Iran’s seventh presidential election scheduled for June 14, 2013 is stressing the country’s entire system of government and promises to be a unique test of its strength. Iran is under the toughest sanctions of its history, sanctions that can be taken as a clear sign that the United States and its allies are preparing for military action against the country. Some American political analysts believe it is very tempting for Washington to wait and see if there is a political crisis and instability in Iran that could bring about changes in the existing system of Islamic rule rather than attacking Iran. Considering what happened during the Arab Spring, the idea does not seem far-fetched. The ghost of a “Persian Summer 2013” is haunting the United States, whose new presidential administration, like its predecessors, appear to be in a hurry to turn up the heat as much as possible with additional sanctions prior to the election.

Extreme measures are already in place: an embargo on Iranian oil imports, exclusion of its banks from the international financial settlement system, a ban on trade with Tehran, and denial of insurance to cover transactions. An embargo on Iranian gas is in the works. But that is not all. We recently heard about upcoming military exercises in the Persian Gulf to develop ways of intercepting foreign merchant ships bound for Iran and blockading Iranian ports, i.e., a rehearsal for a naval blockade. The Americans are not bothered by the fact that the UN Charter allows a naval blockade only by decision of the UN Security Council. The adoption of unilateral sanctions against Iran without a UN decision has become the norm for the United States. The White House pays no attention to Russia’s objections, and its partners ignore them as well. Europe, which daily becomes less unified in solving its internal difficulties, has adopted America’s positions with surprising pro-American solidarity. Despite the obvious economic losses it entails, the countries of the European Union are supporting the economic strangulation of Iran, which, according to various assessments, will have a budget shortfall of $35 to $50 million this year.

Nevertheless, the sanctions have as yet done nothing to resolve the nuclear crisis with Tehran. However, that is not their main purpose. It has been correctly pointed out that sanctions can only be effective as part of an overall and consistent strategy, not when they are implemented in place of such a strategy, as is the case with the US government’s policy towards Iran. There is no strategy, just a basic disregard for the other side. Washington is not striving to change the behavior of Iran’s leaders with the sanctions. The Americans still intend to replace Iran’s religious government 34 years after the Islamic revolution of 1979. Among other things, they are striving to use the paralyzing effect of various discriminatory measures against Iran’s economy to provoke unrest and rioting in Iran, get its people to take to the streets in opposition to the ruling system and bring about a crisis of government prior to the presidential election. So we can safely say that Iran’s presidential campaign got underway in the White House before its official launch in Iran. The White House is focused on each percentage increase in the Iranian people’s potential for protest. Just a little over four months remain until the election, and Iran’s economy has not collapsed, its people remain loyal to their leaders, and, like Libya and Egypt, Syria and Yemen, they are in no hurry to take to the streets and erect barricades.

According to a recent survey of Iranians inside the country by the American Institute of Public Opinion that was published on February 7, 63% of Iranians still support the government’s policy of continuing its nuclear activities. That percentage clearly shows that the Iranian public is more uniform and united than the West believes. Here it
Indeed, when it comes to such strategically important issues as the country’s independence, territorial integrity and national pride — which for many Iranians means its nuclear program — and distrust in the United States, the Iranians have shown a striking degree of unanimity and confidence in their leaders. It is remarkable that even within the Iranian diaspora in the United States and Europe the Iranians who want to restore many Western-style attributes of statehood in Iran are still patriots in their own fashion when it comes to Iranian nuclear research or US threats of war. In these matters, they are “more royalist than the king.” A large part of the Iranian diaspora in the United States rejected the Islamic revolution and has remained hostile to the Islamic Republic but considers Iran entirely within its rights to continue nuclear research. Nor do they support US plans to force Iran to abandon its peaceful nuclear ambitions by military means. In Iran itself, 57% of respondents blame the United States for their worsening situation, not their government. It seems reasonable to predict that the White House’s formula for calculating the protest potential of the Iranian people — that an increase in sanctions causes an equal escalation of Iranians’ dissatisfaction with their government — is not going to work.

However, we cannot be completely sure that street rioting will not occur, nor can the Iranian authorities themselves. For the onlookers across the sea hoping for a sign, there are already indications that a tough election campaign is underway. On February 10, for example, Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, one of the men most often mentioned as a presidential candidate, was unable to finish his speech in Qom on the 34th anniversary of the Islamic revolution. The audience started throwing shoes when Larijani took the podium, and security personnel evacuated him to a safe location. Political analysts attribute this to growing conflicts between Larijani and Ahmadinejad, who had previously accused the Speaker and his family of corruption and favoring personal interests over public. His inhospitable reception in Qom undoubtedly was politically organized by Ahmadinejad’s followers.

A tough campaign and tense rivalry among Iran’s political elite are not new phenomena. Iran’s leadership cannot be called monolithic. For example, serious tensions have periodically cropped up in relations between President Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Khamenei, who has managed to hold onto his prestige and who, as Iranian experts have rightly noted, will play a decisive role in choosing Iran’s next president.

It is difficult to say right now how free the coming presidential election will be. The Majlis election (2012) suggests that there will be alternative candidates. There was a great deal of competition during that election. More than 3400 candidates competed for 290 parliamentary seats, i.e., there was a choice. On average, the occupant of each seat in parliament was elected from a field of 11 candidates. It currently appears that there will be quite a few candidates for the presidency; the first have already announced unofficially that they are running, although the registration procedure has not yet started. Members of the Trilateral Conservative Coalition are likely candidates: Gholamali Haddad Adel, the former speaker of parliament; Ali Akbar Velayati, Khomeini’s senior advisor; Gholamali Haddad Adel, the former speaker of parliament; Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf; and Ali Larijani, the current Speaker of Parliament, as mentioned earlier. However, I feel it would be inappropriate to comment on the chances individual Iranian politicians have of becoming head of the country’s executive branch before official registration opens.

But we can already say that this time Khamenei’s support for a candidate is not a 100% guarantee of success. First of all, we should consider the role of current President Ahmadinejad, who will step down from the political Mount Olympus after eight years as head of government with, as yet, no definite prospects for his future career. Nor should we forget about his team, whose members clearly do not want to surrender their dominant positions to their enemies without a fight. Ahmadinejad’s political heritage and the economic well-being of his tight-knit circle of political allies are at stake. Ahmadinejad and his closest associates have occasionally tried to challenge the supremacy of the religious authorities, interfere in Ahmadinejad’s jurisdiction, increase their own power at his expense, and demonstrate practical and political independence from him. There evidently is no reason why this part of Iran’s elite could not reprise their “stubbornness” even now.

As far as the US calculation that the Iranians will want to see a regime change, Iran’s current situation indicates that nothing radical will happen in the time remaining before the election. I would agree that extrapolation is a highly effective methodology. Nevertheless, the logic of the Americans and their Western colleagues who apply conclusions drawn from observations just of the Iranian diaspora in the United States and Europe to the 75 million population of Iran seems wrong. Western values mean absolutely nothing to most of Iran’s population, and they will not stand up for them at the polls.
In summary, during the upcoming presidential election Iran’s religious leaders will do everything they can to demonstrate the credibility of their political power, which Khamenei intends should be stronger after the election, even at the expense of the country’s new president. There is no doubt that the attention paid to Iran’s upcoming presidential election will increase. It is difficult at present to predict who will be elected and how serious the election environment in Iran will be.

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