Who's who in Iran

As the situation in Iran becomes increasingly volatile, we take a look at the players in Iranian society.

The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, is the country's most powerful figure. He appoints the head of the judiciary, six of the 12 members of the powerful Guardian Council, the commanders of all the armed forces, Friday prayer leaders and the head of radio and TV. He also confirms the president's election.

Khamenei was a key figure in the Islamic revolution in Iran and a close confidant of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic republic. He was later president of Iran from 1981 to 1989 before becoming Supreme Leader for life.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who has been Iran's president since 2005, was actively involved in the Islamic revolution and was a founding member of the student union that took over the US embassy in Tehran in 1979. But he denies being one of the hostage-takers.

He became the first non-cleric to be elected president since 1981 when he won a run-off vote against former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in elections in June 2005.

He is a hard-liner both at home - where he does not favour the development or reform of political institutions - and abroad, where he has maintained an anti-Western attitude and combative stance on Tehran's nuclear programme.

Much of his support comes from poorer and more religious sections of Iran's rapidly growing population, particularly outside Tehran.

Mir Hossein Mousavi

The 68-year-old former prime minister stayed out of politics for some years but returned to stand as a moderate.

Mir Hossein Mousavi was born in East Azerbaijan Province and moved to Tehran to study architecture at university.

He is married to Zahra Rahnavard, a former chancellor of Alzahra University and political advisor to Iran's former President Mohammad Khatami.

One of his closest associates and backers in this election was Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former President of Iran who now heads two...
of the regime's most powerful bodies: the Expediency Council (which adjudicates disputes over legislation) and the Assembly of Experts (which appoints, and can theoretically replace, the Supreme Leader).

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has dominated Iranian politics since the 1980s. Described as a “pragmatic conservative”, he is part of the religious establishment, but he is open to a broader range of views and has been more reflective on relations with the West.

Mr Rafsanjani was president for eight years from 1987 and ran again in 2005. He lost to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the second round. He has been openly critical of the president since then.

He is still a powerful figure in Iranian politics as he heads two of the regime’s most powerful bodies: the Expediency Council (which adjudicates disputes over legislation) and the Assembly of Experts (which appoints, and can theoretically replace, the Supreme Leader). He is also a wealthy businessman.

The Reformists

The Iranian reform movement is a political movement led by a group of political parties and organizations in Iran who supported Mohammad Khatami’s plans to introduce more freedom and democracy.

In 1997, Khatami was elected president on a platform of greater freedom of expression, as well as measures to tackle unemployment and boost privatisation. However, much of his initial liberalisations were stymied by resistance from the country’s conservative institutions.

He initially stood for election in 2009 but later stood aside and lent his support to Mir Hossein Mousavi.

Other key reformist figures include Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mohsen Mirdamadi, Hadi Khamenei, Mohsen Aminzadeh, and Mostafa Tajzadeh.

The Revolutionary Guard and the Army

The armed forces comprise the Revolutionary Guard and the regular forces. The two bodies are under a joint general command.

Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) was set up shortly after the revolution to defend the country's Islamic system, and to provide a counterweight to the regular armed forces.

It has since become a major military, political and economic force in Iran, with close ties to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a former member.

The force is estimated to have 125,000 active troops. It boasts its own ground forces, navy and air force, and oversees Iran’s strategic weapons.

The Guards also have a powerful presence in civilian institutions and...
are thought to control around a third of Iran's economy through a series of subsidiaries and trusts.

The Militias

The Revolutionary Guard also controls the Basij Resistance Force, an Islamic volunteer militia of about 90,000 men and woman with an additional capacity to mobilise nearly 1m.

The Basij, or Mobilisation of the Oppressed, are often called out onto the streets at times of crisis to use force to dispel dissent. There are branches in every town.

The Clerics

Clerics dominate Iranian society.

Only clerics can be elected to the Assembly of Experts, which appoints the Supreme Leader, monitors his performance and can in theory remove him if he is deemed incapable of fulfilling his duties. The Assembly is currently headed by Iran's former President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is described as pragmatic and conservative.

Former President Mohammad Khatami accused the clerics of obstructing his reforms and warned against the dangers of religious "despotism".

Clerics also dominate the judiciary, which is based on Sharia (Islamic) law.

In recent years, conservative hardliners have used the judicial system to undermine reforms by imprisoning reformist personalities and journalists and closing down reformist papers.
THE BALANCE OF POWER IN IRAN

ELECTED

President
Elected for four-year terms with a limit of two consecutive terms. Head of executive and ensures constitution is implemented

Assembly of Experts
86 Members elected for eight year terms that meet twice yearly. Appoints Supreme Leader and has power to remove Supreme Leader

Parliament
290 Members elected for four year terms. Introduces and passes laws.

UN-ELECTED

Cabinet
22 ministers, chosen by the President and approved by the parliament

Supreme Leader
Appointed by the Assembly of Experts. The Supreme Leader is the highest religious and political leader as head of military, intelligence, media, and Friday prayers

Guardian Council
Six theologians appointed by the Supreme Leader and six jurists appointed by the Head of the Judiciary that are approved by parliament.

Military and Intelligence
Supreme Leader leads and appoints the commander of the IRGC, the regular military, and

Media
Supreme Leader appoints head of the media institutions

Friday Prayer Leaders
Supreme Leader appoints head of the Friday Prayers

 Expediency Council
Appointed by Supreme Leader. The currently 29 members advise the Supreme Leader and adjudicate legislative disputes

Head of the Judiciary
Appoints six members to the Guardian Council and regulates the judicial system

Guardian Council determines who is allowed to run for elected office
President Appoints
Cabinet Approves
Iran's presidential election

No certain outcome
Jun 4th 2009
From The Economist print edition

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, populist as he is, may not yet be home and dry

IF IT were not that Iran’s presidential election will determine the fate of a large, ancient nation, and perhaps also the chances of peace in a vital region of the world, the spectacle might simply be hugely entertaining. In this religion-diluted quasi-democracy, where politics tends to be expressed in ritual public chanting or sullen private apathy, the contest has evolved unexpectedly into a bare-knuckled sluggling match, complete with taunting rhetoric, dirty tricks and colourful, rowdy fans. Rather than leading to a widely predicted first-round win for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the fight has thrown Iran’s ebullient, controversial president on the defensive.

Until very recently the field of challengers looked uninspiring, particularly after the abrupt withdrawal of Muhammad Khatami, a liberal reformer who won overwhelming victories to serve as president from 1997-2005. Several potentially strong conservatives also declined to run, apparently in deference to the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has subtly lent his considerable weight to the incumbent. This left two greybeards who are both centrists in the theocratic context of Iran: Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of parliament, and Mir Hosein Mousavi, prime minister during the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88, as the only serious contenders for the opposition. With both standing on mildly reformist platforms, they looked likelier to split and weaken the protest vote than to oust Mr Ahmadinejad.

In early May the Council of Guardians, a body of clerics charged with ensuring the Islamist and revolutionary credentials of public officials, disqualified hundreds of candidates at a stroke, including every female applicant. The only survivors of the cull were the two mild reformists and a hardline conservative, Mohsen Rezai, who used to command the Revolutionary Guard. Considering the president’s genuine popularity among groups most likely to vote, such as the rural poor, and the bias towards him of the state-controlled broadcasts that Iranians mainly rely on, the stage looked set for a dreary campaign. But with only a week to go before polling on June 12th, and with Mr Ahmedinejad and his three challengers pairing off in a string of televised debates, the race has instead stirred up Iranians as much as any since the Islamic revolution of 1979.

This may hurt Mr Ahmadinejad and his ultra-conservatives. Since his shock triumph in the presidential polls of 2005, they have relied on a mix of backing from non-elected institutions, free-spending populism based on windfall oil profits, and a growing tendency among middle-class, city-dwelling Iranians to shun elections altogether. Now the president is suffering not merely from defections in the conservative camp, a crash in oil income, and an unprecedentedly brutal verbal pummelling from his political foes. The heated mood may inspire more of Iran’s army of fence-sitters to get out and vote.

Their voice could make all the difference. Experts reckon that as many as 10m-12m of Iran’s 46.2m registered voters reflexively back Mr Ahmadinejad, meaning that a low turnout could swing him an outright majority in the first round. But key conservative groupings, including senior clerics and parliamentary blocs, have either failed to endorse him or have done so tepidly. And although the former guardsman, Mr Rezai, is deemed a distant runner, he has chipped away at the president’s core constituency. Touting his own credentials as a patriot and fervent revolutionary, he has undermined Mr Ahmadinejad on the sensitive nuclear issue by declaring that Iran would be more respected if it adopted a less “bullying and adventurist” posture, and instead asked other countries to join a consortium to help Iran to enrich its uranium on Iranian soil.

Divisions among the conservatives raise the chance of Mr Ahmadinejad being forced into a second-round run-off against one of the reformist challengers,
both of whom are more popular than Mr Rezai and have proven much fiercer campaigners than expected. Attacking the president’s record across a full range of issues, they have reignited enthusiasm among reformists, many of whom, after their failure during Mr Khatami’s term to overcome entrenched conservative opposition, had despaired of ever regaining momentum. Like Mr Khatami in his heyday, the reformist challengers have also inspired large, organised youthful followings that have fought hard to overcome handicaps, for instance by using text messaging and the internet to bypass the state media.

Tipped as most likely to succeed is Mr Mousavi. Despite his dour professorial manner and absence from politics since his premiership during the grim years of the Iran-Iraq war, he has rallied powerful support with calls for wider freedoms, economic pragmatism and reduced tension with the outside world. “Our people have not given you the right to disgrace them,” he lectured Mr Ahmadinejad in one speech, saying that Iran’s global standing had fallen to the point where its passports were as unwelcome as those of Somalia.

An aesthetic duo

A trained architect and a talented painter, Mr Mousavi also happens to be of Azeri-Turkish origin, so he draws interest from the large, well integrated ethnic minority that dominates north-western Iran. Breaking with Iranian tradition, his wife, also an artist and a professor, has joined his campaign. This, along with his promises to boost women’s rights, is one reason his boisterous rallies have been well-attended by women, often sporting the bright-green colour that has become his symbol.

Mr Karroubi, a turbaned Shia cleric who got 5m votes, nearly as many as Mr Ahmadinejad, in the first round of the presidential polls in 2005, has been equally forthright. Concentrating on the economy, a concern in a country where inflation is running at 25%, he has recruited a team of leading economists and promises to share out oil revenues with every citizen. His supporters have poured invective on Mr Ahmadinejad, likening his rule to the Taliban’s and ridiculing him for describing as “trash” the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council that have made life harder for ordinary Iranians.

In response, Mr Ahmadinejad accuses his opponents of abusing freedom to insult the nation, alternately implying that they are backed by foreign enemies or “greedy despots and financial opportunists” at home. Such fighting words continue to appeal to many, as have the timely dispensing by Mr Ahmadinejad’s government of salary and pension rises, cash gifts to the poor, and even free vegetables.

But the election season has, to quite a degree, pulled away the veil of fear from his critics and exposed the president’s shortcomings. Whatever the outcome of the vote, many Iranians are hoping that this unwonted openness, at least, may last. And if the president fails to win an outright victory in the first round, he may have a struggle to fend off whoever emerges as his chief challenger in the second.
IRANIANs voted in record numbers on June 12th. Analysts had predicted a close race; hope of change was in the air. So for many, the official result—with a claimed margin of 63% for the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—was a preposterous sham. At first, youths took to the streets in Tehran and elsewhere, lighting fires and smashing shop windows. When these were beaten back, opposition grew. Braving an official ban and rumours of police gunfire, well over a million Iranians took to the streets of Tehran on June 15th, dwarfing a televised victory rally staged the day before by Mr Ahmadinejad. A fractured, demoralised opposition suddenly appeared united, empowered and focused on Mir Hosein Mousavi, the soft-spoken former prime minister who, by the official count, had polled only 13m votes to Mr Ahmadinejad’s 24m. Their protests have continued ever since.

In the three decades since the Islamic Republic was founded, Iran has not been rocked like this. Tehran is engulfed in huge marches every day. Women in chadors, bus conductors, shopkeepers and even turbanned clerics have joined the joyous show of people power. Nationwide strikes are planned.

But the government has struck back. Its men have beaten up protesters and fired on the crowd. Reformers, intellectuals, civil leaders and human-rights activists have been arrested or have gone missing, not only in Tehran but also in Tabriz, in the north-west, and across the country. Since the Ministry of Guidance has expelled foreign journalists, the course of the repression will be hard to follow. And the outcome of this clash is impossible to predict.

The unrest is not, or not yet, about the basic underpinnings of the system created by Iran’s 1979 revolution. Protesters have deliberately dressed modestly, enlisting religious symbolism to appeal to the notions of injustice and redemption that lie at the heart of Shia Islam. It is about feelings, shared on both sides of the divide, that the Islamic Republic has gone astray. The split reflects not only a polarised electorate, but also a deep and growing schism within the ruling establishment.
Iran’s unique system rests uncomfortably on two pillars, one democratic, the other theocratic. The elected parliament and presidency have plenty of power over state spending and investment, but little over national security, including Iran’s controversial nuclear programme. This falls under the aegis of the theocratic branch, embodied by the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Mr Khamenei serves not only as a moral authority but also as commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and controls a range of powerful bodies intended to enforce the “Islamic” nature of the system, including courts, state broadcasting and the Guardian Council, an appointed committee charged, among other things, with vetting candidates and monitoring elections.

Today’s upheaval undermines both these pillars at once. Most Iranians believe electoral fraud has occurred on a massive scale. The implications are far-reaching. Extracting the state from the cloud of suspicion that has fallen over it will be tricky. A clampdown by the army and police, with Mr Ahmadinejad brazening out his critics, would wreck the Islamic Republic’s democratic pretensions for good. But this turmoil has not just undermined Iranian democracy; it has also damaged the prestige of the supreme leader.

Most of Iran’s fast-expanding but hard-pressed urban middle class dislike Mr Ahmadinejad. They suspect that his re-election was intended to stamp legitimacy on the grip of hardliners who consider the “Islamic” bit of the revolution more essential than its “republican” part. Among his opponents are pious conservatives, including some prominent senior clerics, as well as liberals who would, if given a real choice, probably opt for a secular state. But even in south Tehran, a working-class area assumed to be for Mr Ahmadinejad, pro-Mousavi voters thronged the streets: a middle-aged woman in tears lest the election was stolen, and a young man who used the only English word at his command to explain his choice: “Freedom”.

Their leaders are figures who, like Mr Mousavi, gained prominence in the early years of the revolution, but have learned pragmatism since. Many are linked to the reformist movement that briefly thrived during the presidency, from 1997 to 2005, of Muhammad Khatami, a smiling cleric whose enormous popularity failed to make headway against entrenched and occasionally vicious conservative opposition. Several of those arrested this week were Mr Khatami’s close advisers.

Men like these see Mr Ahmadinejad’s administration as dangerously incompetent in its domestic policy and recklessly confrontational in foreign affairs. Most ominous to some have been his purges not just of reformists, but also of the wider revolution-era nomenklatura from ministries, local government and universities in favour of people seen as narrow-minded, bullying provincials. This, together with the parcelling-out of rich government contracts to ideological allies such as the Revolutionary Guard, has raised fears that the state is drifting towards a Venezuelan model of demagogic cronyism.

**What conservatives dread**

The president’s supporters also suspect a coup, but one along the lines of eastern Europe’s colour revolutions. The danger, as they see it, is that Iran’s pure Islamic identity will be diluted by a wave of Western materialism, encouraged by a corrupt elite whose revolutionary ardour has faded. Supporters of Mr Ahmadinejad’s millenarian populism include commanders of the Revolutionary Guard and its larger volunteer auxiliary, the baseej, as well as allies the president has packed into the regular army, police and intelligence services. They are backed by extreme conservatives among the Shia clergy, some of whom say a pious elect, not the people, should rule. Other support comes from the (shrinking) peasantry, pensioners, war veterans and others who have benefited from the spendthrift but scattershot generosity of Mr Ahmadinejad’s government.

The supreme leader, too, who should theoretically remain above the political fray, has frequently signalled tacit support for Mr Ahmadinejad. This means that he cannot easily dissociate himself, as he has in the past, from whatever electoral malpractice there may have been. Not only did he hastily bless the election result, pre-empting its validation by the Guardian Council as the rules require. He also, before the election, described the kind of candidate voters should choose in terms that made it clear he was referring to the president. Moreover, one of Mr Khamenei’s sons is believed to have not only quietly sponsored the president’s rise from provincial obscurity, but also orchestrated his two presidential campaigns.

The first of these, in 2005, also produced credible charges of fraud, albeit on a
smaller scale. Mehdi Karroubi, a reformist cleric who ran in the recent election, was narrowly beaten to second place in a first round of voting because of a suspiciously heavy tilt to Mr Ahmadinejad in outlying provinces. This propelled Mr Ahmadinejad, then a political novice, into a surprise second-round triumph against Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president. Mr Karroubi’s protests at the time were quashed by the supreme leader.

This new result looks even more suspect. Before the vote, the president’s rivals had voiced worries about possible fraud. A news report claimed that whistleblowers inside the Ministry of Interior, which organises vote-counting, had warned that it planned to tamper with the outcome. Mr Rafsanjani, still a power-broker as head of two bodies that are meant to adjudicate between branches of government, took the unusual step of firing off a long, heated public letter to Mr Khamenei, declaring that unless the supreme leader acted to ensure a fair vote, trouble would ensue.

Conservatives at the heart of Iran’s “deep state”—that coterie of officials and clerics who are assumed really to be running things—were known to have been disturbed by the sudden snowballing of support for Mr Mousavi. He had at first been seen as a conveniently weak replacement for Mr Khatami, who withdrew from the race in his favour. Particularly upsetting to them was the disregard for public decorum displayed by the young women (“whores of the West” in one baseej newspaper) who joined Mr Mousavi’s rallies. The rigged count itself appeared to many to be a direct response to these fears.

Early on Mr Mousavi, who, supporters say, was tipped off by allies within the Ministry of Interior, proclaimed himself the likely winner. But soon afterwards rolling official results, announced with unusual speed, showed him far behind with only a third of the vote. Suspicions rose further as observers were barred from some counting centres, and the campaign headquarters of Mr Ahmadinejad’s opponents found their telephone lines cut, along with the nationwide text-messaging services they had intended to use to keep an independent tally of the vote. Any remaining doubts vanished on June 14th, as police sealed the headquarters of Messrs Karroubi and Mousavi, placed them under house arrest and detained dozens of their most prominent supporters.

Mr Ahmadinejad certainly has millions of enthusiasts, particularly in areas beyond the scrutiny of Tehran’s chattering classes. Yet the official result still seemed incredible. Mr Karroubi, for instance, had won more than 5m votes in 2005, but now trailed in last place with a mere 330,000 out of the 39m cast, fewer than the number of spoiled or blank ballots. All three challengers were shown to have lost even in their own home regions, despite strong local loyalties and the expectation of state largesse from having sons in high places.

What could explain such an apparently blatant attempt to rig an election that, even had Mr Mousavi won, would have represented little threat to either the republic or its supreme leader? The most likely theory is of a plan gone awry. Given the line-up of institutions either controlled by Mr Khamenei or systematically packed with Mr Ahmadinejad’s supporters, and given that no incumbent president in Iran has yet lost to a challenger, it may have seemed safe to bet on the president’s victory. This would have brought the added satisfaction to many dyed-in-the-wool conservatives, possibly including Mr Khamenei, of weakening the position of Mr Rafsanjani, who has mounted a rearguard struggle to contain the president’s influence.

Just to make sure, strong potential challengers, such as Mr Khatami and the popular, conservative mayor of Tehran, Muhammad Qalibaf, were “persuaded” by the supreme leader not to run. Compared with the ebullient, politically canny Mr Ahmadinejad, the three remaining challengers appeared drab and uninspiring. Mr Ahmadinejad felt so confident that he agreed to an unprecedented series of televised debates. His superior political skills gave him the advantage on screen, but his scorn for his rivals helped stir up a surge of sympathy for Mr Mousavi, dispelling the political apathy that normally pervades Iran’s middle class.

Conservatives suddenly found themselves facing a torrent of youthful activists, their passion for change magnified by the spontaneous but effective use of simple symbols and modern communications. Stunned by this turn of events, Iran’s deep state appears to have opted for a last-minute, and therefore
clumsy, attempt to alter the outcome in the president’s favour.

**Democracy in the balance**

What will happen now? None of the possible outcomes looks good. Mr Mousavi, who, along with Mr Karroubi, has shown unexpected steel in the face of pressure, insists that the only solution is to cancel the election results altogether. “Otherwise,” he says, “nothing will remain of people’s trust in the government and ruling system.” Yet, in deference to the Supreme Leader, the three disappointed challengers have also gone through the motions of a formal protest to the Guardian Council.

This 12-man body, chaired by an ultra-conservative who personally endorsed Mr Ahmadinejad, officially has ten days to investigate the charges pressed by Messrs Mousavi and Karroubi. Faced with the pressure of street protests, it has already, grudgingly, agreed to at least a partial recount of votes. Mr Khamenei has sought to bolster his position by issuing his own call for an inquiry. Yet many reformists fear that the intention is to play for time while passions burn out, and then declare some slight irregularities that do not affect the outcome. As a result, they appear grimly determined to carry on the protests.

The more immediate concern is that Mr Ahmadinejad may impose a form of martial law. There are already ominous signs of such a move, as arrests of prominent reformists widen, censorship and controls on communication tighten, and feared vigilantes of the baseej lash out with impunity. Given the machinery of oppression at his disposal, Mr Ahmadinejad could probably maintain power by force, though no one can say for sure where the army stands. But force would devastate the image of a state that he exalts as the pinnacle of good governance. Moreover, Mr Ahmadinejad would need the support of the far more cautious, consensus-seeking supreme leader, and this is far from assured.

Mr Khamenei faces a deep quandary. A resolution to the crisis that fails to assuage the huge and growing mass of Mr Mousavi’s supporters would do permanent damage to his regime’s democratic pillar. Few Iranians would ever again deign to volunteer for the empty pageantry of voting. Yet giving in completely to their demands would expose his own weakness and fallibility. Underlying all this is the bitter irony that in its paranoia to avoid a “velvet revolution”, Iran’s deep state has itself engineered precisely the conditions that might make such a revolution happen.
In addition to the turmoil and tragedy in Iran over the weekend, there were two new notable analyses of the official turnout, plus one bizarre concession by the ruling Guardian Council. Let’s start with a review of the analyses:

Last week, we pointed to an analysis (pdf) by American political scientist Walter Mebane explained further here. He used the county and city-level vote data from the two rounds of Iran’s 2005 election to try to model the 2009 result. The underlying idea is to see whether the town-by-town variation in Ahmadinejad’s vote in 2005 predicts the town-by-town variation in 2009. He found that his model did not “describe” the vote well in 192 of 320 towns and that, in 172 of those, Ahmadinejad’s vote looks suspiciously high. [Update: Mebane has updated his analysis based on new ballot box data for 23 of 30 provinces showing “evidence of significant distortions in the vote counts not only for Karroubi and Rezaei but also for Ahmadinejad” - more here].

Over the weekend, Alex Scacco and Bernd Beber, graduate students at Columbia University, published analyses in the last two digits in reported 2009 vote totals, on the theory that the distribution of these digits should be totally random. The found suspicious patterns suggestive of fraud in the provincial-level data but not in what they describe as county-level data. Their theory is that provincial level data were fabricated and that the “leading digits” of the county-level data subsequently manipulated to match fraudulent provincial totals (which would have required minimal tampering with the last two digits of most counties -- R analysis code and data here, via Monkey Cage).

Yesterday, the British think-tank Chatham House published an analysis of the provincial level data co-authored by academics at the Institute of Iranian Studies at the University of St. Andrews. They found irregularities in turnout -- including two provinces showing “a turnout of over 100%” -- and patterns they found implausible in the supposedly new votes cast for Ahmadinejad in 2009. Note that while the Mebane and Scacco-Beber analyses were mostly statistical, the Chatam House analysis is more steeped in the authors' expertise in recent Iranian political history.

But perhaps most telling was this statement yesterday from the Iran’s ruling Guardian Council yesterday as published by Iranian state television:

Iran’s Guardian Council has suggested that the number of votes collected in 50 cities surpass the number of people eligible to cast ballot in those areas.

The council’s Spokesman Abbas-Ali Kadkhodaei, who was speaking on the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) Channel 2 on Sunday, made the remarks in response to complaints filed by Mohsen Rezaei -- a defeated candidate in the June 12 Presidential election.

"Statistics provided by the candidates, who claim more than 100% of those eligible have cast their ballot in 80-170 cities are not accurate -- the incident has happened in only 50 cities," Kadkhodaei said.

Kadkhodaei further explained that the voter turnout of above 100% in some cities is a normal phenomenon because there is no legal limitation for people to vote for the presidential elections in another city or province to which people often travel or commute.

To put this in perspective, that's 50 of over 300 cities in which turnout exceeded 100% of the eligible voters. So the statement truly pushes the boundaries of “spin,” or as Nate Silver puts it, "Worst Damage Control. Ever." Though I'm not sure I would go that far. Kadkhodaei claims that the pattern is a "normal phenomenon," since it is legal for Iranian's to vote outside their home provinces. Still, it's quite a stretch.

Consider the update from the Chatham House authors (see p. 2) that their "results are not significantly affected" by the Guardian Council statement:

Whilst it is possible for large numbers of voters to cast their ballots outside their home district (one of 366), the proportion of people who would have cast their votes outside their home province is much smaller, as the 30 provinces are too large for effective commuting across borders. In Yazd, for example, where turnout was above 100% at provincial level, there are no significant population centres near provincial boundaries.

Note also that they found, separately, that the increase in turnout in 2009 "results in substantially less variation in turnout between provinces, with the standard deviation amongst provincial turnouts falling by just over 23% since 2005." So the Guardian Council’s argument is that out-of-province voting was great enough to cause turnout beyond 100% of eligibility in 50 towns and 2 provinces, yet the Chatham House analysis shows less variability across provinces than in 2005. That's quite a pattern.

Update: Josh Tucker has more on the Kadkhodaei statement.
There is no denying that the news clips from Tehran are dramatic, unprecedented in violence and size since the mullahs came to power in 1979. They're possibly even augurs of real change. But can we trust them? Most of the demonstrations and rioting I've seen in the news are taking place in north Tehran, around Tehran University and in public places like Azadi Square. These are, for the most part, areas where the educated and well-off live — Iran's liberal middle class. These are also the same neighborhoods that little doubt voted for Mir-Hossein Mousavi, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's rival, who now claims that the election was stolen. But I have yet to see any pictures from south Tehran, where the poor live. Or from other Iranian slums. (See TIME's covers from the 1979 Islamic revolution.)

Some facts about Iran's election will hopefully emerge in the coming weeks, with perhaps even credible evidence that the election was rigged. But until then, we need to add a caveat to everything we hear and see coming out of Tehran. For too many years now, the Western media have looked at Iran through the narrow prism of Iran's liberal middle class — an intelligentsia that is addicted to the Internet and American music and is more ready to talk to the Western press, including people with money to buy tickets to Paris or Los Angeles. Reading Lolita in Tehran is a terrific book, but does it represent the real Iran? (See pictures of Iran's presidential election and its turbulent aftermath.)

Before we settle on the narrative that there has been a hard-line takeover in Iran, an illegitimate coup d'état, we need to seriously consider the possibility that there has been a popular hard-line takeover, an electoral mandate for Ahmadinejad and his policies. One of the only reliable, Western polls conducted in the run-up to the vote gave the election to Ahmadinejad — by higher percentages than the 63% he actually received. The poll even predicted that Mousavi would lose in his hometown of Tabriz, a result that many skeptics have viewed as clear evidence of fraud. The poll was taken all across Iran, not just the well-heeled parts of Tehran. Still, the poll should be read with a caveat as well, since some 50% of the respondents were either undecided or wouldn't answer.

No doubt, Iran will come out of last Friday's election a different country. But it would serve us well to put aside our prism that has led us to misunderstand Iran for so many years, an anticipation that there would be a liberal counter-revolution in the country. Mousavi is far from the liberal democrat that many in the West would like to believe he is. The truth is, Ahmadinejad may be the President the Iranians want, and we may have to live with an Iran to Iranians' liking and not to ours. (See pictures of
Ahmadinejad's supporters on LIFE.com.

The absolute worst things we could do at this point would be to declare Iran's election fraudulent, refuse to talk to the regime and pile on more sanctions. Hostility will only strengthen Ahmadinejad and encourage the hard-liners and secret police. We should never forget that Iran’s spiritual leader, Ayatullah Khameini, along with Ahmadinejad, have the full, if undeclared, backing of both the Revolutionary Guards and the army, and they are not afraid to use those resources to back up their mandate.

Baer, a former CIA field officer assigned to the Middle East, is TIME.com's intelligence columnist and the author of See No Evil and, most recently, The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower.

See the top 10 Ahmadinejad-isms.

See pictures of Iranian society.

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Before we go too far down the road cheering the forces of Iranian democracy, let's not forget that its public face, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, has American blood on his hands. He was Iran's Prime Minister during most of the 1980s, a time when the country was waging a terrorist campaign against the U.S.

Earlier this week, I received an e-mail from a Lebanese who was present at the creation of the country's Iranian-backed, Shi'ite militia Hizballah in 1982 and on familiar terms with its most radical and violent members. He wrote: "Are you people crazy backing Mousavi, a patron of Hizballah's terrorist wing?" (See behind-the-scenes pictures of Mir-Hossein Mousavi.)

Indeed, Mousavi, Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, almost certainly had a hand in the planning of the Iranian-backed truck-bombing attacks on the U.S. embassy in April 1983 and the Marine barracks in October of that same year. Mousavi, as my Lebanese contact reminded me, dealt directly with Imad Mughniyah, the man largely held responsible for both attacks. (Mughniyah was assassinated in Damascus last year.) The Lebanese said Mughniyah had told him over and over that he, Mughniyah, got along well with Mousavi and trusted him completely.

When Mousavi was Prime Minister, he oversaw an office that ran operatives abroad, from Lebanon to Kuwait to Iraq. This was the heyday of Khomeini's theocratic vision, when Iran thought it really could export its revolution across the Middle East, providing money and arms to anyone who claimed he could upend the old order. Mousavi was not only swept up into this delusion but also actively pursued it.

It was Mousavi who appointed Iran's ambassador to Damascus, Ali Akbar Mohtashemi-pur, the Iranian caught red-handed planning the Marine-barracks bombing. Mohtashemi-pur also coordinated the hostage-taking in Lebanon. As a reward, Mousavi gave him the Interior Ministry, where Mohtashemi-pur went on to crack down on what was left of democracy in Iran.

And it is not as if Mousavi kept his support for Iran's secret war on the U.S. a secret. In a 1981 interview, he had this to say about the taking of American diplomats in Tehran in 1979: "It was the beginning of the second stage of our revolution. It was after that we discovered our true Islamic identity." (Read "The Man Who Could Beat Ahmadinejad: Mousavi Talks to TIME.")

None of this is to exonerate the other candidates. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was an officer in the Islamic
Revolutionary Guards Corps, the Iranian paramilitary force responsible for most of the terrorism against the U.S. Conservative Mohsen Rezaei was the Guards' commander. And Mehdi Karroubi, like Mousavi, was deeply involved in Lebanon in the '80s. According to my Hizballah contact, he too was a patron of Mughniyah's.

This may all be ancient history to Iran's fledgling democratic movement, and history the Op-Ed pages of our newspapers would prefer to forget. But at the very least, it should be a reminder that, when it comes to political leaders, there are no good choices in Iran. It is a promising sign that Mousavi has put his violent past behind him, as has Iran for the most part, but let's not completely forget his far-from-democratic roots.

_Baer, a former CIA field officer assigned to the Middle East, is TIME.com's intelligence columnist and the author of_ See No Evil _and, most recently, The Devil We Know: Dealing with the New Iranian Superpower_

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The crisis in Iran

Is the dream already over?
Jun 25th 2009 | TEHRAN
From The Economist print edition

The authorities may succeed in quelling the street demonstrations. But the crisis is far from over, especially as the ruling clergy quarrel among themselves

THE roller-coaster that liberal-minded Iranians boarded as they agitated en masse against a suspect presidential poll seemed to hit the buffers on June 20th, when a banned demonstration was met with lethal force. Millions of Iranians remain incensed by what they see as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s fraudulent victory over his main challenger, the reformist Mir Hosein Mousavi, in the election of June 12th. But far fewer now seem ready to take the risk of venting their anger on the streets. For all that, it may not take much to provoke another popular eruption. A fresh spark may yet be provided by the unusually public struggle for dominance over the Islamic Republic that has erupted within the ruling clerical establishment itself. The crisis may indeed be moving from the street to the back rooms of the mosque.

Aiming for a resolution of sorts, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, and the man who has the last say on all matters of state, issued a dramatic ultimatum in a sermon on June 19th. Addressing a huge television audience, he dropped his customary pose of impartiality in electoral politics, siding with Mr Ahmadinejad and warning Mr Mousavi’s supporters that further street protests would lead to “violence, blood and chaos.”

To the surprise of many Iranians, who do not as a rule associate reformist leaders with political courage, Mr Mousavi refused to call off a demonstration that had been planned for the next day, nor did he retract his demand that the results be annulled and the election held again. But the result was a pitifully unequal struggle between demonstrators hurling stones and tens of thousands of Revolutionary Guards and voluntary militiamen, known as the baseej, armed with truncheons, water-cannon and automatic rifles.

According to state-controlled media, a score of people have been killed. Other reports put the figure much higher, and say that several hundred have been injured. The government said that 40 brave baseej had been hurt. Some residential areas in central Tehran resembled war zones. The protesters have exalted the image of
a beautiful young woman, Neda Agha Soltan, who was photographed in a demonstration in Tehran as she lay dying after being shot by an unknown assailant.

An edgy calm has now descended on the city. Protests in Tehran and other towns, such as Isfahahan, Kerman, Shiraz and Tabriz, which witnessed huge displays of public dissent after the election result was announced, have since got smaller, letting the authorities tackle the people they regard as instigators of the troubles.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, a New York-based lobby, more than 40 journalists have been arrested since the elections and at least 450 political campaigners imprisoned, severely limiting the ability of Mr Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the lesser of the two reformist presidential candidates, who is also demanding fresh elections, to plan their next move or even communicate with their supporters. Several senior colleagues of Muhammad Khatami, a reformist former president, have been arrested, along with at least a dozen journalists close to Mr Mousavi’s campaign, according to a website that is tracking events.

Fearing a backlash, the authorities have so far refrained from arresting Mr Moussavi or Mr Karroubi. But they are laying the ground. Mr Mousavi has been savaged by the pro-government media and accused of helping a banned opposition group, the People’s Mujahedin of Iran, which is particularly active in western Europe. On June 21st the head of parliament’s judiciary committee said Mr Mousavi’s public statements constituted “criminal acts”. Tehran police claim to have found evidence of co-operation between “foreign elements” and agitators operating from a building that was used by the Mousavi campaign.

Neither Mr Mousavi nor Mr Karroubi had much faith in the willingness of the Guardian Council, a watchdog body itself watched over by Mr Khamenei, to investigate fairly their allegations that Mr Ahmadinejad owed his landslide victory to fraud. According to the Interior Ministry, the incumbent won 25m votes out of 39m cast, compared with 13m for Mr Mousavi and a risible 300,000 for Mr Karroubi, a former speaker of parliament. Scepticism is understandable: the council is in overall charge of running the elections, which means that it has been investigating itself.

Mr Mousavi says that the election was perverted by a multitude of procedural irregularities and by restrictions placed on his representatives’ legal right to monitor ballot boxes. These allegations, which he put in writing, have had little effect. On June 21st a spokesman for the Guardian Council announced that in 50 towns the number of ballots cast had exceeded the number of eligible voters. But it was possible, he went on, that many people had voted outside their home towns.

The council may be preparing for a modest revision of the results, giving Mr Mousavi a few more votes, probably in a few days’ time. But annulment, as Mr Khamenei made clear in his sermon, when he denied that the Islamic Republic “goes in for betrayal in the matter of the people’s votes”, seems out of the question.

Permilted little contact with their supporters, their precise whereabouts a matter of intense public speculation, Messrs Mousavi and Karroubi have managed at least to unnerve their opponents with their refusal to give up. Mr Mousavi has described defenders of Mr Ahmadinejad as “the proponents of a petrified, Taliban-style Islam” and has dismissed the idea, first expressed by the supreme leader, that the agitation was driven by foreign enemies. On June 24th Mr Karroubi defied a government ban by holding a wake for those who were killed in the violence four days earlier. But it was violently broken up.

**The real new fight is less visible**

So the battle for the streets may inevitably be heading for victory for Mr Ahmadinejad and the ruling clerical establishment behind him. But a titanic struggle behind the scenes, obscured by public events and often blurred by Tehran’s whirling rumour mill, may be just as crucial to the country’s future. This pits Mr Khamenei against a wily former president who until recently was often regarded as the Islamic Republic’s second-most-powerful man, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

On the face of it, this struggle is also going the supreme leader’s way, as you would expect, since between them Mr Khamenei and his president hold the main levers of civilian and military power. Mr Rafsanjani’s long silence since the election suggests he has been disheartened by the verbal attacks on him and by the arrest of several family members, including his daughter, a former parliamentary deputy, who has since been released.

Mr Ahmadinejad has made no secret that he longs to see Mr Rafsanjani and members of his family charged with corruption.
So complete is Mr Rafsanjani’s eclipse, at any rate for the time being, that information on his movements and intentions now consists of hearsay. According to one account, he has been busy in the seminary town of Qom, canvassing senior clerics to back a move to sack Mr Khamenei. Another suggests he may signal his surrender to the inevitable by attending Friday’s prayers, whereas he was conspicuously absent when Mr Khamenei gave his sermon on June 19th.

In jail or at home, Iran’s reformists must be rueing their mistakes. It was Mr Rafsanjani, after all, who helped manoeuvre his old friend Mr Khamenei into the vacant supreme leader’s chair after the death of the revolution’s father, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, 20 years ago. To that end, Mr Rafsanjani helped ensure the eclipse of Ayatollah Hosein Ali Montazeri, who had been Khomeini’s heir apparent and who now, a fragile octogenarian, sends messages in support of Mr Mousavi’s cause. Later, during the presidency of Mr Khatami (1997-2005), reform-minded Iranians turned on Mr Rafsanjani with such venom that he failed even to win a seat in parliament in the elections of 2000.

**Have the liberals lost?**

The price of those misjudgments and divisions will be high. Ever since the Islamic Republic was set up after the revolution of 1979, revolutionary purists have had to tolerate another faction, culturally more liberal and latterly more open to relations with the West. This lot is now being squelched.

At what cost to Iran’s already tarnished image abroad? Thanks to their mobile telephones, the protesters have beamed the most gruesome images around the world. France’s president, Nicolas Sarkozy, says the “repression and violence” is “unacceptable”. Germany’s chancellor, Angela Merkel, has expressed support for “the people in Iran who want to exercise their right to freedom of expression and freedom of assembly.” Barack Obama, who had at first tried to stay aloof so as not to endanger his policy of detente with Iran, declared that he was “appalled and outraged...by the threats, beatings and imprisonments” being meted out. The protesters, he said, were “on the right side of history”.

For the many people in Tehran who had hoped that Mr Obama would help usher in a bright new chapter in relations between Iran and the West, this is depressing. Western criticism has bolstered those in Tehran whose instinct, at the first sign of trouble at home, is to seek foreign scapegoats. At the top of the list comes Iran’s favourite bugbear, Britain.

Taking their cue from Mr Khamenei, who described Britain as “abhorrent” in his sermon, Iranian officials have accused Britain’s government of sinister manipulation of events. Manuchehr Mottaki, Iran’s foreign minister, described in outlandish detail how Britain had flown in plane-loads of spies (he did not explain how they had cleared immigration); he then expelled a brace of British diplomats. Iran’s foreign-ministry spokesman has depicted two foreign-based satellite television channels, BBC Persian and the Voice of America, which have been transmitting images and comment to viewers in Iran, as part of an Israeli conspiracy to break the country up.

**America’s choice**

Mr Obama must now decide whether to let all this affect his efforts to engage Iran. His aim is to persuade the country to forgo its contentious nuclear plan—or at least to modify it and throw it open to scrutiny. Plainly, Israel’s hawkish prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, senses a chance to help kibosh an American diplomatic initiative that discomfited him from the start.

Some Iranians who cheered Mr Obama’s policy of engagement may have changed their minds. Shirin Ebadi, a Nobel peace-prize laureate who is Iran’s best-known human-rights campaigner, has asked the European Union to freeze all political dialogue with Iran “until the violence stops and fresh elections are held.” But Russia, which Mr Obama had hoped to draw into a coalition of countries tugging Iran towards respectability, is being awkwardly indulgent of Iran’s behaviour, with a foreign ministry spokesman calling the crisis an “internal
affair”. More predictably China has endorsed the election.

Unless Mr Khamenei dramatically changes heart or protests resume on an irresistible scale, reform-minded Iranians may again have to resign themselves to living without the limited democratic freedoms, including the right to elect a president from an albeit vetted field, that they had hoped to build on. A political elite shorn of its reformist element may well bolster the authoritarian and militarist ways that Iranians are already seeing in embryo: baseej militiamen on every street corner; a special court that is being set up to try arrested “hooligans”; and senior military people muttering darkly about foreign threats.

In the longer term, however, many Iranian liberals think Mr Obama’s optimism will be vindicated. The election campaign and the protests that followed have permitted Iranians to express themselves with a freedom they have not known since the revolution of 1979. They enjoyed the experience—and want more. Further, the sight of infighting among leaders who were apparently united under the binding influence of Ayatollah Khomeini, has undermined the Islamic Republic’s claim to legitimacy, and still more its claim to sanctity. “That idol has been smashed,” said a commentator in Tehran.

In any event, Mr Mousavi’s campaign is going on. If he is arrested, his supporters say they will call a general strike. At night, people around the country gather on their rooftops to shout “Allahu Akbar!” (“God is Great!”), a call dating back to the 1979 revolution that Mr Mousavi’s people have made their own. And many Iranians will fondly recall the post-election march on June 15th that as many as 2m people attended. It was impeccably well-behaved, good-humoured and entirely self-policing.

In the words of one Iranian who attended, “Before then I had lost my faith in being Iranian. We were becoming selfish, turning in on ourselves. But that march seemed to change everything. It can’t have been a dream—can it?”
Iran's debate over theocracy

Why the turbans are at odds
Jun 25th 2009
From The Economist print edition

A debate rages about the nature of clerical rule

THE Koran is the word of God, which every Muslim must follow, but its commands can be hard to interpret. So people should submit to the rule of a properly trained religious scholar. The idea is a simple one, and the father figure of Iran’s revolution of 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, made it the central principle of his Islamic state.

But the notion of velayat-e faqih (guardianship of the jurist) has proved to be controversial as a religious doctrine and tricky in practice. The turbulence now sweeping Iran has many causes, among them a simple urge for freedom. Yet the tensions, inconsistencies and hypocrisies generated by trying to impose velayat-e faqih lie at the heart of its troubles.

Divisions among top Shia scholars are nothing new. In the main seminary towns of Najaf in Iraq and Qom in Iran, followers of competing ayatollahs have frequently clashed, sometimes with fists. One recurring split has pitted scholars who believe they should stay outside politics against those who believe they must engage in it. Ayatollah Khomeini pushed this argument to a new level. His revolutionary constitution created the post of supreme leader, placing an unelected senior scholar in overall command of the country.

Many of his fellow ayatollahs saw this as an “innovation”, a bad word in Muslim jurisprudence, signifying an unsubstantiated departure from Islam’s founding texts. Some feared that immersion in worldly affairs would taint clerics and end by repelling believers from the faith. Others argued that democracy was a better way to divine God’s will, or that a committee of scholars, rather than a single man, would suit the leadership function better. Ali al-Sistani, a Najaf-based ayatollah who is probably the most widely revered scholar among the world’s Shias today, has stated that in order to be legitimate such a ruler should win acceptance from a majority of believers.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who died in 1989, himself once declared the popular vote a measure of legitimacy and allowed for an elected parliament and president, as well as an Assembly of Experts theoretically charged with monitoring the supreme leader. But his successor, Ali Khamenei, despite lacking both the scholarly credentials and the revolutionary aura of Khomeini, has accumulated ever more power relative to Iran’s elected institutions. Under his rule, questioning the doctrine of velayat-e faqih has become taboo. Scholars who query it openly or cast doubt on Mr Khamenei’s fitness for the role have been dispatched to obscurity, exiled or imprisoned. The Guardian Council, the appointed 12-man body that vets candidates and elections, summarily disqualifies anyone seen as insufficiently devoted to the doctrine.

Yet opposition is still brewing. The doubters include not only leading scholars in the seminaries of Qom, but some of Ayatollah Khomeini’s closest associates, including prominent members of his own family. Today’s crisis, which has seen the supreme leader abandon the pretence of neutrality in favour of the hard-line faction behind Mr Ahmadinejad, has exposed doctrinal divisions as never before.

The cheated presidential candidates have appealed directly to the scholars of Qom without challenging velayat-faqih as a doctrine. But their direct defiance of Mr Khamenei is an unprecedented show of rebellion against how it is practised. The response from Qom has been mixed. One group of mid-ranking clerics has
blasted the election as a fraud, and at least four of the 19 grand ayatollahs who bestride Iran’s Shia hierarchy are said to agree. So far none but Mr Khamenei has openly endorsed the official outcome.

This does not mean the supreme leader is alone. Many Shia clergymen either depend on his largesse or hold loyalty to the state and its Islamic mission above matters of personal opinion. Besides, Mr Khamenei’s tenure has seen power steadily drain away from the clergy and towards Iran’s security services, whose commanders he appoints. But with rumours swirling of a lobbying campaign to rally clerical support for ousting Mr Khamenei, the supreme leader may suddenly find himself facing not only a backlash from the millions of ordinary citizens who now openly denounce him as a dictator, but also from his robed and turbaned comrades.
Iran's disputed presidential election

A hollow victory
Jul 2nd 2009
From The Economist print edition

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad keeps power but loses legitimacy, particularly among the middle class

THE case is closed. The landslide claimed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the June 12th presidential election was real, says Iran's government, and anyone who doesn't like it can lump it or, indeed, risk going to jail. After weeks of unrest, the state has reasserted its power. Heavy policing has blunted public protests, while a more targeted campaign of arrests, intimidation and controls on communications has hamstrung attempts to organise and sustain opposition. But with accusations of foul play still being voiced, even within the religious establishment that supports the Islamic Republic, Iran's hardliners will struggle to re-establish legitimacy.

The Guardian Council, an appointed body dominated by clerics allied to Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was in charge of investigating allegations of electoral fraud. Considering that it has a record of barring reformist candidates and that its chairman publicly endorsed the arch-conservative Mr Ahmadinejad before the ballot, the result was preordained: the council announced on June 29th that its researches, including a partial recount, had produced no sign of wrongdoing, so closing the last legal channel to contest the outcome. Pro-regime news outlets even suggested that the revised tally showed gains for Mr Ahmadinejad. The president declared not just a personal triumph but the defeat of an enemy plot to overthrow the regime.

Yet his three rival candidates have remained defiant, insisting that Mr Ahmadinejad’s claimed 63% victory could have been secured only by fraud. They insisted that the election either be annulled or subjected to a full, impartial investigation.

Mir Hosein Mousavi, the runner-up to Mr Ahmadinejad, and another reformist candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, said the government was illegitimate. Mr Mousavi asked: "How can people trust a regime which imprisons its
friends, colleagues and children?” Websites close to him called for peaceful protests to continue, including a possible general strike. Even close associates of the sole conservative challenger, Mohsen Rezai, who has lately muted his criticism in deference to the supreme leader, continued to assert that he had been cheated.

But such displays of defiance belie a widening sense of despair among Mr Ahmadinejad’s opponents. A statement from an influential group of reformist clerics hinted at the change in mood. While reserving the right to protest, it said that Iranians had already paid a high price for speaking out and gave warning that escalating tensions and street protests “are not the solution”. Powerful reformist allies, including the former presidents Muhammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani, have taken to reasserting their loyalty to the Islamic Republic while working behind the scenes to negotiate a compromise.

The toll from the weeks of post-election unrest, which at its peak brought as many as 2m protesters onto Tehran’s streets, includes perhaps 20 deaths, hundreds of injuries and extensive property damage. Much of this was perpetrated by government agents, judging from extensive footage captured in amateur videos and posted on the internet.

The widest sweep of suspected regime opponents since the 1980s has seen hundreds of ordinary citizens hauled off to jail, along with prominent journalists, human rights advocates and dozens of reformist party leaders, many of whom served as senior officials in previous administrations. In what appears to be the beginning of a full-scale purge, reformist sympathisers in Iran’s oil ministry have been replaced by hardliners. Even those with no apparent involvement in politics, such as Bijan Khajehpour, a well-known business consultant, have been detained.

Chillingly, the state-controlled media have taken to airing purported confessions from some of these prisoners. The interior minister also claims to have uncovered a conspiracy whereby armed saboteurs pretended to be members of the baseej, a vigilante force of zealots which has been widely accused of brutality.

Hardliners are trying to present the unrest as the result of foreign intrigue, notably by Britain, the old colonial meddler. Britain and Iran have engaged in tit-for-tat expulsions of diplomats. Local staff of the British Embassy in Tehran were rounded up (and most then released). Iran’s interior minister claims he has footage showing them taking part in anti-government demonstrations. Some pro-regime loyalists claim that the fatal shooting of Neda Agha Soltan, captured on video by bystanders during a demonstration, was staged by agents in the pay of the BBC, whose Persian television channel has drawn the regime’s ire.

Hardline clerics say that in future protests will be viewed as haraba, a crime of banditry for which the punishment is execution. Yet the shrillness of such threats, and the violence of the crackdown, have only strengthened the impression that Iran has experienced something like a coup d’état by hardliners, not by the reformists who are accused of trying to mount one. With the bulk of Iran’s middle class now alienated from its leadership, and the Islamic Republic’s prestige sullied before the world, this is not much of a victory for Mr Ahmadinejad to savour.
Inside the Iranian Crackdown

When the Unrest Flared, the Ayatollah's Enforcers Took to the Streets of Tehran With Batons and Zeal

By FARNAZ FASSIHI

TEHRAN -- When the protests broke out here last month, Mehdi Moradani answered the call to crush them.

On the first day of the unrest, the 24-year-old volunteer member of Iran's paramilitary Basij force mounted his motorcycle and chased reformist protesters through the streets, shouting out the names of Shiite saints as he revved his engine.

On the fourth day, he picked up a thick wooden stick issued by his Basij neighborhood task force and beat demonstrators who refused to disperse.

By the eighth day, demonstrators alleging that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had rigged his re-election were out by the hundreds of thousands. Mr. Moradani says he mobilized in a 12-man motorcycle crew, scouting out restive neighborhoods across Tehran. He battled protesters with a baton and tear gas. The demonstrators fought back with rocks, bricks and bottles. Mr. Moradani says he handcuffed scores of demonstrators and dragged them away as they kicked and screamed.

"It wasn't about elections anymore," says Mr. Moradani, a short, skinny man with pitch-black hair and a beard. "I was defending my country and our revolution and Islam. Everything was at risk."

The mass uprising against the results of the June 12 election by supporters of Mr. Ahmadinejad's challengers has largely died down. Demonstrations this Thursday, though heated, drew thousands rather than hundreds of thousands. Iranian officials have said between 17 and 20 people have died in the monthlong protests. Independent organizations tracking human-rights violations in Iran put the death toll closer to several dozen.

If Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei succeeds in stamping out the unrest, it will be in large part because of Mr. Moradani and his colleagues in the Basij militia, the Islamic Republic's most loyal foot soldiers.

The story of Mr. Moradani, a midranking Basij member, offers a rare glimpse into one of the most mysterious and feared arms of Iran's regime -- and into the group's most significant mobilization since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s. This portrait of Mr. Moradani is based on interviews with him conducted in person and by phone, both before the uprising and after the crackdown began.

The Basij fanned out across Tehran, beating protesters with sticks, lining streets and squares, and roaring through neighborhoods on their motorcycles in a show of force. Regime officials praised the shock troops.
"Our efforts to unveil the faces of our enemy saved Iran from a grave danger," Yadollah Javani, the political chief of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, which commands the Basij, said last week.

But the Basij also became the most visible target of the opposition's fury. In some neighborhoods, protesters covered streets with oil to thwart Basij motorbikes, surrounding and beating fallen Basij riders.

The Basij was created in 1979 by the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. It was devised as a volunteer force, to back up the Iranian army in the Iran-Iraq war. Many of its young members were deployed to the battlefield to walk ahead of soldiers and detonate Iraqi mines.

After the war ended in 1988, the Basij evolved into a type of neighborhood task force. Members serve as law enforcers, morality police, social-service providers and organizers of religious ceremonies. In times of crisis, the Basij are tasked with restoring order and ferreting out dissidents.

Iran's government says the Basij count some five million members. Independent analysts put the number closer to one million, out of an Iranian population of about 75 million.

Those numbers make the group the regime's largest and most wide-reaching network of security volunteers. Members, both men and women, slip easily between roles, from social worker to community spy.

The Basij don't wear uniforms. Men typically sport beards, and often wear loose-fitting shirts that fall untucked over their pants. Women members are usually covered in head-to-toe black chadors.

Rank-and-file members don't draw salaries, though there are perks to the job. They enjoy special consideration when competing for university admission or government jobs.

A Basij chapter operates out of every officially sanctioned institution, private or government owned. Ministries, universities, factories, schools, mosques and hospitals all house Basij units. Joining the Basij can be as easy as signing up. But members are carefully vetted. Indoctrination includes theology and ideology seminars, then military training.

During the administration of reformist President Mohamad Khatami, from 1997 to 2005, the Basij were only called out during times of street protests. After Mr. Ahmadinejad won the presidency in 2005, the Basij enjoyed something of a revival.

Under Mr. Ahmadinejad, authorities reinstituted street checkpoints, manned by Basij and separate morality police, who monitored everything from men's haircuts to how women wear their mandatory headscarves.

In 2005, Basij forces were placed under the command of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, Iran's most elite security force. The Guard, with responsibility for internal security, runs a sort of parallel military, with its own air force and naval branches, its own ministry and extensive business activities.

Mr. Moradani is the son of a former commander of the Guard, who fought against Israel in Lebanon in the 1980s and helped train the armed militia of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shiite group.

The eldest of three children, Mr. Moradani was enrolled by his parents in the Basij's youth club when he was nine years old. The youth club is a mix between the Boy Scouts and Bible school. The clubs organize soccer games, swimming lessons and picnics in the woods.
Children are taught how to pray, and they recite Quranic verses. Religious teachings at the clubs emphasize the call to defend Islam, even at the expense of death, or martyrdom. Future Basij members are told to strive to create a pure society in line with conservative Islamic values.

Mr. Moradani remembers field trips to war monuments, Shiite shrines and so-called martyrs’ cemeteries, where those who died in the Iran-Iraq war are buried. He received his first military training before he turned 14, learning how to handle a gun and fight from trenches, he says.

When he was 14, the Basij forces piled Mr. Moradani and 100 other youths into buses and took them around the dormitories of Tehran University. At the time -- 10 years ago this week -- students had been orchestrating large, antigovernment protests. The demonstrations were among the most significant since the 1979 founding of the Islamic Republic.

Basij commanders ordered the teenagers to beat up student organizers, Mr. Moradani says. They did. In 2003, when student uprisings erupted again, he rushed to help quash them.

"The revolution and Islam need me. I will give my life in a heartbeat if the regime asks me," Mr. Moradani said in an interview earlier this year at a shop in central Tehran, where he sells Islamic and revolutionary paraphernalia, including key chains, T-shirts and CDs. "Our society is now at the verge of sin and filled with antirevolutionary people."

In his small store, Mr. Moradani works with his shoes off, because he also prays there. The shop's walls are adorned with framed posters of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah and Mr. Ahmadinejad.

"My heroes," he says.

Mr. Moradani, who lives in Shahr-eh Rey, a city adjacent to southern Tehran, didn't attend university. He focused instead on his religious studies. He says he hopes one day to follow in his father's footsteps and join the Revolutionary Guard.

He has taken the Guard's rigorous entrance exam twice, passing the ideology and the written portions both times. But he failed the final hurdle: an intense interview that lasts six to eight hours. Applicants must discuss why they are loyal to the regime and the Supreme Leader. He intends to try again.

Mr. Moradani takes religious-singing lessons and aspires to master "madahi," the art of chanting Shiite religious odes at holy ceremonies. His cellphone is programmed to ring with a famous religious song about Imam Hussein, a Shiite saint.

Before the election, Mr. Moradani campaigned for Mr. Ahmadinejad. He printed campaign posters and pasted them on walls. The day after the vote, with his candidate declared the winner, Mr. Moradani bought a box of chocolate cupcakes and drove his motorcycle to one of Mr. Ahmadinejad's campaign offices to celebrate.

A few hours later, he recalls, he was shocked to see demonstrators filling the streets. They set plastic trash bins afire along Tehran’s long Vali Asr Avenue. Men and women, gathered in clusters across town, shouted "Death to the Dictator."

Riot police chased them away. The demonstrators regrouped and began chanting again -- a cat-and-mouse game that played out for days.

"I never expected the protests to be so intense and last so long," said Mr. Moradani in a phone interview.
from Tehran this week. "I thought it would be over in a few days."

Basij members organized to support riot police and other security officials across Tehran. Some Basij members infiltrated the opposition demonstrations, according to eyewitnesses.

Protesters, most of them young, fought back. "You saw young people on both sides mobilizing with vengeance and willing to kill," said Issa Saharkheez, a political analyst in Tehran, in an interview shortly after the election. Mr. Saharkheez was subsequently arrested in detentions that followed the unrest.

At the height of the street battles, in Sadaat Abad, a middle-class neighborhood in east Tehran, young men and women organized themselves into an unofficial militia to fight the Basij, with a "commander" taking responsibility for each street. Every afternoon, they would meet to prepare for the evening's expected battle, according to a 25-year-old student who was involved with the group.

They collected rocks, tiles and bricks from construction sites and spilled oil on the roads, an attempt to sideline the Basij's motorcycles. When a Basij rider would go down, the young men would beat him, according to the student. Women stood back, screaming "Death to the Dictator" and stoking bonfires in the street. Older supporters remained indoors, throwing ashtrays, vases and other household items from their balconies and windows onto the Basij motorcycle riders below.

"There was a war going on here every night," the student says. "We are not going to stand and let them beat us."

At the end of the first week of protests, Mr. Khamenei, the Supreme Leader, led Friday prayers and endorsed Mr. Ahmadinejad's victory. He ordered all demonstrators off the streets.

A few hours after Mr. Khamenei's sermon, Mr. Moradani got a call at home. The local Basij headquarters was holding an emergency meeting. About four hundred members showed up.

A top Basij commander briefed them on the riots and their responsibilities going forward. He called protesters "havoc makers" and accused them of having ties to Western countries aiming to sow chaos in Iran. The commander said the protests were no longer a matter of election unrest, but had become a serious, national-security threat.

"It is now everyone's Islamic and revolutionary duty to crush these antirevolutionary forces," Hossam Gholami, the 27-year-old chief of Shahr Rey Basij, told members, he recalled in a telephone interview this week. "You are not dealing with ordinary people. They are our enemy," he said he told them.

Mr. Moradani lined up with his comrades to receive an official letter of deployment, signed and bearing the seal of the Revolutionary Guard. He was given new equipment: a camouflage vest to wear over his clothes, a plastic baton, handcuffs and a hand-held radio.

Depending on rank, some members received shields and hard hats, and others were given chains and tear gas, according to Messrs. Gholami and Moradani. Mr. Moradani says no one in his division carried knives or guns.

On the streets the next day, a Saturday, the Basij and other security services cracked down, resulting in some of the bloodiest clashes with protesters. Mr. Moradani says he and his brigade roamed the streets, attacking what he says were violent protesters. Alerted about a burnt-out mosque, he rushed to the scene to secure the area.

One day, Mr. Moradani says, a mob chased him. He fell off his motorcycle and the crowd beat him with
sticks and rocks, he says.

His leg was bandaged for a few days, and he still walks with a limp, he says. Dozens of Basij militia have been killed and injured, he says. Protesters have attacked his friends by throwing acid on their faces, he says.

A surgeon at Pars Hospital in central Tehran, where many of the fallen were taken, confirmed casualties on both sides. He said the hospital had operated on three young people from the opposition who were shot in the head and abdomen by security forces. He also treated scores who were badly beaten or stabbed, he said.

Among them were Basij and government supporters, he said -- including Basij members who had acid thrown on their faces.

Mr. Moradani says a young man in his group was killed when a protester in a black sports car ran over him, he says. The driver, he says, was arrested and confessed to driving over 11 Basij members. Mr. Moradani's account was impossible to independently verify.

For Mr. Moradani, the biggest shock during the election turmoil came in his personal life. He had recently gotten engaged to a young woman from a devout, conservative family. A week into the protests, he says, his fiancée called him with an ultimatum. If he didn't leave the Basij and stop supporting Mr. Ahmadinejad, he recalls her saying, she wouldn't marry him.

He told her that was impossible. "I suffered a real emotional blow," he says. "She said to me, 'Go beat other people's children then,' and 'I don't want to have anything to do with you,' and hung up on me."

She returned the ring he gave her, and hasn't returned his phone calls. "The opposition has even fooled my fiancée," he says.

Write to Farnaz Fassihi at farnaz.fassihi@wsj.com
As Ahmadinejad Is Sworn In for 2nd Term, Deep Fissures Are Laid Bare

By ROBERT F. WORTH and NAZILA FATHI

BEIRUT, Lebanon — With his adversaries boycotting the ceremony and a vast deployment of police officers standing guard outside, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was sworn into office on Wednesday for a second term as president, almost two months after an election that divided the nation and set off Iran’s deepest crisis since the Islamic Revolution 30 years ago.

There were scattered protests in the streets around the Parliament building in Tehran, where the ceremony took place. But with thousands of riot police officers and Basij militia members patrolling the capital, the million-strong rally called for by the opposition failed to materialize.

The inauguration ceremony itself exposed deep rifts in Iran’s ruling elite. Many seats were empty, with most of Parliament’s reform faction boycotting the event, according to Parlamaan News, a reformist Web site. Several reformists who did attend walked out as the president began his speech. Leading opposition figures, including the presidential candidate Mir Hussein Moussavi and the former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, also stayed away. Subway stations and shops around the Parliament building were closed, in a sign of concern about possible violence.

Mr. Ahmadinejad must form a cabinet in the next two weeks, and his choices will signal much about the direction his second term will take. He is likely to face rising dissent from within his own conservative camp, as he did last month during a heated fracas over his first appointments. His government will also be struggling to put down a defiant opposition movement that maintains that his landslide June 12 re-election was rigged, and has continued to mount street protests. That task may grow harder as the school year and athletic seasons start next month, providing new opportunities for mass rallies.

But for all the challenges facing him, Mr. Ahmadinejad remains firmly in control, with the clear support of Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who formally endorsed his presidency in a religious ceremony on Monday. He has the backing of a large parliamentary majority, the powerful Revolutionary Guard, and the silence — if not the open support — of Iran’s clerical establishment.

“I, as the president of the Islamic republic of Iran, swear before the holy Koran and the Iranian nation and God to be the guardian of the official religion, the Islamic republic and the Constitution,” Mr. Ahmadinejad intoned as he took the oath of office. A brief film shown before the ceremony highlighted Iran’s scientific achievements, including the cloning of sheep and the launching of the Omid satellite.

In a brief inauguration speech, Mr. Ahmadinejad made clear that he viewed his re-election as a mandate to move aggressively on a variety of issues, including plans to rebuild Iran’s troubled economy and reform the
subsidies system. He also spoke contemptuously about the Western countries that had refused to congratulate him on his election victory. “No one in Iran is waiting for your congratulations,” he said. “The people of Iran care neither for your grimaces nor for your congratulations and smiles.”

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, asked about the inauguration during a news conference in Kenya, where she began a seven-nation Africa tour, said, “Engagement is still on the table with the Iranians,” though that does not mean the United States is not considering other options. She added a word of admiration for Iran’s opposition movement, saying, “We appreciate and admire the continuing resistance.”

The opposition movement persists, but in recent days the authorities have stepped up efforts to intimidate and silence it. On Tuesday, Mir Hamid Hassanzadeh, the director of Mr. Moussavi’s Web site, was arrested, Iranian news agencies reported.

Meanwhile, a mass trial of more than 100 reformists is under way. As the trial opened last weekend, some senior opposition figures were shown on state television delivering humiliating “confessions” in which they said there had been no election fraud, and detailing foreign-led plots to bring down the Iranian government with a “velvet” revolution. Such confessions are familiar from earlier trials, and defendants and human rights groups say they are almost always obtained through torture.

Prosecutors have warned that anyone questioning the legitimacy of the trial — as many opposition figures have — could in turn be prosecuted. Some senior lawmakers have hinted in recent days that Mr. Moussavi and other opposition leaders could be arrested soon, though it is impossible to tell if that is only a scare tactic.

But the opposition does not seem to have been cowed. In recent weeks, as news emerged of protesters who died in prison after being arrested, Mr. Moussavi and others spoke out more forcefully than ever before, accusing the government of savage and criminal acts. The anger spread to some prominent conservatives, prompting a number of conciliatory efforts by the government, including the release of more than 140 prisoners and the closing — at the personal order of Iran’s supreme leader — of a detention center.

Such conciliatory gestures have alternated with renewed crackdowns on street protests, as ever-larger deployments of police officers in Tehran and other cities fill the streets to intimidate and beat back protesters. The protests have continued, and the demonstrators have even adapted: in recent days, they have begun using a tactic in which they form clusters and chant antigovernment slogans, only to disperse quietly into the surrounding crowds the moment the police approach.

The authorities clearly hope that Mr. Ahmadinejad’s inauguration will put to rest the opposition’s persistent demands for an annulment of the election or a referendum on its legitimacy. But it is clear that they are concerned about the continuation of the protests in the weeks and months to come.

The opposition aside, Mr. Ahmadinejad is likely to face an array of political challenges from his own conservative rivals. A bitter dispute broke out last month when he appointed a controversial figure as his top deputy, and he was forced to back down after Ayatollah Khamenei intervened. As the president begins naming his new cabinet in the coming days, his rivals are likely to seek more concessions, bringing persistent fissures in the conservative camp to light.
August 11, 2009

Iranian Lawmakers Demand Say on Cabinet, Hinting at a Rift Among Hard-Liners

By ROBERT F. WORTH and NAZILA FATHI

BEIRUT, Lebanon — About 200 conservative Iranian lawmakers signed a letter on Monday calling on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to consult them about cabinet appointments, the latest sign of a struggle among hard-liners that may limit the president’s political clout as he moves to form a new government in the coming week.

The lawmakers’ demands followed reports that Mr. Ahmadinejad had fired as many as 20 officials in Iran’s Intelligence Ministry. The purge appeared to be aimed at those who disagreed with the handling of the harsh crackdown on opposition protests in the wake of the disputed June 12 presidential election.

The firings have exposed sharp differences among conservatives over how to deal with Iran’s still defiant opposition movement. Last month, Mr. Ahmadinejad fired the intelligence minister, Gholam-Hussein Mohseni-Ejei, provoking furious criticism from many conservative lawmakers and senior clerics. Mr. Mohseni-Ejei had objected to using televised confessions of jailed protesters — widely believed even in Iran to be coerced — and since his removal, those confessions have been used in a mass trial of reformist figures.

Other conservatives have spoken out against the torture and abuse of protesters who were detained after the election, including several who died in custody. The issue has also galvanized opposition figures, and on Sunday a new and explosive accusation emerged: male and female prisoners are said to have been raped at one detention center, according to a letter by a reformist cleric and presidential candidate, Mehdi Karroubi.

At the same time, there were signs that some opposition leaders might be choosing silence, at least for the moment, in the face of renewed threats. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president who provided crucial support to the opposition last month in a Friday Prayer sermon at Tehran University, indicated on his Web site on Monday that he might not deliver this Friday’s sermon, though it is his turn.

The divisions among conservatives go well beyond the handling of the crackdown. Many lawmakers and high-ranking clerics have said they are concerned that Mr. Ahmadinejad has not shown sufficient respect for senior figures or for Parliament. They were especially disturbed by his flouting last month of a command from Iran’s supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, to drop a deputy, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

On Monday, the speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, one of Mr. Ahmadinejad’s most powerful critics, met with the president to discuss the lawmakers’ petition. Afterward, a junior lawmaker who attended the meeting said Mr. Ahmadinejad turned the question around, saying he had been waiting to hear from the lawmakers before completing his short list of cabinet nominees.
Mr. Ahmadinejad’s purge of the Intelligence Ministry appeared to be part of a long-expected bid for control by the president and his allies in the Revolutionary Guard, analysts said. Officials deemed insufficiently loyal were swept aside, including some with long experience in the counterintelligence, security and technical departments.

With the purge, “Ahmadinejad is, in effect, taking over the management of the most important security institution in the country,” wrote Hassan Younesi, the son of a former intelligence minister, Ali Younesi, on his blog. He added that the ministry had never seen such a boldly political purge in its history.

At the same time, opposition Web sites have reported that Ahmad Salek, a cleric rumored to be under consideration for intelligence minister, is operating an unofficial intelligence-gathering service run by Ahmadinejad loyalists. Opposition sites have implicated him, along with Hussein Taeb, chief of the Basij militia, in the torture of detainees.

Mr. Salek and Mr. Taeb were among a number of high-ranking officials and clerics who have fiercely criticized opposition leaders in recent days, leading many in Iran to suspect that Mir Hussein Moussavi, the leading presidential challenger, could soon be arrested. Mr. Taeb said Sunday that Mr. Moussavi and his followers were guilty of an “evil plot” and did not want to see the Islamic Revolution succeed, according to the semiofficial Fars news agency.

Arresting Mr. Moussavi, a former prime minister who was close to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of Iran’s 1979 revolution, would be a bold and divisive gesture that could backfire, some Iran experts say. But others say the threats are merely aimed at silencing Mr. Moussavi and his supporters.

If so, they may have succeeded, at least temporarily. Mr. Moussavi, who maintains that the election was rigged, has not been heard from in several days.

Even as some hard-line figures pushed for a more aggressive approach, others continued to make more conciliatory gestures. On Sunday, Iran’s national police chief, Brig. Gen. Ismail Ahmadi Moqaddam, said abuses had taken place in at least one detention facility. On Saturday, Iran’s chief prosecutor became the first senior official to acknowledge that jailed protesters had been tortured.

But Mr. Karroubi’s assertions that detained protesters had been raped were anything but conciliatory. The accusations were detailed in a letter sent to Mr. Rafsanjani dated July 29, but were first published Sunday on the Web site of Mr. Karroubi’s political party.

Robert F. Worth reported from Beirut, Lebanon, and Nazila Fathi from Toronto.