

Iran's Continuing Power Struggles

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Brief Analysis

The power struggle between Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad continues. Signs of deep fissures in the conservative camp are emerging just as the Islamic Republic prepares for parliamentary elections next year, the first countrywide polls since the disputed June 2009 presidential election. These divisions, rather than the struggling economy or the nuclear issue, are the top concern for Iranian leaders.

Moslehi Is Out, Then Back In

On April 16, Ahmadinezhad announced he was accepting the resignation of Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi, who reportedly tendered it under pressure. The move followed Moslehi's decision to replace his deputy on legal and parliamentary affairs. The deputy, Hossein Abdullahian, is considered part of Ahmadinezhad's inner circle and a close friend of Muhammad Reza Rahimi, the first deputy of the president. A website run by conservative critics of the president in the Majlis, also reported that Abdullahian was close to another controversial Ahmadinezhad confidant, Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashai.

Following the announcement, Khamenei quickly ordered that Moslehi -- his former representative to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Basij paramilitaries -- remain the intelligence minister. In so doing, he invoked his absolute authority as ruling jurist to overturn any government action or law for the sake of regime interests. Such decrees, called *hokm-e hokumati*, are rare, occurring only when a dispute cannot be resolved in private. Significantly, Khamenei's instruction was made directly to Moslehi rather than Ahmadinezhad. Also, 216 members of the Majlis (parliament) signed a letter criticizing Ahmadinezhad on the issue.

After Khamenei reinstated Moslehi, Iran's official news agency (IRNA) as well as Ahmadinezhad-affiliated websites hesitated to publish the news, waiting some fourteen hours to do so. During that delay, pro-Ahmadinezhad media waged a campaign against the president's conservative critics, accusing them of falsely claiming that Ahmadinezhad and the Supreme Leader had disagreed.

Competition over Key Ministries

Traditionally, the Supreme Leader decides who will occupy the most prominent cabinet positions, including the ministers of intelligence, interior, defense, and foreign affairs. At the same time, it is the president's constitutional right to appoint all of the ministers based on his own judgment. Earlier this year, Ahmadinezhad

dismissed Foreign Minister Manoucher Motaki while the latter was on a diplomatic trip in Africa. This decision was rumored to stem at least in part from Motaki's tendency to report directly to Khamenei rather than to the president.

Similarly, Ahmadinezhad has sought, for some time, to assert more control over the Ministry of Intelligence. In 2009, shortly after the disputed election, he dismissed Intelligence Minister Gholam Hossein Mohseni Ejei, a radical cleric close to Khamenei. Ejei was reportedly ousted because he opposed the president's appointment of Mashai as his first deputy, the official who effectively runs the country on a day-to-day basis. Indeed, Mashai's appointment was widely criticized by Ahmadinezhad's conservative rivals, and Khamenei reversed it within days, although the president defiantly appointed Mashai to another post in his office.

Since firing Ejei, Ahmadinezhad has pushed for substantial change in the Intelligence Ministry staff in order to bring in his own trustworthy people. Although the Moslehi dismissal failed, the president's faction is still attempting to alter the ministry's structure in other ways. On April 18, in an official ceremony, the intelligence deputy for legal and parliament affairs was replaced. That same day, pro-Ahmadinezhad Majlis member Hamid Rasai announced that his faction hopes to introduce a bill changing the Intelligence Ministry into an intelligence organization -- the same status the ministry held under the shah.

Ahmadinezhad and the Clerics

The same religious strata of society that once found Ahmadinezhad's political discourse so appealing have recently begun to criticize him sharply. Their opposition is primarily rooted in the president's increased promotion of apocalypticism and nationalism, two disparate ideologies that share one common feature: disdain for clerics.

Regarding apocalypticism, one recent episode that sparked much controversy was the countrywide distribution of millions of DVDs titled "Zohour Nazdic Ast" (Reappearance Is Imminent) in reference to the Mahdi or "Hidden Imam" who will usher in the Islamic Day of Judgment. Produced by the pro-Ahmadinezhad institute Mobasheran-e Mahdi, the DVD claims that the president, Khamenei, and Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah are the prophesied commanders who fight the "enemy" for seventy-two months before the Mahdi reappears. Although neither Ahmadinezhad nor the Supreme Leader has yet to react to the DVD, the president's conservative rivals and senior clerics in Qom have criticized it.

For its part, Iranian nationalism has been associated with secularism since the time of Reza Shah and Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq. Indeed, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini referred to nationalism as "heretical" and characterized Mossadeq as a non-Muslim. Today, Ahmadinezhad's statements glorifying pre-Islamic Iranian civilization and Nowruz -- the most important holiday of the year for most Iranians, though Zoroastrian in origin -- have enraged clerics and conservatives alike. Similarly, clerics have widely criticized Mashai for his unorthodox views on Islam and Iranian nationalism, in particular his assertion that "Iranian Islam" -- a formulation that itself sets clerical teeth on edge -- is superior to other schools of Islam.

Meanwhile, former Ahmadinezhad supporter Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi -- a hardliner cleric known in Iran as the theoretician of Islamic violence -- has warned about the formation of a new Iranian "freemasonry," a term long used to describe hidden anticlerical forces. In his view, such forces use revolutionary and Islamic ideals as cover, maintaining their "form" but not their "content." If we do not make an effort," he warned, "those who have been raised by us would launch a fitna, the term used by hardliners to describe the protests that followed the 2009 election.

Conclusion

The contest between Iran's two conservative factions will worsen as the 2012 elections approach. Ahmadinezhad

is under pressure from the clerical establishment, the traditional conservatives (e.g., bazaar merchants), and the Larijani brothers (including judiciary chief Sadeq and Ali, speaker of the Majlis).

The usual pattern in the Islamic Republic has been for the president's power to decline in his second term. For example, Khamenei successfully expanded his authority at the expense of the executive branch during Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami's second terms, and he has managed the current conservative dispute skillfully so far. If this trend continues, the most likely outcome for the June 2012 parliamentary elections will be defeat for those associated with Ahmadinezhad. Moreover, the president is constitutionally ineligible to run for another term in 2013, and his faction would have seemingly little chance of winning that election under a different candidate. All of which suggests that Khamenei may once again be well placed to expand his power even further.

The United States and its allies should bear in mind that rather than disagreements over policy, this sort of factional maneuvering -- such as the jockeying for control of key ministries -- is at the center of Iranian political life. In comparison, the challenges posed by the opposition Green Movement are secondary, and by the nuclear issue almost marginal.

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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