

Iran: The nuclear issue and the implementation of the foreign policy

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There are several governmental bodies within the Iranian political system with influence over foreign policy design, including, in order of relevance: 1) the *Velayat al Faqih* – Spiritual Leader and Chief of State; 2) the Presidency and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; 3) the National Security Council; 4) the Expediency Discernment Council of the System; and 5) the National Security and Foreign Policy Committee of the *Majlis*, or Parliament. Furthermore, both the Islamic Revolutionary Guard or *Pasdaran* and the Ministry of Islamic Culture and Guidance have the ability to influence the decision-making process.

In turn, these institutions are intertwined with an array of political associations and groups which, as a result of the lack of definition in their programs or ideological boundaries, have brought about the formation of electoral and parliamentary alliances. Therefore, throughout the 25 years of political life of the regime, since the beginnings of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the different factions that have arisen have not been homogeneous or permanent, even though at least they allow for the identification of strong men within the political system who have been able to cling to positions of power.

The example of the controversy over the Iranian nuclear program is clarifying in that it proves the existence of numerous centers of power and the way in which foreign policy decisions are representative of the epiphenomenon of different factions struggling within the establishment. During the crisis unleashed in 2003, resolved with the visit of the European (English – French - German) *troika*, the Iranian negotiator was Hassan Rowhani, head of the national Security Council, instead of the Minister of Foreign Affairs Kamal Kharrazi, the chief diplomat in Khatami's government. Rowhani is an ayatollah educated in the U.K. and has been one of the main collaborators of Hashemi Rafsanjani, former President and current Head of the Expediency Discernment Council, and as such, has made it clear to the international community that the Iranian security policy, or at least the part of said policy related to nuclear issues, is not dictated ultimately by Khatami's government, but by the bodies controlled by the pragmatic sector of the Servers of the Reconstruction, formerly Rafsanjani's party.

After the 2004 parliamentary elections, won by the conservative sector, the National Security and Foreign Policy of the *Majlis* was granted with the power to decide the resumption of uranium enrichment activities, suspended as a result of a decision made by Rowhani, as well as the power to ratify the additional protocol to the Non Nuclear Proliferation Treaty demanded by the IAEA. There is a dual interpretation for this. To the outside world, the decision is made by a legitimately elected Parliament, so there is nothing to object to its national and international legitimacy and legality. On the other hand, the conservatives currently control Parliament, so the *Majlis* could also be the source of a hard-line in foreign policy. Nevertheless, Rowahni continues to be the unofficial spokesman of the Iranian position, at the detriment of Kharrazi.

From its dominant position as *Velayat* or Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei declared during several massive demonstrations in 2004, that Iran "will cut off the hands" of those who

attack Iranian technological interests¹, alluding to those who seek military force abroad to destroy Iranian nuclear facilities. Furthermore, a number of member organizations of the religious militant structure of the *Pasdaran*, such as the indoctrination and strategic operations centers, made an appeal to take specific actions against U.S. or Israeli interests.

However, members of Mohamed Khatami's government Minister Kharrazi and ministerial spokesman Reza Asefi declared that Iran has met and will continue to meet its international commitments, and made an appeal to caution to conservative sectors. However, as a result of growing international pressure, Khatami has been forced to shift to a stronger national and international position, avoiding the weakening of the reformist sector, already quite disparaged by the electoral setbacks of 2003 and 2004. As a response to the recent publication by the U.S. newspaper *New Yorker* of a possible U.S. plan to strike Iranian nuclear facilities, Khatami and Kharrazi have not hesitated in declaring that Iran will respond resolutely to any military action seeking to harm Iranian nuclear interests².

The international confrontation between Iran and U.S. is mediated by Europe and the International Atomic Energy Agency, which much to the chagrin of the Bush administration, continues to believe that negotiation is the best way to ensure the peaceful development of the advanced Iranian nuclear program. It is to be expected that any deadline stipulated by the international body will be pushed by Iranians to the end of Khatami's term, so that the new president elect can be involved in the decision. Thus, the upcoming electoral process will have a crucial importance to judge the possible prospects of opening up or hardening of the Iranian regime.

Current President Khatami will not be able to run for office at the upcoming June 2005 presidential elections, because he has already served the maximum of two terms established by the Constitution. Several candidates have already announced their intention to run for office, the most prominent among which are: Hassan Rowhani; Ali Shamkhani, current Minister of Defense; Mir Husein Musavi, former Prime Minister during Khamenei's presidency; and Ali Akbar Velayati³, former Minister of Foreign Affairs during the presidencies of Khamenei and Rafsanjani. These last two are considered as "radicals" in the Iranian political scene and therefore their international positions will probably not be very inclined to negotiations. Within the so-called "reformist" group, badly beaten and split since 2003, the only potential candidate so far is the current President's brother, Mohamed Reza Khatami, who is the figurehead of the Islamic Participation Front, an organization which supported Khatami's coming to power.

However, during the last week, it has been known that Hashemi Rafsanjani had accepted the proposal put forward by a group of members of Parliament to run for office again. His candidacy may not prosper however, but if it did it could represent an attempt by the pragmatists to reclaim the reins of executive power, thus avoiding a reformist presidency that may be considered as weak to international pressures, and preventing also radical sectors from hindering the normalization of relations between Iran and the other countries, including the U.S. Rafsanjani, a protégé of Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Republic and a strong man of the regime, would have the necessary tools to negotiate its nuclear policy with international organizations with the support of the regime, without it being interpreted as an Iranian surrender to the US.

¹ *Kayhan* (Iran), July 6, 2004, quoted in www.memri.org, *Special Dispatch Series – No. 743*, July 13, 2004.

² *Tehran Times*, January 22, 2005

³ Velayati stated that "Iran is among the world's top ten nuclear powers. The acquisition of nuclear potential and at the same time, our commitment with the Non-Nuclear Proliferation Treaty are among Iran's diplomatic powers", in *Sharq*, No.303, page 5, Tehran, January 1, 2004.

The executive power, as the executor of foreign policy and representative of the Iran's image abroad, has become the battlefield where ideological disputes among the political and religious elite of Iran are resolved since the revolution of 1979. Therefore, the presidency is the only key political institution left for the non-reformist sectors to regain – they already control the rest of institutional elect bodies – in order to present an ideologically homogeneous political system to the international community.

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