

# Khamenei's Strength Could Be a Vulnerability

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Brief Analysis

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**By weakening the Islamic Republic's institutions and strengthening his own authority, Ayatollah Khamenei may make himself more vulnerable in a time of crisis.**

**A**t a time when the international community's attention is focused on Tehran's nuclear program, Iranian politicians are more preoccupied by the country's increasingly dysfunctional politics. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appears to undercutting many government institutions, including the presidency, leaving him more directly in charge. An important indicator of how far this process will go is the extent to which parliament confronts President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

## Majlis to Question Ahmadinejad

In 1981, Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini ordered parliament to dismiss the Islamic Republic's first president. Since then, however, the Majlis has not used its authority to even question the president, much less threaten his position.

Recent years have been marked by sharp disagreements between the Majlis and Ahmadinejad that have grown worse over time. Last year, for instance, Ahmadinejad ignored the previously sacrosanct legal deadline for submitting a budget, so the Majlis approved only a provisional budget to cover two months while it debated how to change the full year's spending. This year, Ahmadinejad submitted the budget even later, infuriating the Majlis. As conservative parliamentarian Nasrollah Kamalian told his colleagues, "We have less than ten days to the New Year and the cabinet is not concerned about its next budget and puts no effort into sending the budget bill. Due to national interests, I cannot mention the reasons for [the president's] behavior in an on-the-record session."

After several requests from the Majlis, Ahmadinejad finally agreed to attend a session of parliament at which he will answer questions, though it will not be a formal "interpellation" under the procedures set out in the constitution. Presumably, he acquiesced only under pressure from Khamenei. Scheduled for March 14, the meeting has been

postponed several times and may be again, though that date holds advantages for Ahmadinejad because it is the parliament's last on-the-record session before the Persian New Year. Since no newspapers will be publishing during the two-week New Year holiday, the media will have little chance to bring the meeting and its outcome to public attention.

Once the meeting is held, the Majlis will be limited to ten questions whose content has already been made public. Four of them are economic: Why did the cabinet not implement the law funding the subway in Tehran and other large cities? What, if not economic mismanagement, accounts for the 2011 growth rate being well below the government's 8 percent target? (Officials claim the rate was 4.5 percent, but the International Monetary Fund reports only 3 percent, even after upward revision.) How did government spend last year's \$150 million allocation for elevating the country's cultural indicators? Why did the government not implement the subsidy reform provisions to compensate the agricultural and industrial sectors for their increased production costs?

The other six questions are about political disputes: Why did the government refuse to implement the law creating a Ministry of Youth and Sport? When Khamenei reappointed the intelligence minister dismissed by Ahmadinejad, why did the president abstain from appearing at his office or fulfilling any of his duties for eleven days? Why did Ahmadinejad deny that the "Majlis is at the top of all affairs," as Khomeini once said? Why was Foreign Minister Manoucher Motaki dismissed while he was on a mission in Senegal? Why has the president said that the issue of women's veils should be tackled through cultural efforts rather than force of law? Why did the president's chief of staff say that the government's priority is to propagate an "Iranian school" of Islam?

Although the parliament's questions are unlikely to have any practical implications, confronting the president in this manner holds symbolic significance that could weaken him. This seems to fit Khamenei's agenda. Indeed, the Supreme Leader has expressed interest in changing the constitution to replace direct popular election of the president with election by the Majlis. This change is unlikely to take place anytime soon, but it shows Khamenei's desire to restrain the president's power.

## Majlis Elections

**K**hamenei managed the recent elections in such a way to make the Majlis more loyal to him and less friendly to Ahmadinejad. Besides a few reformists and pro-Ahmadinejad candidates, the main competition was between those who were anti-Ahmadinejad during his first term (the United Front) and those who became anti-Ahmadinejad during his second term (the Stability Front). The president's favorite candidates were either disqualified by the Guardian Council or not elected (e.g., his sister Parvin).

The elections gave Khamenei more cause for confidence not only because he managed to prevent reformist and pro-Ahmadinejad factions from gaining a significant number of seats, but also because it was the first incident-free voting since the rigged 2009 presidential election. In his eyes, this fact restored the regime's damaged democratic legitimacy.

Indeed, Khamenei has masterfully associated elections with regime legitimacy, such that boycotting them is perceived as an act of subversion. Therefore, while many reformists and opposition Green Movement leaders boycotted the voting, former reformist president Muhammad Khatami cast his vote. Khamenei also suggested that international sanctions on Iran aim to deepen the gap between the people and the government and discourage the former from participating in elections. In turn, he has used the reportedly high turnout to argue that the West failed in its goal to provoke antigovernment sentiment.

## The Disappearing Expediency Council

**I**ran's constitution provides for an Expediency Council to resolve differences between the Majlis and Guardian Council and take whatever actions are needed to help government institutions function effectively. Yet the five-

year term of the Expediency Council's current members has expired, and chairman Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has been pushed from the center of Iranian power and will not be reappointed. Both developments have contributed to the council's gradual marginalization. In a recent interview with Iranian website Day News, Rafsanjani explained how Khamenei has incapacitated the council. He also stated that Ahmadinejad, who is supposed to attend the council's sessions, has appeared at only a few such meetings in the past seven years. Consequently, the council has not been able to operate properly since 2005.

Khamenei is responsible for selecting the council's new chairman and members before its current term ends. He likely postponed the appointments until the last days of the Persian year so that the media would not be able to discuss the implications of Rafsanjani's inevitable removal. The most likely candidate to replace him is former judiciary chief Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. The Supreme Leader has already appointed Shahroudi as head of the Committee for Arbitration and Adjustment of Relations between the Three Government Branches, a body created unconstitutionally by Khamenei. That committee appears to have much the same portfolio as the constitutionally mandated Expediency Council, such as resolving differences between the president and other branches of government. So far, though, it has remained a largely ceremonial body.

## Conclusion

Over the past two decades, Khamenei has weakened the Islamic Republic's political institutions in order to strengthen his own autocratic authority. He believes the country should be run by institutions directly under his control, principally the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the intelligence agencies, and the judiciary. Yet his self-confidence, along with the dysfunctional state of the parliament, president, and other political institutions, could ultimately make him more vulnerable in a time of crisis, since the public would hold him personally responsible for whatever decisions are made, including those seen as having led to the crisis.

*Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East.* ❖

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