

Anthony Bubalo
Words find their mark in power stakes
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In recent days Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has added to his growing catalogue of hate speech by characterising the establishment of Israel as the culmination of efforts to rid Europe of Jews. But while it is tempting to caricature the Iranian President, it would be wrong to dismiss him simply as the proverbial mad mullah from central casting (and not just because he isn't a cleric).

Ahmadinejad reflects a broad, though disparate, desire for change within the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this respect his election poses a challenge to the country's ruling establishment, as well as to the international community's efforts to find a diplomatic solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

On one level what you see with Ahmadinejad is what you get. He is an ideologue committed to the original principles of the 1979 revolution. His recent imposition of a ban on the playing of Western music on Iranian radio and television harks back to the days of the republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Superficially, Ahmadinejad's views are in line with those of regime hardliners and conservatives, like the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as the republic's pre-eminent political and religious figure. Indeed, Ahmadinejad's denial of the Holocaust and recent call for Israel to be wiped off the map are repugnant views widely shared in the regime.

In this sense, he is doing little more than revealing the regime's true face, masked in recent years by the soothing rhetoric of his predecessor as president, the reformist Mohammed Khatami. Yet Ahmadinejad also represents a challenge for a regime riven by ideological and personal fissures and containing many competing power centres. His election has prompted an internal political struggle manifest in purges of officials and conflict between President and parliament over ministerial appointments.

This is as much about generational differences as about ideology. For Ahmadinejad and others of the revolution's second generation, the promise of 1979 has not been realised, from the failure to deliver socio-economic justice at home to faltering efforts to export the revolution. Significantly, he sees key regime figures as the main culprits.

Unsurprisingly, he takes aim at reformers like Khatami, whose eight-year presidency saw a relaxation of religious restrictions that governed domestic life after 1979 and efforts to improve ties with the international community.

But he has also been critical of conservative figures like former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, who unsuccessfully vied with Ahmadinejad for the presidency last June. Ahmadinejad charges — accurately — that members of the regime establishment have enriched themselves at the expense of the people, in particular, through their control of state enterprises and powerful charitable foundations, and that they were too often ready to sacrifice revolutionary goals for the dictates of realpolitik.

By railing against the establishment the President has tapped into a rich vein of popular discontent. The public may not agree with his plans to return the revolution to its first principles, but it certainly responds to his populist protestations about regime corruption and the need to deliver jobs and economic security in a country with double-digit unemployment and inflation.

Like Khatami, Ahmadinejad was, in effect, an anti-establishment candidate, not expected to win the election, but who drew on a significant popular constituency demanding change. While it may seem counterintuitive given his ideological views, Ahmadinejad appeals to a strong anti-clerical mood in Iran that transcends the ideological divide and stems from the corruption of the clerical class to which Rafsanjani, Khamenei and other key figures belong.

This shows the limits of using ideology alone to decipher Iranian politics. Understanding the conflicts and compromises between different power centres and the schisms between different generations of the regime is also important.

It is not surprising, therefore, that the establishment has already moved to undercut the new President's power by giving greater supervisory power to Rafsanjani, who remains the head of the powerful Expediency Council (the role of which is to resolve disputes between the various arms of the Government and the regime).

But the President won't be easily reined in. For one thing, Ahmadinejad has powerful allies in the Revolutionary Guard, the Basij (popular militia) and the intelligence services. In this respect, his repeated attacks on Israel and the Holocaust might also be calculated with an eye to internal politics.

By isolating Iran internationally and creating an atmosphere of crisis, Ahmadinejad forces the regime to coalesce. And by fuelling fears in Iran that it may come under military attack from the United States or Israel, he increases the importance of the security forces, his key power bases.

This internal political struggle is clearly having an impact on Iran's handling of the nuclear issue. Efforts to find a diplomatic solution centre on a Russian proposal for Iran to shift its domestic uranium enrichment program to Russia, where there would be stronger guarantees that uranium would only be enriched to levels sufficient for energy production and not for the higher levels needed to produce weapons.

It is doubtful that Iran will agree to this compromise, a judgement reinforced by its recent announcement that it will resume sensitive nuclear fuel research. In the Iranian regime there is a broad consensus behind its domestic nuclear effort, as much for the sake of national pride as for economic and strategic reasons. Even under Khatami, Iran was loath to give up efforts to achieve indigenous mastery of the nuclear fuel cycle.

But even if wiser heads in the regime are starting to recognise that Iranian obduracy is pushing its international allies, Russia and China, closer to the European Union and the US on this issue, Ahmadinejad's blunt assertiveness could yet undo any move towards compromise. In this respect, the nuclear question might not simply be a battle of wills between Iran and the international community, but a pointer to who is in control inside the Islamic Republic as well.

Anthony Bubalo is a research fellow at the Lowy Institute for International Policy.