CHAPTER 8

The George W. Bush Administration and the Failure of Containment

For Iran watchers in Washington, Ahmadinejad’s election was a surprise compounded by lack of information about a politician the press dubbed the “virtual unknown.” The underlying scramble to figure out who Ahmadinejad was produced some hazy comments about a “hard-line” political faction taking over; allegations that Ahmadinejad was among the American embassy captors in 1979, however, were quickly discounted. Mainstream media also expressed hope that Ahmadinejad would be concerned with internal economic problems and thus soften Iran’s stand on the nuclear program. The Washington Post quoted Ahmadinejad’s spokesman who described the president-elect as a “moderate man” and offered hope for a “durable stable relations” with the United States. A better understanding of the internal dynamics of the regime, of course, would have made it clear that Iran was headed toward a radical hard-line that would become known as the Third Republic.

The Road to the Third Islamic Republic:
The “Quiet Coup” of the Revolutionary Guard and Abadgaran

As indicated in the previous chapter, the liberalizing efforts of the Khatami presidency galvanized a second-generation cohort, including veterans of the Iran-Iraq War with deep roots in the Revolutionary Guard and the vigilante movement. In early 2003, Isargaran joined twelve other groups to launch the Builders of Islamic Iran (Etedaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami), or Abadgaran, coled by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel. In a sarcastic nod to American neoconservatives, liberals in Tehran referred to Abadgaran as neoconservatives. In reality, Abadgaran featured some of the most extremist figures in Iranian politics; in addition to Ayatollah Mohammed Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who regarded democracy as un-Islamic, other prominent Hojjatieh
members were Ayatollah Abol-Ghasem Khazali, the head of the secretive Mahdavite Al Ghadeer Foundation (The Awaited One Foundation); Ayatollah Aziz Khoshvaght, a leader in the Ansar al-Hezbollah; Brigadier General Mohammed Hejazi, the Basij chief; and Mojtaba Khamenei, one of the sons of the supreme leader. Most important, Ahmadinejad had the support of Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi, the head of the Revolutionary Guard and his deputy Mohammad Baqer Zolqadr, the onetime coordinator of the guard outreach in Sudan.

The Abadgaran coalition chose the municipal elections of February 28, 2003, to test its strategy. Persuaded that a free ballot would result in defeat, the Revolutionary Guard, the Hezbollahis, and the Basij mobilized to “get out the vote” in the election that involved some 168,000 local seats. The low 12 percent turnout favored the hard-liners, as most of Khatami’s supporters stayed away or were intimidated by violence; there were also accusations of outright fraud.

Despite complaints, Abadgaran made good use of the election result, especially in the all-important Tehran municipality. In 2004, the city council elected Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as mayor. The energetic new mayor embarked upon a campaign to improve conditions in the highly congested city, most notably in the southern neighborhoods, where poor and migrants from the countryside lived. Ahmadinejad was so successful that in 2005 the prestigious City Mayors Project placed him as a finalist for World Mayor. Ahmadinejad’s populism was matched by financial modesty, as exemplified by his working-class-style wardrobe and a small house in an unfashionable part of Tehran. To broaden the appeal to his base, Ahmadinejad adopted a policy of reintering remains of the Iraq-Iran “war martyrs” in public squares. As part of a cultural-religious campaign, he turned some art galleries into prayer halls, planned women’s-only parks, and expanded the religious infrastructure of the city by ordering mosques and prayer centers built. When Ahmadinejad’s belief in the Mahdi was revealed, many in sophisticated political circles concluded that he was “stupid”; others nicknamed his “the Iranian Taliban.” But astute observers noted that his mix of convictions and nationalist bombast held a strange appeal to the masses.

Charisma aside, Ahmadinejad was very astute in cultivating ties to the Revolutionary Guard. The municipality awarded many of its projects to guard-controlled companies and substantial number of ex-guards joined his administration, and, in another gesture of goodwill, Ahmadinejad waived all monetary claims against the guard. A 2004 study at the University of Tehran estimated that the Revolutionary Guard constituted the third-largest corporation in Iran with an annual turnover of $12 billion. Such expansion was based on no-bid contracts and aggressive tactics to muscle out competition. When the Khatami government awarded Turkish-Austrian consortium Tepe-Afkem-Vie (TAV) a license to operate the new Imam Khomeini Airport, the guard shut it