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# Iran?s rapidly eroding theocracy

by GWYNNE DYER

?I have heard that people's zeal and interest is higher than in the first round [of Iran's presidential election],? Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told Iranian TV just before the second round of voting on Sunday. ?It is wrong to assume those who abstained in the first round are opposed to Islamic rule.?

Khamenei is about as old now as Joe Biden would be at the end of a second term (85), so it's understandable that he might misspeak from time to time, but that was a doozy. Five million extra people voted in the second round of the Iranian election, and they voted for Masoud Pezeshkian, the guy who opposes Islamic rule.

Well, not exactly opposes it. Actually calling for an end to ?Islamic rule' ? that is, total control of the country by a self-chosen group of Islamic scholars ? will get you a long time in prison or even a death sentence, so people tend not to do that.

Instead, they vote for people like Masoud Pezeshkian. He's a ?reformer' who pledges loyalty to the theocratic system but manages to signal to the voters that he would ease up on the dictatorial aspects of the system if elected.

Iranians have been playing this game of politics-by-signal-flags ever since the revolution 45 years ago, and they have got quite good at it.

It's normal for half the voters or more to boycott elections, because the Supreme Leader always vets the list of candidates and often only extreme supporters of the theocracy make it through. But once in a while some moderate reformer gets onto the list of candidates, and then the ?democrats' (let's call them that) face a choice.

They can boycott the elections as usual, to show their disdain for the deliberately crippled political system, or they can vote for some ?reformer' who is inevitably no more than the best of a poor lot. A radical reformer would never make it past the Supreme Leader's veto.

That's what happened this time, perhaps because the managers of the system didn't have time to rig the system it as usual. (This presidential election was being held to replace Ebrahim Raisi, a harshly repressive president who died with his entire entourage in a helicopter crash in May.)

Only one of the four candidates, Masoud Pezeshkian, could be described as a ?reformer', and a lot of unimpressed democrats abstained as usual. Nobody got more than 50% of the votes, so the two leading candidates went through to a run-off round ? but Pezeshkin, to most people's surprise, was in the lead.

He was still doomed to lose in the second round unless a lot more voters showed up, because his surviving opponent in the second round, hard-line conservative Saeed Jalili, would inherit most of the pro-regime votes from the ones who dropped out. But five million extra voters decided Pezeshkian had a chance, showed up at the polls, and carried him to victory.

What does all this mean? In a 45-year-old system in which the Supreme Leader always has the last word, can it really make a difference?

What makes Iran so hard to read is that it is an oligarchy, based not on wealth but on religious knowledge, which at the point of delivery turns into a kind of democracy. The candidates are vetted for religious orthodoxy, the media do what they are told to ? but nobody knows who is going to win the elections. This may be the regime's saving grace.

Assuming Pezeshkian is allowed to take office, it might even extend the theocracy's survival for another term or two. The

president-elect has pledged his loyalty to the Supreme Leader, of course, but he wants changes in Iran's politics and its economy.

He calls for ?constructive relations? with the West. He wants to revive the no-nukes deal with the United States (which Donald Trump cancelled in 2018) in order to end the crippling sanctions and salvage the Iranian economy. He opposes the use of force to make women cover their hair. He promises to try to ease internet censorship by the state.

Nothing too radical, then. Just more evidence that the majority of Iranians dislike the existing system. No indication of when that dislike will again erupt into outright defiance (although it does so fairly regularly), or of when that defiance might finally succeed.

But if you can plausibly say that ?this cannot go on forever', you are also saying ?some day this will come to an end'. This cannot go on forever, and it is probably a great deal closer to its end than its beginning.