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A new day in Iran

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The re-election of the Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who defeated his chief opponent, the ex-Prime Minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, was not entirely unpredictable. Iran's ultimate decision-maker and power-broker, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei had endorsed him several times. He controlled state media and the Interior Ministry. The Revolutionary Guards had expressed their support for him. Why then had the Western media and governments put so much hope on an upset, aside from their mere wish to see him lose? Why did they assume that his reformist challenger, the ex-PM Mir-Hossein Mousavi, would bring the kind of change we can all believe in?

Not that Mousavi was not a real challenger. He might have won the popular vote — though this regime has fixed elections in the past and there was absolutely no reason to believe that this time it would be different. But most Western journalists invariably reported from Tehran and Isfahan, home to the young and the educated whom they constantly spoke to and quoted. Rarely did they venture to Yazd, Qom, Khorramshar and Bandar Abbas, or anywhere else in Iran, a vast, diverse and robustly traditional country. This could again have been a case of the media creating a reality to fit its mindset, rather than observing a reality that could go terribly wrong from their point of view.

Even if one accepts that the regime indulged in result-fixing, why is this so shocking? Probably because much misguided punditry suggest that Iran is a democracy. Hence, by speaking to like-minded Iranians, journalists must have concluded that this was a real contest, where an Iranian Barack Obama was about to steal the show from the Ayatollahs. In fact, Iran is not a democracy. Freedom House places Iran in the company of China, Russia, Zimbabwe, Cuba and Libya when it comes to political freedoms and civil liberties. Women still count for half a man in an Iranian court of law. "There are no gays in Iran," declared Ahmadinejad, at a public lecture at Columbia University two years ago. This is true, in a sense, because gays, once discovered, are either executed or forced to undergo a sex change. Candidates for

public office must first be vetted by the Guardians' Council, a body of clerics that ensures that none may contravene the tenets of the Revolution.

This should have been a warning about Mousavi. After all, he had impeccable Islamic credentials. He and his wife were devotees of Ali Shariati, one of the Revolution's main ideologues. As Prime Minister, he was complicit in Tehran's clandestine nuclear efforts and the regime's brutal repression of its citizens. Even Mousavi would have pursued a nuclear programme. During the campaign, he did not criticise Ahmadinejad for doing so, but for drawing international condemnation on Iran's nuclear activities and its ballistic missile programme, which under the previous reformist President, Mohammad Khatami, Iran had been able to pursue without outside interference.

Still, the regime must have concluded, the unprecedented mobilisation for Mousavi alongside some of his utterances may bode ill for the Revolution. There is no precedent, after all, in the annals of authoritarianism, where an ideologically-driven dictatorship can pilot political change without losing control. When Iran found itself on that path under Khatami, it ended in a bloodbath. So the regime — now firmly in the grip of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards — must have reasoned that it was foolish to take a risk. Better face public protests and international consternation than lose the plot. Having rigged the election and exposed the ruse about Iranian democracy to anyone apart from Iran's staunchest apologists and a few inside the Washington beltway, the regime will now feel no compunction about crushing any attempt to challenge the result. It knows that the price to pay for this exercise — when America is extending a hand of friendship and words of contrition — is infinitely lower than taking the uncertain road of moderation. I do not expect a Velvet (or "Green") revolution any time soon. Ahmadinejad may not be the last word of Iran's power structure. But he now represents the most articulate expression and the true face of its regime, what it wants to achieve in the world.

What does it mean for the international community and its hopes to find accommodation with Iran? All pretexts for inaction or laying in wait are now gone. It is a new day in Iran — one where Islamic radicalism has staked its sole claim to be our interlocutor. Let the diplomatic dance begin then. And woe betide those who think that such tidings may bring peace in our time.