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Last update - 15:23 25/12/2006

Forget the nuclear weapons, what about inflation?

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Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Misbah Yazdi wants to be Iran's next supreme leader. He knows that Ali Khamenei is ill with prostrate cancer. He has lost weight and looks paler and thinner than ever. Yazdi's first step on the way to realizing his dream was supposed to be a victory in the elections to the Majlis Hubargan, the Assembly of Experts also known as the council of sages, the 86-member body whose members have the highest religious ordination. The sages are elected once every eight years and meet at least twice a year in the old Iranian Majlis, or parliament building. Their job is to review the actions of the supreme leader and appoint a successor for him in the event of illness, impaired functioning or death.

Now it seems that Yazdi's dream is gradually falling out of reach. In the elections some 10 days ago, he suffered a resounding loss, coming in only sixth place for the seven places allocated to the Tehran district. Even worse than this, his detested rival, former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani came in first place, with 1.1 million votes, as opposed to Yazdi's 680,000.

However, this is not just a personal defeat for Yazdi. His failure also has repercussions for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's status. Yazdi, who is known as Ayatollah Crocodile (Misbah rhymes in Farsi with Timsah, which is crocodile), is seen as the revered spiritual mentor of the president and the inspiration behind the president's messianic beliefs that are so feared by Israel and the entire Western world.

At the same time as the election of members of the Assembly of Experts, there were also elections for the city councils, local councils and village councils. Additional elections were also held to choose the Tehran district's representatives to the Majlis. The election results were surprising, but completely clear: the extremist conservatives, which include Ahmadinejad, lost. The moderate conservatives won a clear victory and the reformists came back to life after being clinically dead following the last presidential elections, which were held in May 2005.

The elections were surprising also because of the high voting rates. Approximately 25 million Iranians, 60 percent of the eligible voters, went to the polls. In the capital of Tehran, for example, only 15 percent of eligible voters went to vote in the previous elections, and this time, too, there was a voting rate there of 60 percent. In most of the large cities, the moderate conservative faction, known as "the principalists," headed by Mohammad Ghalibaf, the mayor of Tehran,

won. The faction, which was created 16 years ago, believes in the need to bring the country back to its original principles, of the 1979 Iranian Revolution. However, unlike the president and his radical camp, they are more attentive to the modern needs of Iranian society, including students, professionals and the middle class. As an expression of this approach, Ghalibaf launched an investment of \$100 million for the renewal of Waliasar, the main commercial and shopping drag that is a particular favorite of the city's wealthy sector.

The faction of President Ahmadinejad, who was the mayor of Tehran until a year and a half ago, received only three seats of the 15 allocated to the capital and did not win any seats in elections in the cities of Meshad, Tabriz and Qarman.

Rafsanjani can smile broadly now that the elections are over. After his humiliating defeat in the second round of the presidential elections to Ahmadinejad, some were already eulogizing him. But Rafsanjani, who thanks to the election results in the Assembly of Experts is in a good position to be appointed the next supreme leader, proved he was a polished and experienced politician who knows how to pull the strings behind the scenes.

Israel and the West would like to believe that Ahmadinejad was defeated because of his blustery foreign policy and especially because of his untiring efforts to obtain nuclear weapons, but it seems that the main reason for his defeat has to do with domestic problems. Ahmadinejad has actually not resolved a single problem troubling the public at large, especially not the problem of corruption or soaring inflation (which stands officially at 15 percent, but is actually over 20 percent). Ahmadinejad's campaign slogan was "It's possible and we can do it," but since his election as president, he has followed the approach of "I want and I can." He dropped the "we" that brought him victory and the rift between him and the constituents that elected him is widening.

A good place in the middle

Criticism of the president has even crept into an area over which there is seemingly no disagreement in Iran: Israel and the Holocaust. Last week, Baztab, an Iranian news Web site, published a long article attacking the decision to hold the Holocaust deniers conference in Tehran, calling it an "adventure at the expense of the national interest." It is true that the site is owned by Mohsan Razai, who was a commander of the Revolutionary Guards and is considered a stubborn rival of the president, but it seems that it reflects the prevailing view among Iranians, who are asking themselves why the president decided to open another unnecessary front against the rest of the world, which will isolate Iran even more. "Even Khomeini did not question whether the Holocaust happened," the author of the article stated. However, the election results should not be interpreted as a political death sentence for Ahmadinejad and his supporters. Far from it. They are still powerful and there is no doubt they represent a sizable segment of Iranian society. What has been happening in Iran over the last few years is an intergenerational fight between the older generation of religious leaders who were part of the revolution, such

as Khamenei, Rafsanjani and Amami-Kashani and Mishkhani (who were elected second and third place in the Assembly of Experts) and the young generation consisting of supporters and admirers of the religious leaders from the revolution and its initial rule.

The real winner in the election is actually the ailing Khamenei, who did not even run. The fact that the voter turnout was so high indicates that despite the fact that the Iranian public knows it will not be able to change the system of government in the foreseeable future, it still wants to take part in shaping it. The elections put the serving supreme leader in a good place in the middle of the political map. That is the secret of Khamenei's power. His ability to serve as the balance between different rival factions. In the last presidential elections, he favored Ahmadinejad over Rafsanjani and now he has decided that it is time to rein in the president and increase his rival's power. Ahmadinejad thought he received an open check from Khamenei, but now he has discovered that he must pay for it.

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