The unexpected good showing of the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former Mayor of Tehran, in the first round of the Iranian Presidential elections held on June 17, 2005, and his emergence in the No.2 position with 19.5 per cent of the valid votes polled as against 21 per cent for the favourite Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani throws open the possibility that in the second and final round on June 24, 2005, which would be confined to the two of them, he may emerge as the winner, thereby belying all pre-poll predictions by Iranian as well as foreign analysts. During the week preceding the polls, there were indications of increasing support for Ahmadinejad, but nobody anticipated his spectacular showing.

The respectably high turn-out (63 per cent of the eligible voters) in the elections, though not as high as in the previous Presidential elections, and the spectacular showing of Ahmadinejad, who is considered as the closest to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei amongst all the candidates in the first round, has taken observers of the Iranian political scene by surprise. Among the reasons attributed for the high voter turn-out and the support for Ahmadinejad is the anger caused among large sections of the Iranian population by what was perceived as the blatant efforts of the Bush Administration in the US to interfere in Iran’s internal affairs through stepped-up broadcasts and telecasts to the people to stay away from the voting as a protest against the alleged lack of democracy. The broadcasts and the telecasts sought to create doubts in the minds of the people about the fairness of the elections and the credibility of the electoral process. They were made from Prague and relayed by clandestine relaying stations in the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Pakistan. The explosions in the days preceding the polls in the Arab areas of Khuzestan near the border with Iraq and in Teheran itself were seen by the people as instigated by the US intelligence agencies in order to destabilise Iran. The voting in the first round is thus seen as a firm message sent by the voters to the US to mind its business and not to interfere in the internal affairs of Iran.

If the Bush Administration does not draw the right lessons and continues with its provocative broadcasts/telecasts and actions in the days preceding the second round, it may face the mortification of seeing a strongly anti-US ultrconservative, who had played a role in the 1979-80 decision to storm the US Embassy and take American diplomats as hostages, elected as the next President of Iran---not because the people supported his ultrconservative views,
but because they felt that was the only way of teaching a lesson to the US.

In an analysis of the pre-poll scene in the January, 2005, issue of the “Iran Focus” published from London, its Editor, Mir Ali Nourbakhsh, had highlighted the following significant features of the scene:

- Fading of religious aspects Unlike eight years ago, none of the conservative candidates was using religious orthodoxy as a strong campaigning tool. Only a few Islamic principles were used by candidates to attract the voters. Apart from Rafsanjani, none of the conservative candidates is a cleric.

- Dissociation from the past. Most of the political forces with radical social views were trying not to express their attitudes directly or are dissociating themselves from traditionally radical parties.

- Signs of moderation The majority of conservative forces were using moderate slogans similar to those expressed by outgoing President Mohammad Khatami.

- Good governance as a source of legitimacy. Political groups were chanting slogans about a powerful and capable government. Both conservatives and reformists were implying that Khatami’s failures were the result of his personal weaknesses and not those of the constitution. Reformists were trying to create the impression that there is still hope for change from within.

- Personal politics was fading. The Iranians (even the conservative sections) were paying more attention to what the politicians were saying rather than relying on their revolutionary record. Economic slogans were starting to play a role in the election campaign.

His article projected the various scenarios which were likely to emerge from the elections. In none of these scenarios, did Ahmadinejad figure as a strong contender, who could win. It characterised him as “value oriented, xenophobic, strict socio-political beliefs, in favour of state controlled economy and against the IMF and the World Bank” and Rafsanjani as an independent thinker, flexible, in favour of détente, open, but would compromise social freedoms with radical forces over economic issues, open on economic issues in favour of privatisation and foreign direct investment”.

Following the success of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the 49-year-old Ahmadinejad, who holds a doctorate in engineering from the Iran University of Science & Technology, became a member of the Office for Strengthening Unity (OSU) and reportedly supported the decision of its Central Committee
to storm the US Embassy in Teheran and take the American diplomats hostage. In fact, it is said that he wanted that the students should raid the then Soviet Embassy too, but the Central Committee did not agree to it.

He subsequently became an officer of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards and rose to be a senior commander. His responsibilities in the Revolutionary Guards reportedly included countering the activities of political dissidents in Iran and those of the Mujahideen-e-Khalq (MEK), which had started a terrorist movement against the Islamic Government from sanctuaries in France and Iraq. He was considered a leading counter-terrorism expert of the Revolutionary Guards. Sources in the Iranian exiles community in the West allege that he was also given the responsibility for the execution of the fatwa for the assassination of Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born British author. The execution of the fatwa has since been suspended.

He served as the Governor-General of the Ardebil Province in northwest Iran during the 1980-1988 Iran-Iraq War. He also became a member of the right-wing Association of Engineers and of the central council of the Society of the Devotees of the Islamic Revolution.

He also served as a senior advisor to the Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance. He was elected as the Mayor of Tehran in March, 2004, a post from which he resigned before filing his nomination for the Presidential elections. Upon taking up his post as the Mayor, he said: “I hope I can use my reputation in achieving justice. I do not believe in shotgun-retribution, but some managers will inevitably be changed. The new managers will be selected on personal criteria, and whoever doesn’t meet the mark must go. You can only be a manager to the extent that you work for the people, and that will be my criteria for selecting my managers. Recommendations are false misgivings. I will not give weight to anyone’s advice during my term as Mayor. Some may be displeased with this course of action, but the people’s trust is gained only through dedication to justice”.

He also said: “Piety, virtue, candour, efficiency and trustworthiness will be the criteria on which my managers will be selected and this has nothing to do with settling political scores. The Mayor’s office must be cleansed of corrupt managers and shady monetary and administrative practices. When these visions are put into effect in the next couple of months, Tehran’s municipality will bear witness to profound changes in scores of managerial positions, ranging from deputies to managing directors of the municipality’s affiliated companies. These managers will be replaced by a host of new faces as the first step toward cleansing a city that is long overdue for a makeover.”
As the Mayor of Tehran, he improved the public transportation system, but made enemies among the liberals by converting many cultural centres in the capital into mosques or other religious centres. He made a distinction between Islamic democracy and Western style liberal democracy and strongly rejected the latter. He used to say: “We did not have a revolution in order to have democracy”.

His views on the policies which he would follow if elected as the President as expressed by him during his election campaign are given in the following sub-paragraphs:

DOMESTIC POLICY: “If elected, I would implement development projects on the basis of justice and the wishes of the people. Political, cultural and economic developments are not isolated from each other and at the very core of all of them is justice and public consensus. Among my priorities are removing the problems of the youth related to employment, housing and marriage. My idea of political development is different from its foreign interpretation. We must expand freedoms quantitatively and qualitatively, and determine ways in which freedoms could be used. The way we have been dealing with the youth on the streets does not solve anything.”

FOREIGN POLICY:” The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is in principle based on the establishment of peace and justice worldwide. For this reason, the expansion of relations with all countries is on the agenda of the Islamic Republic of Iran. I mean balanced relationships, based on mutual respect and observance of each other’s rights. There are very few countries that fall outside this scope. If they do, it is due to their blind approach to the Islamic Republic. Of course, there are hierarchies in the diplomacy. In these echelons, we give priority to the establishment of relations with our immediate neighbors, then with countries that once fell within the zone of Iran’s civilization, then with Muslim states and finally, with all countries that are not hostile towards the Islamic Republic of Iran. We desire an expansion of relations with regional states and the establishment of extensive public contacts. We believe that visa quotas should be lifted and people should visit anywhere they wish freely. People should have freedom in their pilgrimages and tours.”

RELATIONS WITH THE US: “I meet Ambassadors from European, African and Asian countries once a week. Iran does not need imposed ties with the United States. When the world formed a united front to fight Iran, our oil could not sell on the international markets and our economy was paralyzed (due to the 1980-88 war imposed by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq), the nation did not extend its hand (to outsiders) for help. Now that we have managed to build the infrastructure (for development) and the country has progressed,
we do not need to accept any imposed relationship with America. The US severed its ties with the Islamic Republic to harm the Iranian nation and so do those who favor resumption of ties with the US.”

UN REFORMS: “Global equations undergo changes, this is their nature. Today, the Muslim world is the poorest of the global powers. The UN structure is one-sided, stacked against the world of Islam. The Muslim world should be allowed a chance in the UN Security Council, where certain groups now possess the right to veto. We consider this privilege essentially wrong. It is not just for a few states to sit and veto global approvals. Should such a privilege continue to exist, the Muslim world with a population of nearly 1.5 billion should be extended the same privilege.”

NUCLEAR ENERGY: “This subject has been given a tremendous amount of publicity. It is a critical subject. Nuclear energy is the scientific achievement of the Iranian nation. Our youth have crowned themselves with this achievement, via domestic technology and by reliance on their own knowledge. The energy belongs to the Iranian nation. Definitely, the progress of a nation cannot be obstructed. Scientific, medical, and technical development of our nation is necessary. I believe there are certain individuals that create a false mood. They want to portray the situation as critical, while there is no crisis here. The technology is at the disposal of the Iranian nation. Certain powers do not want to believe this. They resist against accepting such a right, such an achievement of the Iranian nation. Their scientists and experts have admitted that the Iranian nation is entitled to this right. I believe the problem can be solved with prudence and wisdom, by utilizing opportunity and relying on the endless power of the Iranian nation, through our self-confidence. The ongoing artificial mood is political sleight of hand. The mood aims to influence the Islamic Republic’s domestic developments. One cannot impede scientific progress. You can see scientific progress everywhere in the world. One cannot obstruct this movement. This is not something that can be prevented with an order. No one can deprive the Iranian nation of this right. They are vainly trying to stir conditions worldwide. They want to fan tension, create crisis to meet their transitory objectives. That’s a kind of psychological war. This is as if you want to deprive someone of industrial progress. This is something impossible. Industry is intertwined with the nature of an individual. Technical knowledge has now become an integral aspect of the Iranian psyche. You cannot say that the Iranian nation should not use math, should not have physicians, should not build large dams, or should not be able to build a refinery or a plane. This is an illogical claim; no one accepts it. Fortunately, the world has seen this. God willing, these few arrogant powers will accept it as well. We have relations with governments and nations. The basis of those engagements is guaranteeing and respecting
each other’s national identities. Iran’s present status in the field of nuclear energy is indigenous and it has been gained without reliance upon foreigners."

THREATS TO IRAN:” The system of domination is founded on depriving nations of their true identity. It seeks to deprive nations of their culture, identity, self-confidence and in this way dominate them. Our dear country, Iran, throughout history has been subject to threats. These were due to its advantages and geo-political conditions as well as the capacity of the great Iranian nation. The Iranian nation for a long period of time has been the architect of civilization and the standard bearer for science, technology, culture, literature, arts, math, medicine, philosophy, astronomy, and the like. It still holds these standards. It continues to hold the banner of independence and freedom. These threats, however, are not of recent origin. These threats have been with us for a long time. Our enemies can deal a blow to us any time they wish. They do not wait for permission to do this. They do not deal a blow with prior notice. They did not take action because they can’t. Our nation is today a powerful nation. Fortunately, Iranians are politically active worldwide. For hundreds of years Iranians have been migrating to many parts of the world. They took Islamic culture to other parts of the world and established it there. Now too, Iranians have a wide-scale influence in the world. They have strong cultural, scientific, political and economic influence. The presence of an Iranian elite, outstanding figures in many parts of the world is a precious asset for the Iranian nation. Iranians defend and present their Islamic and Iranian identity to other people worldwide.”

ISLAM: “We want to make a good impression so that other nations know what path to take. This is the Prophet’s promise. This is what will happen. There will be a global state of Islam.”

Even now, Rafsanjani is tipped to win in the second round. If he does not and if Ahmadinejad wins, he would have reason to thank President Bush for his unexpected victory.

If Ahmadinejad wins, there could be two implications for India. First, the US opposition to the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline could harden. Second, Pakistan would have reasons for satisfaction if he carries through his promised policy of working for the election of an Islamic nation as a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In recent months, President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz have been travelling extensively in Asia, Australia and New Zealand. One of the purposes of their travel is to canvass support for the Pakistani view that there is no need for the expansion of the permanent membership. However, if it is going to be expanded, an Islamic nation should be included and Indonesia, with the largest Muslim
population in the world, should be the right candidate as a representative of the Islamic as well as the developing worlds. Musharraf and Aziz have reportedly been arguing that giving representation to the Islamic world would soften the anti-West feelings of the Muslims.

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