

The upcoming elections in Iran

Written by Afshin Shahi

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AFSHIN SHAHI, MAY 3 2009

When Iran's former president, Mohammad Khatami, announced that he would stand as a presidential candidate in the country's June elections, there were hopes that once again he could use his charisma to mobilize voters in favor of a reformist program.

People within the Khatami camp recognized that the policies of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had indirectly served their cause by showing the reformist program up as a more pragmatic alternative. Almost four years of economic mismanagement by Ahmadinejad, as well as further constraints on social and individual freedoms and further isolation internationally, persuaded the reformists that they stood a chance of winning.

Khatami stood for the election on the condition that the former prime minister, Mir Hussein Mousavi, did not stand as a candidate. This created the impression that Khatami and Mousavi were targeting the same political audience, and that Khatami did not want to split the reformist vote. Furthermore, Mousavi's silence created the impression that a deal had been struck and that the two men were coordinating their actions. However, just as Khatami's campaign was gaining momentum, Mousavi stunned observers by putting himself forward as a candidate. That was immediately followed by Khatami's decision to withdraw from the race in favor of Mousavi.

Mousavi's action and Khatami's hasty reaction raised a number of questions about the fate of the reformists in the election. Was this an embarrassing lack of coordination between leaders from the same political camp or a sign of ideological disagreement between them?

Apart from discrediting Khatami, Mousavi's decision to run indicated that there were few ideological affinities between the two men. Although, Khatami claimed that he has given up his candidacy in favor of Mousavi, the former prime minister's recent statements suggest he does not see himself as part and parcel of the reform camp.

In his first statement, Mousavi emphasized the importance of values close to the hearts and minds of the Iranian 'principalists' (those "who have adopted a hard-line position" in Iranian politics) as much as he did. . He stated that only a return to the fundamental values of the Islamic revolution could guarantee change and urged that Iranians should think how to create a society based on the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad and the ideas of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Reform, by definition, should be about improving the present for a better future. This is, at least, what Khatami advocated during his campaigns. Yet Mousavi's statements have emphasised a return to the past. He has reminded people about the early years of the revolution rather than the issues raised by the reformist government for eight years. He did not mention how he planned to push for reform, and he did not talk about the obstacles facing the reformist agenda.

Mousavi's over-emphasis on values, rather than practical solutions, implies he is more at ease with conservative hardliners than reform-minded voters. Unlike Khatami, who regarded women and youth as the backbone of his campaign, Mousavi returned to orthodox revolutionary rhetoric, identifying the poor as the most reliable social class as a source of both reform and of "principalism." Mousavi visibly does not want to be seen as a candidate with an explicit reform mandate, so as not to alienate the conservatives. This has pushed him to introduce a different

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definition of reform than that offered by Khatami.

A potential split among reform-minded voters was not the only factor that compelled Khatami to withdraw. The former president would have stood a minimal chance of winning a landslide victory with Mousavi also in the race. That's not necessarily because reformists would have been split however, but because Mousavi would have been able to draw support from conservative voters as well. After two landslide victories in 1997 and 2001, Khatami could not have afforded to face a bitter defeat. He recognized the public's nostalgia for a reformist government, but also appreciated the fundamental obstacles involved.

Crucially, Khatami could no longer count on his traditional base of support. Many of those who had backed him in the past were frustrated with the slow pace of reform under his leadership. Furthermore, Khatami had to take into consideration the participation of the Basij and the Revolutionary Guards in the election of 2005, which led to the surprising defeat of a powerful pragmatist and former president, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, by Ahmadinejad. A similar outcome alarmed him enough where he was obliged to rethink his decision.

This story fundamentally underlines the widespread template for interpreting the upcoming Iranian presidential election: a simplistic narrative of the reformer Mousavi confronting a hostile conservative camp with the backing of an ideological soul mate in Khatami. The reality is rather more complicated, as the elections in three months time will make clear.

Afshin Shahi is a doctoral candidate at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. A previous version of this article appeared in The Daily Star Lebanon on 03/04/09.

About the author:

Afshin Shahi is a doctoral candidate at the School of Government and International Affairs at Durham University. You can contact him at afshin.shahi@durham.ac.uk