

# Iran's Supreme Power Struggle

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Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has never been happy about the status of the Iranian presidency -- neither during his own tenure, from 1981-1989, nor during the terms of his three successors.

Tension between the president and the Supreme Leader is built into the Islamic Republic's core. The Supreme Leader has absolute authority and can veto decisions made by the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. At the same time, the president emerges from an electoral process with an agenda and ambitions of his own. During a president's second term -- which Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has now begun -- the tensions inevitably emerge into public view.

Khamenei has never been willing to tolerate a president with a large independent power base. In the past, he clipped the wings of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had strong ties to the merchant class, and of Mohammad Khatami, a reformer whose support came from Westernized middle-class professionals. Though Ahmadinejad received the Supreme Leader's support in the face of large-scale protests against his re-election last year, Khamenei does not appear hesitant about limiting the president's power.

In fact, it appears that the massive demonstrations against Ahmadinejad delayed their confrontation, since both the Supreme Leader and the president rallied publicly to defend the legitimacy of the election. But Ahmadinejad's radical Islamist views and his support among religious, lower middle-class Iranians have not protected him from Khamenei.

For the most part, the two men have avoided head-on confrontation. Their struggle is visible, however, in their maneuvering inside other branches of government. In this arena, Ahmadinejad faces off against Ali Larijani, the speaker of the parliament, and his brother, Sadeq Larijani, who is the head of the Iranian judiciary.

The Larijani brothers have been vehement critics of the president, whom they accuse of ignoring legislation and key judicial rulings. Within the parliament, the conservative bloc is divided between supporters of Ahmadinejad and advocates of more parliamentary oversight of the president.

Recently, parliament demonstrated its opposition to Ahmadinejad's economic policies by deciding to remove the president from his traditional post as head of the General Assembly of the Central Bank. This would reduce Ahmadinejad's ability to intervene in economic policies and keep him from naming the bank's governor.

But this decision is contingent on the approval of the Guardian Council, where a group of the president's supporters have launched a counter-attack. They want the Supreme Leader to allow the president to issue warnings to both the parliament and the judiciary if he thinks they have overstepped their authority, thereby subordinating the Larijani brothers.

Until now, parliament has been an effective tool for the Supreme Leader legitimately to rein in presidential authority, and it is difficult to imagine that the Larijani brothers would have mounted such a sharp challenge to Ahmadinejad without the Supreme Leader's approval. If they carry the day, the president will lose authority over the one area where his power has been greatest: the Iranian economy.

By contrast, the president has no serious say in foreign policy, which is under the Supreme Leader's direct supervision. Khamenei is known to seek advice from various parties, but ultimately he makes decisions alone. For example, he overruled Iranian nuclear negotiators who offered a compromise during the Geneva negotiations in October 2009. He has also diminished the foreign ministry's stature by appointing a number of special envoys in key areas.

Khamenei does rely on Ahmadinejad to lead Iran's public diplomacy. The president travels widely, speaks frequently, and mobilizes political support with his anti-American and anti-Western rhetoric. But public diplomacy is not diplomacy itself. It is clear that no one in Ahmadinejad's inner circle -- certainly not the president himself -- has gained the Supreme Leader's confidence. The nuclear portfolio, for example, remains exclusively under Khamenei's control.

Within the realm of religious politics, Khamenei has made careful use of Ahmadinejad's radicalism. It is widely believed that the president would like to reduce the clergy's influence and increase the power of the Revolutionary Guards, his main source of institutional support. Thus, Khamenei can present himself as a defender of the clergy, which, given widespread doubt about his clerical credentials since he took power 21 years ago, enhances his position.

Clerics know that if Khamenei weakens, Ahmadinejad's circle can manipulate widespread anti-clerical resentment and exclude them from power. Moreover, Ahmadinejad knows that, without Khamenei's restraint, the clerics would use their political networks among conservatives like the Larijani brothers to limit the president further. The mutual hostility of Ahmadinejad and the clerical class offers the Supreme Leader the best of both worlds.

The history of the Islamic Republic indicates that the power struggle between the Supreme Leader and the president never abates. It also suggests that the Supreme Leader will prove to be stronger.

More importantly for the international community, this internal struggle keeps Iran's leaders from realistically appraising their foreign and nuclear policies. Consumed with their test of wills, they are unable to make well-informed and nuanced decisions in their dealings with outsiders.

*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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