Khamenei's Strategy for Obama's Second Term

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Brief Analysis

If the Supreme Leader decides to get serious about nuclear negotiations, he will likely take a more public role in the process than before, if only to maintain control of Iran's increasingly turbulent domestic politics.

In light of continuing pressure from abroad and mounting economic and political problems at home, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is preparing for the possibility of a generous compromise offer from President Obama that would allow Iran to end the risk of military strikes on its nuclear facilities. The Supreme Leader seems to have realized that there is little difference between America's two main political parties when it comes to the prospect of Iranian nuclear weapons -- as both candidates made clear during their last debate, U.S. policy is prevention. Tehran understands that further lack of significant progress in negotiations may justify an attack.

Yet Khamenei also faces a serious domestic dilemma. If the economic crisis becomes bad enough, he might feel compelled to make a deal before Iran's next presidential election, scheduled for June 2013. At the same time, however, he does not want either the outgoing Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or his replacement to get credit for an agreement that reduces international sanctions, since that would enhance the popularity and power of the presidency at the Supreme Leader's expense. And most important of all, he does not want to harm his image at home and throughout the Muslim world by seemingly capitulating to foreign pressure if he can avoid it.

POLITICAL PROBLEMS AS BAD AS ECONOMIC ILLS

While Iran's economic problems have received much attention recently, the political atmosphere within the ruling elite is as big a headache for Khamenei. Like the two men who preceded him in the office, Ahmadinejad has been a big disappointment for Khamenei, who had high hopes that the president would implement the Supreme Leader's agenda rather than his own. Given Ahmadinejad's relatively low profile before taking office, he relied on the ayatollah and his institutions to come to power. Khamenei also believed that Ahmadinejad would help him get rid of reformists and technocrats led by former presidents Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Akbar Hashemi

Rafsanjani (1989-1997).

But Ahmadinejad has turned out to be a big problem instead. In the aftermath of massive public protests against the rigged 2009 presidential election, Khamenei was forced to officially endorse Ahmadinejad's policies in order to buttress the latter's legitimacy. This explicit approval left him unable to publicly criticize Ahmadinejad's actions as he done to Rafsanjani and Khatami during their terms. Ahmadinejad quickly seized this opportunity to emphasize his authority and legitimacy, supposedly based on being elected by the people. Since then, he has increased his public and covert efforts to assert his power against that of the conservatives who previously supported him, and against the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and other institutions run by the Supreme Leader. Unable to attack Ahmadinejad directly, Khamenei has instead given the judiciary and parliament a green light to pressure the president for his mismanagement and economic corruption.

Unable to resolve his problems with Khamenei behind closed doors, Ahmadinejad has gone public with them. His October 23 open letter to judiciary chief Sadeq Larijani is a glaring example. Previously, Ahmadinejad had planned to visit Evin Prison in Tehran, asserting that it was his responsibility to oversee all three branches of government and make sure none of them are violating the constitution. Yet Larijani sent him a "very confidential" letter refusing the request; given that Ahmadinejad's former press advisor Ali Akbar Javanfekr is serving time at Evin, Larijani argued that a presidential visit might be interpreted as a political move to undermine the judiciary's authority. Furious, Ahmadinejad wrote an open letter on the issue, and this publicizing of a covert dispute upset Larijani so much that he responded with an open letter of his own -- one harsher than anything his predecessors ever wrote.

Khamenei soon intervened, bluntly warning the heads of the three branches of government not to argue in public. Larijani and his brother Ali, the speaker of parliament, each sent Khamenei a letter reaffirming their loyalty to him. But Ahmadinejad sent an almost-sarcastic letter, asserting that of course Khamenei could not intend to undermine the presidency since it is the second most important post in the Islamic Republic, and the only one elected by all of the people. In addition, numerous unsourced reports indicate that Ahmadinejad has repeatedly threatened to resign if the pressure on him continues, knowing that such a move is the last thing Khamenei wants under the current circumstances.

As the election approaches and the economic situation deteriorates, Ahmadinejad may increase his aggressive moves. Recently, for instance, he has been fighting with Ali Larijani, each man (correctly) accusing the other of hurting the economy. Yet the president's true target is Khamenei's authority and the people or institutions associated with it. Whether Khamenei responds or stays silent, such infighting would be costly for him -- in particular, it could strengthen marginalized figures like Rafsanjani, who have criticized Ahmadinejad from the beginning.

COMPLICATIONS FROM OBAMA VICTORY

Khamenei has at least two compelling reasons to be unhappy about Obama's reelection. First, had Mitt Romney won, Tehran would likely have had several months of breathing room before the new president took office, formed his national security team, and attempted to resume negotiations via the P5+1 (i.e., the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). Obama's victory leaves little excuse for delaying new talks.

Second, Khamenei may now have to deal with backlash if he decides to negotiate. His domestic critics would no doubt ask why he did not make a deal with the Obama administration years earlier, when fewer sanctions were in place; such scrutiny could weaken his position at home. Similarly, striking a deal would empower those rivals who have advocated negotiating with Washington only to see Khamenei curtail their efforts. (This includes Rafsanjani and, more recently, Ahmadinejad, though it is unclear that either would actually have engaged the United States if they had the authority to do so on their own; the Islamic Republic has a long history of those out of power advocating

such engagement, then refusing to do so when they come to power.) Khamenei will not want to risk strengthening his critics shortly before the election.

IMPACT ON IRAN'S ELECTION SEASON

If the economic situation deteriorates further, Khamenei may not be able to wait until the June election to make significant progress in negotiations with the West. At the same time, he presumably does not want to strike a deal for which Ahmadinejad could claim credit. The economic crisis is so dreadful and the social anxiety so deep, he may believe that even half-measures (e.g., lifting certain sanctions) could dramatically boost the president's position if the people believed Ahmadinejad were responsible for brokering them. Ahmadinejad's only remaining usefulness to the Supreme Leader is as a scapegoat for the economic chaos.

In addition, Khamenei does not want presidential campaigning to begin yet. Faced with popular grumbling about the impact of sanctions, his priority is to emphasize government unity. He also wants to avoid a long campaign season that holds great potential for criticism of the regime and its policies, which could stir the people into large-scale unrest. Nevertheless, pre-election maneuvering is already well underway -- by the time the two-week Nowruz holiday season arrives in late March, Iran's elite will be so focused on the presidential race that they may have difficulty concentrating on any negotiations with foreigners.

As for the election itself, Khamenei will again play the main role in determining the next president. His ideal is to have a low-profile president who listens to him rather than following his own ambitions. This preference -- together with Khamenei's fear of a president becoming a popular hero for alleviating sanctions -- means that Ahmadinejad's successor is very unlikely to play a significant part in Iran's foreign and nuclear policy. Instead, the Supreme Leader is much more likely than in the past to take public responsibility for whatever decision he makes about a nuclear deal.

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