

The Ayatollah Will Overwhelm Ahmadinejad

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Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has now made the mistake that all Iranian presidents make: he has challenged the authority of the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is doomed to fail.

The challenge posed by Ahmadinejad is such a predictable part of Iranian politics that it has come to be known as "the president's symptom." It emerges from a president's confidence that, as a popularly elected leader, he should not be constrained by the Supreme Leader's oversight. But the Islamic Republic's history is littered with its presidents' failed attempts to consolidate an independent power center. Ultimately, divine authority trumps political authority.

This dual authority is embedded in the Islamic Republic's constitution, and inevitably tilts toward the divine, particularly in a president's second term. Ahmadinejad is not an exception to this rule. In fact, because he has pushed harder than his predecessors, his star is falling faster. Moreover, the controversial presidential election of June 2009, and the political crisis that ensued, irreparably damaged Ahmadinejad's democratic legitimacy. Khamenei was forced to use his authority to support the president, and has since repeatedly condemned the "Green Movement" that opposed Ahmadinejad's re-election. As a result, Ahmadinejad has been the most costly president for Khamenei to date, because he forced the Supreme Leader to deplete his power in the face of a common enemy -- a move that called into question his own judgment and tarnished his reputation.

Ahmadinejad himself, however, has generally ignored the post-election crisis in his public statements, and evidently believed that Khamenei's post-election support meant that the Supreme Leader would remain passive in the face of encroachments on his traditional powers and prerogatives. Indeed, for the last two years, Ahmadinejad has repeatedly undermined parliament, and abruptly dismissed ministers tied to Khamenei, like Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki and Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi.

Since becoming Supreme Leader 22 years ago, Khamenei has been relatively weak, but has adapted by seeking to encourage weakness in the Islamic Republic's other high offices. He has supported factionalization in the government, and, when necessary, has weakened factions that he previously supported. Most importantly, he has ensured that Iran's presidents remain weak, regardless of their agenda or popularity.

So, now that the threat posed by the Green Movement has diminished -- at least in Khamenei's eyes -- the time has come to call Ahmadinejad to account. Both men are hard at work preparing for the March 2012 parliamentary election, as well as the 2013 presidential election, and Khamenei has taken off the gloves. He has given official propagandists the green light to attack Ahmadinejad and his cronies explicitly, portraying them as people who do not believe in the principle of the guardianship of the Shia jurist, the key concept bequeathed by the Islamic Republic's founder, Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

In the official view, Ahmadinejad and his circle lack rationality and wisdom; indeed, they are said to be in the grip of superstition. There are even rumors that some of them have resorted to witchcraft to summon spirits from beyond the grave, and that Ahmadinejad has had direct contact with the hidden Imam (the Shia messiah).

Likewise, the judiciary, under Khamenei's control, has accused the vice president, Mohammad Reza Rahimi, of leading an economic mafia, and many of Ahmadinejad's allies have been arrested or are under investigation.

It is likely that the Guardian Council, which can veto legislation and bar candidates from standing in elections, will use its power to shift the balance in favor of Ahmadinejad's conservative critics. The anti-Ahmadinejad camp's leaders, the brothers Ali and Sadeq Larijani, who head the parliament and judiciary, respectively, will help Khamenei to push the president from the center of power.

But, since Khamenei cannot accept a single, united political faction, it is extremely unlikely that he will let the Larijani camp (which includes Tehran Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf and former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati) become powerful enough to win the next presidential election.

Khamenei will likely create a new faction to compete with traditional conservatives after Ahmadinejad's decline. This might force him to pick a new face for the next presidential election, someone with little domestic-policy experience and little influence on ordinary people's lives. One possible candidate is Said Jalili, Iran's current nuclear negotiator, or someone like him. Only those with a strong background in intelligence or the Revolutionary Guards, and a low profile in domestic politics, need apply.

Having full control over the judiciary, the intelligence apparatus, and the military makes Khamenei seem invincible against all political factions or elected officials. This will lead the regime down an increasingly autocratic path, applying more aggression at home and defying the West with greater self-confidence.

But the concentration of power in the Supreme Leader's hands poses risks for the Islamic Republic. When Khamenei dies, there is no strong and obvious successor. And, since he has systematically weakened Iran's political institutions so that the Islamic Republic itself has come to be identified with his person, his absence will create a vacuum. His strength today foreshadows greater uncertainty in Iran's future.

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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