

Iran's new President has a past mired in controversy

Tehran, Jun. 25 – “Ahmadinejad? Who’s he?”

This was the typical reaction of most Iranians a day after the first round of presidential elections in Iran, when they heard that the two candidates facing each other in the run-off were veteran politician Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the little-known, ultra-conservative mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Last week’s surprise was all forgotten by the much bigger shock on Friday, when Ahmadinejad defeated the former President and iconic figure in the ruling theocracy in a landslide victory that consolidated power in the hands of the ruling Islamic clerics.

With spotlights now trained on the small, bearded figure in a trademark dilapidated grey suit, Ahmadinejad’s murky past is causing deep anxiety in Iran and growing concern abroad over the new President’s policies and orientation.



Born in the desert town of Garmsar, east of Tehran, in 1956, Ahmadinejad was the fourth child of a working class family with seven children. His father, who was a blacksmith, moved the family to Tehran when Ahmadinejad was barely a year old. He was brought up in the rough neighbourhoods of south Tehran, where a cocktail of poverty, frustration and xenophobia in the heydays of the Shah’s elitist regime provided fertile grounds for the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

After finishing high school, Ahmadinejad went to Elm-o Sanaat University in 1975 to study engineering. Soon the whirlwind of Islamic revolution led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini swept him from the classroom to the mosque and he joined a generation of firebrand Islamic fundamentalists dedicated to the cause of an Islamic world revolution.

Student activists in Elm-o Sanaat University at the time of the Iranian revolution were dominated by ultra-conservative Islamic fundamentalists. Ahmadinejad soon became one of their leaders and founded the Islamic Students Association in that university after the fall of the Shah’s regime.

In 1979, he became the representative of Elm-o Sanaat students in the Office for Strengthening of Unity Between Universities and Theological Seminaries, which later became known as the OSU. The OSU was set up by Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti, who was at the time Khomeini’s top confidant and a key figure in the clerical leadership. Beheshti wanted the OSU to organise Islamist students to counter the rapidly rising influence of the opposition Mojahedin-e Khalq (MeK) among university students.

The OSU played a central role in the seizure of the United States embassy in Tehran

in November 1979. Members of the OSU central council, who included Ahmadinejad as well as Ibrahim Asgharzadeh, Mohsen (Mahmoud) Mirdamadi, Mohsen Kadivar, Mohsen Aghajari, and Abbas Abdi, were regularly received by Khomeini himself.

According to other OSU officials, when the idea of storming the U.S. embassy in Tehran was raised in the OSU central committee by Mirdamadi and Abdi, Ahmadinejad suggested storming the Soviet embassy at the same time. A decade later, most OSU leaders re-grouped around Khatami but Ahmadinejad remained loyal to the ultra-conservatives.

During the crackdown on universities in 1980, which Khomeini called the “Islamic Cultural Revolution”, Ahmadinejad and the OSU played a critical role in purging dissident lecturers and students many of whom were arrested and later executed. Universities remained closed for three years and Ahmadinejad joined the Revolutionary Guards.

In the early 1980s, Ahmadinejad worked in the “Internal Security” department of the IRGC and earned notoriety as a ruthless interrogator and torturer. According to the state-run website Baztab, allies of outgoing President Mohammad Khatami have revealed that Ahmadinejad worked for some time as an executioner in the notorious Evin Prison, where thousands of political prisoners were executed in the bloody purges of the 1980s.

In 1986, Ahmadinejad became a senior officer in the Special Brigade of the Revolutionary Guards and was stationed in Ramazan Garrison near Kermanshah in western Iran. Ramazan Garrison was the headquarters of the Revolutionary Guards’ “extra-territorial operations”, a euphemism for terrorist attacks beyond Iran’s borders.

In Kermanshah, Ahmadinejad became involved in the clerical regime’s terrorist operations abroad and led many “extra-territorial operations of the IRGC”. With the formation of the elite Qods (Jerusalem) Force of the IRGC, Ahmadinejad became one of its senior commanders. He was the mastermind of a series of assassinations in the Middle East and Europe, including the assassination of Iranian Kurdish leader Abdorrahman Qassemlou, who was shot dead by senior officers of the Revolutionary Guards in a Vienna flat in July 1989. Ahmadinejad was a key planner of the attack, according to sources in the Revolutionary Guards.

Ahmadinejad served for four years as the governor of the towns of Maku and Khoy in northwestern Iran. In 1993, he was appointed by Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance Ali Larijani, a fellow officer of the Revolutionary Guards, as his cultural adviser. Months later, he was appointed as the governor of the newly-created Ardebil Province.

In 1997, the newly-installed Khatami administration removed Ahmadinejad from his post and he returned to Elm-o Sanaat University to teach, but his principal activity was to organize Ansar-e Hezbollah, a radical gang of violent Islamic vigilantes.

Since becoming mayor of Tehran in April 2003, Ahmadinejad has been using his position to build up a strong network of radical Islamic fundamentalists organised as “Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami” (literally, Developers of an Islamic Iran). Working in

close conjunction with the Revolutionary Guard's, Abadgaran was able to win the municipal elections in 2003 and the parliamentary election in 2004. They owed their victories as much to low turnouts and general disillusionment with the "moderate" faction of the regime as to their well-oiled political and military machinery.

Abadgaran bills itself as a group of young neo-Islamic fundamentalists who want to revive the ideals and policies of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini. It was one of several ultra-conservative groups that were setup on the orders of Ayatollah Khamenei in order to defeat outgoing President Mohammad Khatami's faction after the parliamentary elections in February 2000.

Ahmadinejad's record is typical of the men chosen by Khamenei's entourage to put a new face on the clerical elite's ultra-conservative identity. But beyond the shallow façade, few doubt that the Islamic Republic under its new President will move with greater speed and determination along the path of radical policies that include more human rights abuses, continuing sponsorship of terrorism, and the drive to obtain nuclear weapons.

Iran elections candidates: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Age: 49

Position: The appointed Mayor of Tehran

Career Highlights:

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is the appointed Mayor of Tehran, after first getting the job in April 2003.

He is seen to be an ultra-conservative, having also been a top commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the regime's ideological army.

Following the 1979 Islamic revolution he became a member of the Office for Strengthening Unity. He belonged to the ultra-conservative faction of the OSU.

According to other OSU officials, when the idea of storming the U.S. embassy in Tehran was raised in the OSU central committee by Mahmoud Mirdamadi and Abbas Abdi, who later became leading figures in President Mohammad Khatami's faction, Ahmadinejad suggested storming the Soviet embassy at the same time.

Ahmadinejad's activities in the Revolutionary Guards were directly related to suppression of dissidents in Iran and terrorist attacks abroad. A recently revealed document has shown his involvement in planning an attempt on the life of the Indian-born British author Salman Rushdie.

He served as governor-general of Ardebil Province (northwest Iran) during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War.



He is presently a member of the right-wing Association of Engineers and a member of the central council of the Society of the Devotees of the Islamic Revolution

As mayor of Tehran, he moved to restrict activities in cultural centres in the capital, turning them into religious centres.

In his own Words:

"We did not have a revolution in order to have democracy".
(*United International Press, May 24, 2005*)

Iran's new President cements ultra-conservative grip on power

Tehran, Jun. 25 – A 49-year-old former commander of the Revolutionary Guards became the sixth President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in a “landslide” victory over former President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, cementing the grip of ultra-conservatives led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on all the levers of power in the theocratic state.

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the Mayor of Tehran since April 2003, was unknown to most Iranians before the first round of presidential elections on June 17. Widely expected to be eliminated in the first round, he came second after veteran politician and strongman Hashemi Rafsanjani.

Ahmadinejad's victory dealt a crushing blow to European governments who had given their backing to Mostafa Moin, an ally of outgoing President Mohammad Khatami, in the first round, and pinned their hope on the “pragmatic” Rafsanjani in the second round.

“The hardliners’ domination of politics in Tehran throws the European Union’s policy of ‘constructive engagement’ with the Islamic state into complete confusion”, a European diplomat who was in Tehran until recently said in a telephone interview. “Engaging Iran in the hope of promoting moderates has backfired”.

“He owes his victory as much to the strong organization of the Revolutionary Guards and the paramilitary Bassij as to the anti-Rafsanjani vote by millions of impoverished Iranians who hate the former President as a symbol of corruption and nepotism”, Ali Yarandi, a sociologist in Tehran University, said.

“The same machinery that won the last two national elections [municipal elections in 2003 and parliamentary elections in 2004] steamrolled to victory this time”, journalist Haleh Hayati said. “This is not about democratic elections. It’s about the Revolutionary Guards and Islamic vigilantes stuffing ballot boxes with fake votes and intimidating election workers and voters alike”.

Ahmadinejad, the son of a blacksmith, campaigned as a populist politician opposed to the scions of the Islamic theocracy; men such as Hashemi Rafsanjani whose family runs a large business empire.

In reality, Ahmadinejad is seen as little more than a “puppet” in the hands of the powerful clerics who piggybacked him to victory. One of his principal backers, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Guardian Council, was in buoyant mood yesterday as he delivered Tehran’s Friday prayers sermon.

"Every vote you cast is a bullet in the heart of America", he told worshippers. "What they (Western countries) have is not democracy, but rule of trickery. It's parties and capitalists who get the vote of the people in their own favour to fill their pockets”.

Jannati, one of a handful of ultra-conservative clerics who form the “inner cabinet” of Ayatollah Khamenei, has played a key role in engineering the consolidation of power in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards and their allies in the past three years.

Active or former generals of the ayatollahs’ ideological army control the military and security apparatus, the Majlis (Parliament), the principal dailies, the state broadcasting corporation which runs all the radio and television stations, the municipal councils, and the Supreme National Security Council.

Ahmadinejad’s victory brings the last outpost of power in the Islamic Republic, the presidency, under ultra-conservative control. With the hard-line judiciary and the Guardian Council already in their hands, the hard-line clerics around Ayatollah Khamenei are now in complete control of the ruling theocracy.

Ahmadinejad is on record as saying that he will implement “the policies of the Supreme Leader to the letter”. He will move the government to a tougher negotiating position in talks with Europe over its nuclear program.

He has criticized Iran's current negotiators as making too many concessions to Europe. His presidency will mean that Iran's foreign and security policies, including all the decisions on the nuclear program, will be made solely in the office of the Supreme Leader with minimal input from other parts of government.

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