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PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT
SPONSORED BY**June 19, 2009****As Confrontation Deepens, Iran's Path Is Unclear**By **NAZILA FATHI** and **MICHAEL SLACKMAN**

TEHRAN — As another day of defiance, concessions and ominous threats transfixed [Iran's](#) capital, it was increasingly apparent on Thursday that there was no clear path out of a deepening confrontation that has posed the most serious challenge to the Islamic republic in its 30-year history.

The situation had all the hallmarks of a standoff. Hundreds of thousands of silent protesters [flooded into the streets](#). They roared a welcome to their champion, [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#), the opposition candidate for president whose reported defeat by President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) in Friday's election touched off the crisis.

Iran's leaders offered conciliation, while simultaneously wielding repression.

With one hand, the government offered to talk to the opposition, inviting the three losing presidential candidates to meet with the powerful [Guardian Council](#). While that reflected a continuing retreat from the initial insistence by Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#), that the election results were accurate, many Iranians saw the offer as an effort to buy time and shield the ayatollah from public accountability. The Guardian Council is loyal to him.

Even Mr. Ahmadinejad, who has kept a defiant if low profile, made an unusual public concession. After insulting the huge crowds that poured into the street by dismissing them as "dust," the president issued a statement on state television, according to The Associated Press:

"I only addressed those who made riot, set fires and attacked people. Every single Iranian is valuable. The government is at everyone's service. We like everyone."

With the other hand, the government continued to arrest prominent reformers, limit Internet access and pressure reporters to stay off the streets, and security officials signaled their waning tolerance.

It was not clear whether Iran's government, made up of fractious power centers, was pursuing a calculated strategy or if the moves reflected internal disagreements, or even uncertainty.

"Most analysts believe the outreach is just to kill time and extend this while they search for a solution, although there doesn't seem to be any," said a political analyst in Tehran, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. "This will only be a postponement of the inevitable, which is indeed a brutal crackdown."

Important clues could emerge Friday, when Ayatollah Khamenei is scheduled to lead the national prayer service from Tehran University. Political analysts said that they hope that the leader will reveal his ultimate intent, indicating a willingness either to appease the opposition, or to demand an end to protests.

There was some speculation among Iran experts in the United States of a possible compromise, with reformers being given positions in a new government. But it was unclear if that would be acceptable to the opposition, which understands that in Iran, positions do not necessarily come with power. For eight years, the reform president, [Mohammad Khatami](#), saw his program stifled by the conservative interests of the religious leadership and its allies.

"There could have been a very easy political solution, and that would have been nullifying the election results, but they have refused to do that so far," said Mashallah Shamsolvaezin, a political analyst in Tehran. "Postponing the resolution means they want the military to find the solutions," he said, referring to the [Revolutionary Guards](#), not the army.

On Thursday the opposition remained firm in its demand for a new election, and it was not immediately clear how it would respond to the council's offer of talks, which could take place as early as Saturday. The meeting would include Mr. Moussavi and two other candidates, Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezaei.

Mr. Moussavi has indicated in the past that he does not trust the Guardian Council because some of its members campaigned on behalf of Mr. Ahmadinejad before the election. State radio said the Guardian Council had begun a "careful examination" of 646 complaints about the vote.

Nor was it clear what role was being played by a former Iranian president, [Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani](#), who supported Mr. Moussavi and is

in a power struggle with Ayatollah Khamenei. Today there were unconfirmed reports that two of his children had been banned from leaving the country because of their role in helping the protesters.

The path to resolution is so cloudy because Iran's political system is not based on coalitions or compromise. It has evolved into a winner-take-all contest, with each side holding competing views of what kind of country Iran should be: one in continuing opposition to the West, where individual freedoms are tightly restricted, or one more open to engagement with the world and greater civil liberties.

"We don't have a consensus on who we are," said a political scientist with close ties to Iran's leadership. "Here we have ideology and ways of thinking that have nothing in common."

In Iran's theocracy, the supreme leader has vast power over the military, the judiciary and broadcasting. He also appoints 6 of the 12 jurists on the Guardian Council, which oversees Parliament and certifies election results, and so he exerts a profound influence on the organization.

The president and Parliament are elected by the people, and in recent years, popular demands have grown for social freedoms and economic gains. That pressure was easier to resist with Mr. Ahmadinejad as president, because it meant that conservatives controlled all the levers of power.

If Mr. Moussavi had been declared the winner, his victory would have broken the hard-liners' monopoly, and that possibility was seen as a threat to the group's material interests and its ideological goals.

Not only would the conservatives have lost control of important ministries, but also the new government might have been more amenable to talking with the United States. Opposition to the United States is a central component of the leadership's identity, and legitimacy.

As the streets filled with protesters for yet another day, Ayatollah Khamenei appeared to be arguing that even in this crisis, everyone supported the system over which he holds ultimate power. "The friendly atmosphere that existed before the elections should not turn into an atmosphere of conflict and confrontation after the vote because both groups of voters believe in the system," [he was quoted as saying in Iran Daily](#), an English-language newspaper.

But the streets told a different story — not one of confidence in the system, but rage. Starting about 4 p.m., thousands of people began gathering in Imam Khomeini Square in Tehran. The crowd quickly grew to hundreds of thousands, stretching beyond the borders of the square, one of the city's largest, and filling the surrounding streets, witnesses said.

The protest seemed to grow larger than demonstrations on previous days. But it was not as big as Monday's rally; that outpouring involved three million people, Tehran's mayor said Thursday, making it the largest protest since the Islamic Revolution in 1979.

"These protests are nothing short of magnificent, hundreds of thousands of people marching in peace and total silence," said a witness to the events in Tehran.

At one point, a car drove into the thick of the demonstration, and Mr. Moussavi, wearing a black shirt and suit, and his wife stood on top of their vehicle to roars of approval.

As on previous days, the police kept to the sidelines. Although vigilante forces appeared, there were no immediate reports of clashes.

In a statement on his Web site, Mr. Moussavi had called on his followers to mourn those protesters killed in clashes with paramilitary forces over the past several days, and protesters responded by wearing black and carrying black candles. Many held up their fingers in a V-sign for victory.

Meanwhile, some protesters expressed growing fears that the government's tolerance of the persistent protests would soon wear out.

The Iranian authorities reported that at least seven people were killed in Tehran in the first days of unrest after the election. Student activists say seven more people have died since then in attacks by government militia on student dormitories in Tehran and in the southern city of Shiraz.

Iranian Web sites have carried reports of violence in some other cities, but given the press restrictions now in place, those could not be verified.

According to news reports and a human rights group, the [International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran](#), the latest detainees include Ibrahim Yazdi, a former foreign minister who leads an organization called Freedom Movement.

[Amnesty International](#) issued a tally of detentions, saying 17 people had been detained in the northwestern city of Tabriz. It added that students appeared to have been "particularly targeted."

The opposition signaled that it would not let up the pressure. State television's Press TV reported on its [Web site](#) that Mr. Moussavi was

already planning to address a rally on Saturday, called by a group of reformist clerics loyal to Mr. Khatami, the former president.

Nazila Fathi reported from Tehran, and Michael Slackman from Cairo. Alan Cowell contributed reporting from Paris, and Neil MacFarquhar and Sharon Otterman from New York.

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