

Iranian leadership feud too close to call

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Iran's intensifying political crisis remains dangerously unpredictable. It's still too early to determine if the bitter feud within Tehran's political establishment will lead to a revolution against Iran's Islamic government that so many foreigners hope for, or eventually burn out.

Caution is advised. Much of the opinions we are getting on Iran's current crisis come from bitterly anti-regime Iranian exiles, "experts" with an axe to grind and U.S. neocons yearning for war with Iran. In viewing the Muslim world, westerners keep listening to those who tell them what they want to hear, rather than the facts. President Barack Obama properly stated he would refrain from being seen to meddle in Iran's internal affairs. He did the right thing by apologizing for the U.S.-British coup that overthrew Iran's democratic government in 1953.

But Washington also has been actively attempting to undermine Iran's Islamic government since the 1979 revolution.

The U.S. has laid economic siege to Iran for 30 years. Recently, Congress voted \$120 million for anti-regime media broadcasts into Iran and \$60-75 million in funding for opposition, violent underground Marxists and restive ethnic groups such as Azeris, Kurds and Arabs under the "Iran Democracy Program." Pakistani intelligence sources put the CIA's recent spending on "black operations" to subvert Iran's government at \$400 million.

While the majority of protests we see in Tehran are genuine and spontaneous, western intelligence agencies are playing a key role in sustaining them and providing communications, including the newest method, via Twitter.

Repress

The Tehran government made things worse by limiting foreign news reports and trying to cover up or brutally repress massive protests.

We also hear a lot of hypocritical humbug from western capitals. Washington, Ottawa, London and Paris accused Iran of improper electoral procedures while utterly ignoring their autocratic Mideast allies such as Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, which hold only fake elections and savage any real opposition.

U.S. senators, led by John McCain, blasted Iran for not respecting human rights. That's pretty rich after they just voted to bar the public release of ghastly torture photos from U.S. prisons in Iraq.

Iran is a weird hybrid of repressive theocratic state and democracy. Its political powers are

fragmented to prevent re-emergence of another despotic shah. At least Iran holds elections and allows often fierce political debate, though it often bars candidates. Its recent electoral turnout was an impressive 85%.

Popularity

There are many questions about Iran's vote, of which incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won 60. But however much foreigners may detest Iran's abrasive, incendiary elected leader, he remains widely popular at home thanks to his populist programs, generous subsidies and ascetic lifestyle. He is particularly popular among farmers, the poor, pensioners, the military and religious people. Pre-election polls that showed him headed for a big win may have been right.

Ahmadinejad's chief rival, the more moderate-sounding Mir Hossein Mousavi, is also a conservative who backs Iran's nuclear program. He is supported by Iran's young, many of whom are fed up with obscurantist restrictions imposed by the religious establishment.

In the wings, veteran politician Ali Akbar Rafsanjani is waiting to pounce. He heads the Assembly of Experts, which theoretically has the power to unseat Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Machiavellian Rafsanjani might yet emerge the winner of the current crisis.

Dangerous decision

Ayatollah Khamenei is not a strong leader. He now faces the dangerous decision of whether to crack down on spreading protests, call a recount or a new election, any of which would undermine his authority. Khamenei's best hope is for a political compromise between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi. But he could end marginalized by a secular government.

Reuters reports Israel's intelligence chief, Meir Dagan, thinks Ahmadinejad will win out. Mossad boss Dagan reportedly worries that if Ahmadinejad falls, there will be less international pressure on Iran to end its nuclear programs. He is probably correct.

Other Mideast nations will look at Iran and conclude giving democratic rights is downright dangerous and must be avoided.

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