

Islamist Neo-Cons Take Power in Iran

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Introduction

Iran, the land of roses and nightingales, remains unpredictable and enigmatic for any Western analyst—it always takes a different turn than what one would expect. When the regime of the Shah appeared to be stable, it was swiped away by a popular left-leaning revolution which replaced the monarchy with an Islamic Republic. When then the new clerical regime seemed feeble and was attacked by Saddam Hussein, it managed to survive; even more, during the Iran-Iraq war it tightened its grip on the state apparatus and the society as well, and defeated its domestic adversaries. After Khomeini's death the regime followed a more 'pragmatic' course and the West made acquaintance with a handful of clerics that presumably controlled the country, and again overlooked the complex factions, ideological currents and power equations within the regime. As a consequence, Hojjatoleslam Khatami's landslide victory in 1997 was a total surprise, as now is Mr. Ahmadi-Nezhad's victory in the presidential elections.

To better understand Iran, it is important to approach it from the perspective that it is neither a democracy in the western sense, nor is it a totalitarian regime as defined by political theory. It is also not quite accurate to classify Iran as a 'theocracy.' Only a minority of the clerics who engage with the regime—the vast majority of them, among them all Grand Ayatollahs, oppose it.¹ From the perspective of power-sharing, it is important to point out that Iran has developed a vibrant and very outspoken parliament (*majles*). The debate in the *majles* is often heated and lively, and in some instances it is powerful enough to force the government and the regime to adjust political course. This peculiarity distinguishes Iranian parliamentarianism from say the Arab countries, and some Central Asian states. Iran's citizens elect their president through direct voting; they elect the parliament (*majles*), and some members to the Assembly of Experts (*majles-e khobregân*), the clerical body, which in turn elects the Supreme Leader. Iranians have no direct say in the appointments of the Council of Guardians (*shurâ-ye negahbân*) whose 12 members are appointed (six by the Leader, six by the parliament). The *negahbân* is tasked with vetting the candidates, who run for presidential and parliamentarian elections. It regularly excludes communists, nationalists, secularists, but also all those critical of the regime. On occasion, it also blocks candidates from the Islamic left.²

Political options and constructs

There are at least four political currents in the Islamic Republic. All exist within the framework introduced by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, called the *velâyat-e faqih*, or the 'rule of the jurisprudent'. But Khomeini was to a certain degree a pragmatist. He did not follow closely any political theory, but rather allowed room for a wide range of political and theological interpretations, which meant that the regime could react and adjust its ideology to the realities on the ground. Hence, ideological flexibility as set by the *velâyat-e faqih* is one of the regime's most praiseworthy assets: after all it was this flexibility that enabled an easing of social and political repressions. That said, political currents tend to correspond to specific institutions, individuals or political parties. Event though the supreme leader, Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei, is supposed to be above political affinity, he has a clear political affiliation and is well rooted in the traditional right, which presently controls the *khobregân* and *negahbân* assemblies.

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¹ On the regimes ideological and theological challenges see EU Institute for Security Studies, 'Iranian Challenges' (conference report) p. 11 available at <<http://www.iss-eu.org/activ/content/rep05-08.pdf>>.

² For more information on Iran's power structure, see Wilfried Buchta, *Who Rules Iran. The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic*, Washington 2000.

Table 1: breakdown of Iran's political spectrum³

<p>The Traditional Conservative Right (<i>râst-e sonnati</i>) is the best organised and most powerful of the political options rooted in conservative-Islam. It is the product of the traditional clergy-bazaar coalition. Its main components are the 'Militant Clergy Society' (<i>Jamâ'athâ-ye Ruhaniân-e Mobârez</i>) and its allies (<i>tashakkolha-ye hamsu</i>); the 'Allied Islamic Societies' (<i>Jami'at-e Mo'talefeh-ye Eslâmi</i>); the 'Society of Islamic Engineers' (<i>Jâme'eh-ye Eslâmi-ye Mohandesin</i>); and the 'Society of the Teachers of the Qom-seminary' (<i>Jami'at-e Houze-ye Elmi-ye Qom</i>), which is an organisation of influential Ayatollahs. To them most of the economically powerful <i>bonyâds</i>, Islamic and Revolutionary foundations and many influential figures in the Revolutionary guards have to be added.</p>	<p>The modernist or moderate right (<i>râst-e modern</i>) also know as the 'technocrats' is the circle of power embracing Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. They are in favour of modernising Iran's economy and the support the general opening of the society. Ideologically one can describe them as being a cross-bread between liberal-Islamists and technocrats. They have lend their support to the two Khatami governments.</p>
<p>The Islamic left (<i>chap-e eslâmi</i>) dominated the parliament from 1980 to 1992. Their main political bodies are the 'Islamic Iran Participation Front' (<i>Jabhe-ye Moshârekat-e Irân-e Eslâmi</i>), the 'Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution' (<i>Mojâhedîn-e Enghelâb-e Eslâmi</i>), the 'Militant Clergy's Association' (<i>MRM Majma'-e Ruhaniân-e Mobârez</i>), and the 'Office of Strengthening the Unity' (<i>Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat</i>), which is a student organisation. Their ideology remains tied to the social-revolutionary and Islam, but they did manage to liberalize many of their viewpoints. Back in the heyday of the revolution, they were responsible for mass-executions inside the country, while actively exporting the revolution. They enjoy the support of some of the Revolutionary foundations and from members of the Revolutionary Guards.</p>	<p>The newest political platform is often referred to as the new left, the extreme conservatives, neo-fundamentalists, or the new conservatives. The last is the more fitting classification as its members retain strong personal ties with the old conservatives. They, too, consciously embrace revolutionary radicalism. They first emerged in the form of the 'Society for the defence of the values of the Islamic Revolution' (<i>Jâme'-e defâ' az arzeshhâ-ye enghelâbi-ye eslâmi</i>), and they are obviously well connected with the <i>baseej</i>-mobilisation force, the extremist Ansar-e Hezbollah, and with some powerful clerics like Jannati and Mesbah-Yazdi.</p>

The four political currents are the result of a long lasting process of political differentiation of Iran's political system. The Moderate Right and the Islamic Left would form the 'reformers' (*eslâh-talabân*) as opposed to the two conservative (Traditional right, Neo-conservatives) currents. Hence, as for now, the differentiation in four currents is only a rough assignment of political pressure groups, to them newspapers and magazines as mouthpieces of various groups should be added. Besides, not all of the organisations named above are political parties. Party affiliation is still very fluid. Individuals and organisations of all four political options form political parties for the purpose to fielding and supporting candidates. The 'Servants of Reconstruction' (*Kargozaran*) for instance was Rafsanjani's party, while the 'Islamic Participation Front' was Khatami's personnel reserve. To make matters more complicated, one has to take the role of personal friendship and kinship ties into account. They form a further layer of the political power, either as a patronage network or as a backchannel to powerful figures on the other side of the political spectrum.

In order to better understand Iran's factional dynamics, it is important to recall the transformations of the political system after Khomeini. The first phase was still dominated by the radicals of the Islamic Left. In the second phase, Khamenei and Rafsanjani formed a 'duumvirate' and embraced post-revolutionary politics (1989-1992). This alliance broke in 1994. From 1997 onwards Khatami coined the term *eslâh-talab* (reform) to which Rafsanjani has lent its support. This was possible because the Islamic Left, to which Khatami belongs, had sacked Islamic revolution-ism while in opposition. The de-facto Moderate-Right – Islamic left coalition lasted until the 2004 parliamentary elections, and was finished off in the 2005 presidential election.

³ After the diagram at Buchta, p. 14; and Moslem, *Factional Politics, passim*.

The Iranian presidential elections of 2005 – tactics and process

For decision-makers and political pundits from the West, Dr. Mahmud Ahmadi-Nezhad's victory came as a total shock. The question is why were so many so wrong? There are several reasons for this. One reason has to do with wishful thinking in the West and on the behalf of westernized Iranians. Because Hashimi-Rafsanjani was an already know face of the regime, and someone many in the West felt like they can do business with, the need for rational assessment gave room to blind obsession with a politician that ran a slick electoral campaign directed largely at the voter from the posh quarters of upper Tehran. Another reason is that many observers overlooked that Iran still has a high percentage of fundamentalists. And finally the sheer unpredictability of the Iranian electorate confused even the seasoned observers. Most Iranians decided in the last instance, and as a result both, the high voter turnout as well as the outcome, surprised.

Table 2: Voter turnout over 100%

(Source: Iran Ministry of the Interior)⁴

Province (<i>ostân</i>)	District (<i>shahrestân</i>)	1 st round in %	2 nd round in %
Bushehr	Jam	107,78	96,03
Tehran	Damavand	92,82	100,53
Tehran	Rebat Karim	129,99	131,30
Tehran	Rayy	215,97	216,42
Tehran	Shemiranat	797,22 (sic!)	839,82 (sic!)
Chehar Mahal va Bakhtiyar	Kuhrang	110,39	99,6
Fars	Mehr	102,23	88,58
Kerman	Manujan	112,51	108,29

According to the statistics provided by the Ministry of Interior,⁵ voter turnout decreased slightly from 62,84 percent in the first round to 59,76 percent in the second round. It also differed from one province to another. In general, Kurds boycotted the elections. Participation in the Kurdish populated regions was generally below 50 percent—in some purely Kurdish districts participation was even below 16 percent.⁶ Whereas the voter turnout in predominantly Persian provinces like Qom, Eylam, Bushehr, Khorasan, Semnan, Sistan, Kohgiluyeh, Yazd and Hormozegan was above 70 percent. A closer look at the results of the first round reveals that Dr. Ahmadi-Nezhad was strongest in Qom (53,38%), Isfahan (43,46%) and Semnan (33,16%) as well as Yazd (36,95%) and Khorasan – South (34,94%) and poorest in the Kurdish and Azeri-regions of the country, even in Ardabil, where he has been governor.

Electoral rigging too played a role in the both rounds, and Mo'in and Karrubi, both candidates of the Islamic left in the first round, complained bitterly about it. As shown in the table above (Table 2), voter turnout was well above 100 percent in some districts. (Note the bizarre percentage of Tehran's Shemiranat and Rayy districts!) But across the whole, the irregularities were certainly not of the magnitude suggested by some Western analysts.⁷ While rigging remains a problem in the Iranian elections, this is not a good enough reason to explain the rise to power of the new President. As one Iranian journalist told the author on the telephone, "the rigging was not even necessary." This is perhaps one of the reasons that in the end Rafsanjani, too, has accepted the result.

⁴ See results on the district (*shahrestân*)-level provided by the Ministry of Interior available at <www.moi.ir/ghavanin/branch.htm>.

⁵ See <http://www.moi.ir/ghavanin/total.htm> and <http://www.moi.ir/ghavanin/state.htm>.

⁶ See MOI: <http://www.moi.ir/ghavanin/branch.htm>. See also the appendix.

⁷ See Michael Ledeen, who claims that some 2 million Pakistanis crossed the borders in Baluchistan to vote for Ahmadi-Nezhad. The voter turnout of Iranian Baluchistan was around 800,000 votes. See the Ministry of Interior's website <<http://www.moi.ir/ghavanin/total.htm>>.

Table 3: Iranian Presidential elections 1st round (17 June 2005)⁸

Candidate	Votes	Percent
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (<i>Kargozaran</i> moderate right)	6,159,453	21.01%
Mahmoud AhmadiNezhad (<i>Abadgaran</i> neocon)	5,710,354	19.48%
Mehdi Karroubi (MRM Islamic Left)	5,066,316	17.28%
Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf (Conservative)	4,075,189	13.90%
Mostafa Mo'in (JMIE Islamic Left)	4,054,304	13.83%
Ali Larijani (Conservative)	1,740,163	5.94%
Mohsen Mehralizadeh (Islamic Left)	1,289,323	4.40%
Blank or invalid votes	1,221,940	4.17%
<i>Total</i>	<i>29,317,042</i>	<i>100%</i>

There are at least two other factors which help explain the first round. For one, the reformist camp fielded too many candidates of the same breed. Three of the reformists' candidates, the Speaker of Parliament Hojjatoleslam Mehdi Karrubi, Mohsen Mehralizadeh and Mostafa Mo'in, all belonged to the Islamic left. They not only competed for votes with Iran's shrewdest politician Ali Akbar Hashemi (Barahmani) Rafsanjani from the moderate right *Kargozaran* party, but also broke the very Islamic-left plus *Kargozaran* alliance which back in 1997 assured the victory of Hojjatoleslam Mohammad Khatami. As Table 3 shows, the *Kargozaran*-Islamic Left alliance had all together over 50 percent, which would make the second round even unnecessary. Ahmadi-Nezhad on the other hand had only two competitors, General Qalibaf and the Mr. Larijani. (Another candidate and ex-military, Mohsen Rezai, stepped down from the elections at the latest moment.)

Secondly, the candidates did not enjoy the same amount of support from the state apparatus. The candidates of the Islamic left were clearly disfavoured. According to liberal reform cleric, Hojjatoleslam Mehdi Karrubi, this distorted the chances of many candidates.⁹ But whereas access to state support helps perhaps explain the disadvantages that individuals like Karrubi, Mo'in and Mehralizadeh endured, it does not entirely explain the success of Ahmadi-Nezhad. Rather it seems that his personality and his biography made him a better choice for the *baseej* in the second round.

The second round was full off smearing. Ahmadi-Nezhad attacked Rafsanjani for being wealthy—which in Iran is often associated with corruption—while presenting himself as the poor austere underdog against. Cleverly utilising populist slogans like 'oil wealth for the poor' he secured their support. But he touched also upon another major grievance—the weak economy and widespread corruption. In the end, the electorate decided that the austere mayor of Tehran was a better fit to fight the country's notorious corruption and nepotism than the multi-millionaire Rafsanjani. There was little connection between Rafsanjani and the electorate in the poorer quarters of the big cities like Tehran.

Table 4: Iranian Presidential elections 2nd round (24 June 2005)¹⁰

Candidate	Votes	Percentage
Mahmoud Ahmadi-Nezhad	17,284,782	61.69%
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	10,046,701	35.93%
Blank or invalid votes	663,770	2.37%
<i>Total</i>	<i>27,959,253</i>	<i>100%</i>

⁸ <<http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-543096>> and <<http://www.isna.ir/Main/NewsView.aspx?ID=News-543092>>.

⁹ Mehdi Karrubi wrote a long letter to Supreme Leader Khamenei where he complained about irregularities. This letter is available at <http://news.gooya.com/president_84/archives/031422.php>.

¹⁰ Ministry of Interior: <<http://www.moi.ir/fElectionAllp2.aspx>>.

Rafsanjani and his team on the other hand accused the former mayor for his misuse of the *baseej*, while pronouncing that Ahmadi-Nezhad was an extremist.¹¹ Tehran and the international media were soon filled with rumours depicting Ahmadi-Nezhad as some sort of narrow-minded Iranian Taliban. In some instances, the rumours were so bizarre that it is no surprise they largely fell on deaf ears.¹² On the other hand, Ahmadi-Nezhad managed through a successful campaign to convince the Iranians that he was hardly any threat to their personal freedoms. No doubt, Ahmadi-Nezhad was the favourite of the various conservative factions and in the second round he could count on the active support from circles close to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

There is yet another explanation. Ahmadi-Nezhad's placement as mayor of Tehran and the neo-conservative victory in the 2004 parliamentary elections point to the fact that there could be a comprehensive neo-conservative strategy behind this aimed at acquiring power. But who exactly is Ahmadi-Nezhad, and to which political spectrum does he belong?

The enigmatic Dr. Ahmadi-Nezhad

At first glance, the official biography of Ahmadi-Nezhad¹³ does not offer much insight. Like millions of others, he is of modest rural origin but grew up in Teheran. Politically active even before the revolution, he fought for the overthrow of the Shah and volunteered at the front to fight the Iraqi invasion.

As a soldier he served in the logistics (responsible for military engineering) in the 6th Division's special forces, and from 1985 onwards in the 'Special Forces Brigade' of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (*Sepâh-e Pâsdârân-e Enghelâb-e Eslâmi*, hereafter: Pasdaran). In this function he operated out of the Pasdaran's liaison office to the Iraqi Kurds, the Qarargah-e Ramazan,¹⁴ and participated in operations in the Kirkuk region in Iraq. He held two other positions in the Kurdish regions of Iran: he was an aid to the governor of Maku and Khoy and later advisor to the administration of Kurdistan. This may at least partially explain two things: the bitter reaction and harsh comments to his election on behalf of the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran,¹⁵ and his poor polling in the Kurdish regions. But it also points to the fact that Ahmadi-Nezhad is very familiar with the Kurdish question.

Hence, much of this is typical for the revolutionary generation. In short, judging from his formation as it is presented in his official biography one can describe him as a technocrat with experience in administration and security related matters. But ideology-free technocracy doesn't fit with neo-conservatism.

Ideologically Ahmadi-Nezhad is no liberal of any kind. He belongs to the right: it is said that in his youth, he was close to the Hojjatiyeh society.¹⁶ However, one should not exaggerate this point since the biographies of the greater part of influential figures in Iran show some reference to Hojjatiyeh. As a fierce anti-communist he joined the 'Islamic Association of Students' (*Anjoman-e Eslâmi-ye Dâneshtjuyân*) which on the orders of Khomeini fought the spread of Marxism in Iran's universities from 1980 onwards.

The Anjoman was later transformed to the 'Office of Strengthening of Unity' *Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*, of which Dr. Ahmadi-Nezhad was a founding member in the Central Committee. (*Tahkim-e Vahdat* is today one of the moderate pro-democracy forces of the Islamic left). His career in the Society of Islamic Engineers puts him firmly in the conservative camp.

¹¹ Scott Peterson, 'Iran votes hard-liner in runoff', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 June 2005, Gareth Smyth, 'Rafsanjani uncertain of run-off victory', *Financial Times* 23 June 2005 and Juan Cole: 'Ahmadi-Nejad Uses Bush's Tactics', available at <http://www.juancole.com/2005_06_01_juancole_archive.html>.

¹² Stories emerged accusing Ahmadi-Nezhad of wanting to bury the remnants of fallen combatants of the Iran-Iraq war on squares and plazas of Teheran; or that he will ban double beds. Other accusations were more aggressive: some of the victims of the 1979 US-embassy takeover pointed fingers at him as being one of the hostage takers – a false accusation as it turns out.

¹³ 'Zendeginameh', available at <<http://www.mardomyar.com/aspx2/aboutme.aspx>>

¹⁴ The Qarargah-e Ramazan still exists. It is located in Sulemaniya, Northern Iraq. See Martin van Bruinessen, 'Iraq: Kurdish challenges,' in Walter Posch, *Looking Into Iraq, Chailot Paper* 79, Paris July 2005.

¹⁵ See the various statements at the party's homepage <<http://www.pdk-iran.org/>>.

¹⁶ A secret organisation which fought the Bahais and communists and later played an essential role in the founding of the Islamic Republican Party.

The Neo-conservatives

Because of his background of working with both the left and the right, Ahmadi-Nezhad was able to benefit from the modern neo-conservative political trend.¹⁷ What later become Iran's neo-conservatives originally tried to organise themselves as a new radical leftist-fundamentalist organisation. Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri founded the new organisation, the 'Society for the defence of the Values of the Islamic Revolution', and positioned it against the Islamic left which then was still very radical. This new current was directed against then-president Rafsanjani. It was also in close contact with extremist vigilant groups like Mas'ud Dehnamaki's 'Ansar-e Hizbullah', who in turn was closely connected to the *baseej* and elements in the Pasdaran and the Intelligence Ministry. Reyshahri's attempt to win the presidency in 1997 failed and he disbanded the organisation in 1998. This political option however remained on the margins of the political spectrum, with big appeal amongst the *baseej*, the mass-volunteer force of the Islamic Republic, and amongst the increasingly frustrated war-generation who saw themselves betrayed and denied the benefits of the revolution they had fought for. Ahmadi-Nezhad's visit to the tomb of Imam Khomeini was a signal to these voters; that he shared their values of social justice and the Islamic Revolution. He also pays tribute to the *baseej*. On his homepage he says 'I am proud of [being] a teacher [*mo'allim*] of the *baseej* and I beg of god, that I shall remain always this way.'¹⁸

The sub-current most responsible for Ahmadi-Nezhad political rise seems to be the generation change among the traditional conservatives. After 1997, when Hojjatoleslam Khatami was elected president and more so after 2000, when the conservatives lost the majority in the parliament, the younger generation of conservatives under the leadership of the Society of Islamic Engineers revised the conservatives' political messages and changed their outlook towards a more modern one. The older generation which still holds power within the *negahbân* helped stage this revival by blocking most reformist candidates from partaking in the February 2004 parliamentary elections. But it was younger politicians like Mohammad Reza Bahonar (the president of the Islamic Engineers) who created the new secular slogan "a free, developed and joyful Iran (*Irân, âzâd, âbâd va shâd*)" for the February 2004 election.¹⁹ From this step onwards, it was obvious they would be eying the presidency in 2005. In hindsight, Ahmadi-Nezhad's appointment to mayor of Tehran in 2003 appears as a shrewd and timely move.

The 'Developers of Islamic Iran' (*Âbâdagrân-e Irân-e Eslâmî*) party now functions as the new political outlet of the neo-conservatives.²⁰ As is the case with most neo-cons the slogan of the Abadagaran strikes with appalling simplicity: "fundamentalism (*osulgarâ'i*) in thought, novelty in the form, cooperation in action."²¹ Under this mantra, the Abadagaran appears as a far-right version of Rafsanjani's Kargozaran, but with strong ties to extremists and perhaps even to murky watch groups.²²

The neo-conservative victory has a double impact on the political currents of the Islamic Republic. On one hand, they have successfully sidelined the reformist camp and defeated the dysfunctional Islamic-left—moderate right alliance in the parliament and in the presidency. On the other hand, they have sidelined the old gerontocracy of the conservative elite and 'secularised' the conservative outlook: for neither the speaker of parliament Haddad-Adel nor Ahmadi-Nezhad are clerics. Therefore, it is possible that the 'unknown right,' or the extremists, might be reigned in and made subject to the rules of parliament making them at least to some extent accountable.²³ Second, the generation change could erode permanently the power of the most stubborn members of the conservative elites and in the long-run enable the more democratic minded figures to occupy influential positions.

¹⁷ Given Ahmadi-Nezhad's leading membership in the Islamic Engineers Society it raises questions as to whether he was co-initiator of this move.

¹⁸ This message is in Ahmadi-Nezhad's handwriting on the top of his homepage. See <www.mardomyar.com>

¹⁹ See Farhad Khosrowkhawar, 'The New Conservatives Take a Turn,' in: *Middle East Report*, Winter 2004, p. 24-27.

²⁰ As is typical for Iran, the party was established for the purpose of the elections.

²¹ See: 'osulgarâ'i dar andishe, nougarâ'i dar rawesh, hamgarâ'i dar 'amal', this slogan is the only information available on their homepage < <http://www.abadgaran.ir/>> .

²² Michael Rubin: *Into the Shadows. Radical Vigilants in Khatami's Iran*, Washington 2001.

²³ A similar point is made by Khosrowkhawar, p. 27.

What is to be expected from Iran's new president?

The regime faces serious challenges internally as well externally. Internally, it is foremost the economy. Here, one can expect Ahmadi-Nezhad to borrow heavily from the programs of the moderate right, perhaps following even a watered down version of Rafsanjani's economic opening. He may pursue tacit modernisation by using the oil wealth to ease the economic hardships of the poor.

Subtle economic opening, as laid down in Iran's 20-year Perspective, the Islamic Republic's strategy paper, is the Iranian elites' compromise position on country's future anyway. Most certainly he will embrace some populist action in order to keep the poorest of the poor quiet and satisfied. Social policy and steps towards a more accountable administration will certainly be a focus of his domestic politics. Over the years he has already demonstrated that he can perform as an able administrator. During his governorship in Ardabil (1993-1997) and his tenure as mayor of Tehran (2003-2005), Mr. Ahmadi-Nezhad focused on issues like urbanisation which is fitting to his expertise as a civilian engineer. But even foreign investors seem to trust him and tend to downplay populist statements concerning the distribution of oil-wealth from the rich to the disenfranchised masses. A number of moderate statements from Ahmadi-Nezhad tend to support the thesis that he is after corruption and is not looking out to nationalize Iran's economy.²⁴

This said his political platform is bound to be inward looking, focused on the economic development of the country. However, whether he will really tackle problems like the tax free pious and revolutionary foundations (*bonyad*), whose economic activities distort Iran's nascent market economy, remains to be seen. At this point, such a step would come as a big surprise, given he is supported by the conservative elites. Nevertheless, given his success at the election and the support of the parliament, he has as it seems, greater clout to press for reform than Rafsanjani or any of the Islamic left candidates.

But he also has another field of expertise. Thanks to his military service, and later as a governor, in the ethnically diverse west of the country, it is safe to assume that he has a deep knowledge about Iran's ethnic minorities and first-hand experience with the Kurdish question in Iran and Northern Iraq, as well as experience in dealing with insurgency and counter-insurgency. This may well turn out to be an unexpected asset if the United States begin to openly playing the 'ethnic card' or begins using the cultish People's Mojahedins to undermine the regime. (However, one has to put a caveat here and notice Dr. Ahmadi-Nezhad's weak showing in the western provinces including Ardabil during the first round of the elections!)

As for foreign policy, few changes are expected since the mainframe is outlined in Iran's strategy paper.²⁵ The door to negotiations with the United States will remain open, though the Iranians will not push for restoring the relationship. Iran will not behave provocatively towards the US, though it is safe to assume Iranian's under Ahmadi-Nezhad's stewardship will follow self-interest in the neighbourhood. Cooperation with Turkey and Syria over the Kurdish issue will continue, and so will the consultation mechanism involving Iraq's neighbours. The EU will remain the most favoured partner, while relations with China, India and Russia will continue the way they are. On a very sensitive issue of nuclear weapons, Ahmadi-Nezhad is not the most radical—at least he is willing to continue negotiating with the EU.

Conclusion

Ahmadi-Nezhad may be somewhat more immune to external political and military pressure than his predecessor. His battle-hardened generation is convinced that they have already seen all the horror imaginable on the frontlines. In their view, they have already fought against the world in the Iran-Iraq war and won.

²⁴ Carola Hoyos and Gareth Smyth: 'Iran's officials pledge 'total change' to oil sector,' *Financial Times*, 28 June 2005, Gareth Smyth, 'New leader promises moderation and justice', *Financial Times*, 27 June 2005.

²⁵ "No foreign policy change in new administration", *Tehran Times*, 13 July 2005.

Appendix 1

Table 5: Voter turnout of Iran's presidential elections 20 July 2005

(Sorted after the Ahmadi-Nezhad's results in the 1st round)

AN=Dr. Mahmud Ahmadi-Nezhad

HR=Hashemi-Rafshanjani

Province	Round I			Round II		
	Turnout	AN	HR	Turnout	AN	HR
Qom	77,01	53,38	21,68	77,27	73,16	25,05
Isfahan	58,26	43,64	14,20	59,60	71,83	25,78
Yazd	76,02	36,95	16,43	75,49	66,82	30,77
Khorasan (South)	78,59	34,94	19,68	71,88	66,30	32,32
Semnan	73,48	33,16	23,60	74,22	71,69	26,18
Tehran	63,68	28,63	24,31	65,20	61,11	36,62
Markazi	62,09	26,79	23,72	60,63	69,70	28,32
Hamadan	62,34	23,75	21,43	57,52	70,40	27,62
Ghazwin	69,23	22,69	20,88	67,04	72,81	25,45
Ch. Mahal – Bakhtiyar	64,85	22,35	16,17	64,34	71,80	26,49
Zanjan	65,25	20,06	23,80	61,03	67,62	30,47
Bushehr	72,33	19,59	23,16	66,49	55,81	41,82
Khuzistan	55,33	14,85	20,40	51,25	60,76	35,70
Khorasan (Razawi)	70,99	14,58	20,36	63,99	63,79	34,43
Azerbaijan (East)	51,25	14,51	19,67	46,18	67,98	29,55
Gilan	58,40	14,03	20,29	58,52	64,35	32,98
Fars	61,36	13,18	21,90	58,28	57,14	40,44
Hormozgan	78,30	12,99	12,25	67,49	59,67	37,70
Mazanderan	65,19	11,58	22,68	65,26	64,57	33,50
Kerman	77,98	10,85	40,32	77,86	50,71	47,97
Eylam	80,43	10,82	13,55	66,76	51,21	45,81
Kohgiluyeh and Boyer Ahmad	78,48	10,81	17,65	76,11	61,23	37,24
Kermanshah	55,38	9,16	17,91	51,20	48,60	47,03
Azerbaijan (West)	44,02	8,93	17,96	37,15	60,18	35,13
Lorestan	67,17	8,54	14,84	60,41	49,70	47,77
Golestan	65,81	7,85	21,51	60,53	53,63	44,31
Ardabil	54,15	6,93	19,40	49,00	62,93	34,71
Khorasan (North)	63,55	6,44	19,77	55,67	59,75	38,59
Kordestan	37,37	5,79	14,00	24,96	49,61	42,37
Sistan and Baluchistan	74,44	5,46	17,74	63,76	44,37	54,35