

Khamenei and the Politics of Indecision

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Brief Analysis

February 11, the anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, is the most important official holiday in Iran. The public faces of the opposition Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, have called for street demonstrations to mark the occasion. Meanwhile, government officials at every level have warned against such protests, threatening tough action against any participants. In this tense atmosphere, what are the prospects that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei will agree to political compromise?

The rhetoric on both sides has grown more heated in recent days. Gen. Hossein Hamedani -- commander of the Muhammad Rasoul Allah Army, an Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) branch in charge of Tehran security -- warned that "anyone who protests against the government on February 11 is not part of the Iranian people, and we dare to say that he is foreigner's agent." On the opposition side, Mousavi gave a February 2 interview in which he argued that the 1979 revolution did not end despotism in Iran. "[W]e have been too optimistic about the revolution," he said, implying that the Islamic Republic has deep flaws in its very structure.

Pressure on Khamenei

After the surprising violence on December 27, 2009 -- the Shiite holy day of Ashura -- Khamenei faced intense pressure from government moderates to make at least minimal concessions with the opposition and extinguish the crisis. For example, moderate conservatives in the Majlis issued a report linking Said Mortazavi, former general prosecutor of Tehran, to the torture of prisoners in Kahrizak detention center. They argued that if the government takes action against such notorious hardliners, it will be able to forge a compromise that ends the protest movement.

These relative moderates seem to believe that some concessions are necessary to prevent the imminent demonstrations from spiraling out of control and eclipsing the Ashura violence. They also hope to prevent erosion of the Ahmadinezhad government's legitimacy outside Tehran and in the eyes of citizens who have remained passive thus far. In addition, they seem to believe that without compromise, the regime will do even more harm to its global image and perhaps increase international pressure on Iran. This moderate faction appears to have a strong presence in the Majlis and includes other notable figures such as Tehran mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, Expediency Council secretary Mohsen Rezaei, and pro-regime religious authority Ayatollah Nasser Makarem Shirazi.

Khamenei has faced pressure from other sources as well. In an exceptional move, Ayatollah Abdul Karim Mousavi

Ardebili -- one of the Islamic Republic's founding fathers and head of the judiciary under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini -- recently traveled to Tehran to visit Khamenei. Religious authorities (marjas) rarely pay such visits to the Supreme Leader; in fact, it was Ardebili's first in seventeen years. According to the website Jaras, Ardebili asked Khamenei to compromise, proposing that the Supreme Leader offer "immediate unconditional release of all political prisoners" and reject "extremists and radicals." Khamenei reportedly refused to accept any of these terms.

This reaction seems in line with the Supreme Leader's management style, which has been to exercise full authority without accepting any responsibility or making clear decisions. The recent nuclear negotiations are a good example of his favored approach: Tehran sends contradictory signals to diminish pressure on Iran but avoids reaching (much less implementing) a decisive deal. Khamenei pursues the same policy on domestic issues, with notable exceptions (e.g., his explicit support for President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad after the June 2009 election and his implicit acceptance of responsibility for the outcome). Although he generally seeks to avoid high-profile, violent confrontations, that does not necessarily mean he is willing to compromise with the opposition. In a February 8 speech, he stated, "It is clear now that those who stood up against the Iranian people in the election are not part of the people but rather are either anti-revolutionaries or ignorant, stubborn individuals who do what anti-revolutionaries do; they have nothing to do with the people." In doing so, he implied that Mousavi and Karrubi are ignorant and stubborn, and that a clear line separates them from the Islamic Republic and its supporters.

Why Is Compromise Difficult for Khamenei?

Despite his eagerness to see the political crisis taper off, Khamenei finds compromise difficult. Since the 2009 presidential election, he feels less comfortable trusting the moderates he once supported. With Ahmadinezhad's counsel, he has come to believe that Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and other figures such as Qalibaf and Rezaii seek to weaken the president and look for opportunities to usurp his position. These figures have been Ahmadinezhad's competitors throughout his presidency, providing outspoken criticism on economic policies in particular. The mistrust is mutual: the confidence gap between the opposition and Khamenei is widening the more he identifies with Ahmadinezhad. On February 1, for example, Muhammad Khatami said that Iranians are loyal to the Supreme Leader provided he acts as a leader for all.

Khamenei's relations with the clergy are another factor in his stubbornness. Even pro-regime clerics have shown far-reaching discontent about Ahmadinezhad, questioning his economic policies, his decision to appoint women as ministers, and most especially his choice of Esfandiar Mashai as head of the president's office. Mashai represents a new set of ideas about Islam common in revolutionary circles, namely, minimizing the role of clerics. In light of these factors, pro-regime religious authorities did not congratulate Ahmadinezhad for his "victory" in the 2009 election (with the exception of Ayatollah Hossein Nouri Hamedani, who has little influence over the Shiite community and is seen as economically and politically corrupt). Khamenei, of course, gave Ahmadinezhad immediate, unconditional support after the rigged vote and was not happy about the clerics' reluctance, which he viewed as a sign of weakened support for the Supreme Leader himself. A compromise that undercuts the president could be seen as a signal to the clergy that they need not accept all of Khamenei's decisions.

Indeed, the Supreme Leader's support for Ahmadinezhad has narrowed the circles from which he can draw support. Green leaders and moderate conservatives alike have asked him to back off from this stance and allow the political and judicial institutions to criticize the president and hold him accountable. Instead, Khamenei continues to act as if he believes that his political destiny is intertwined with Ahmadinezhad's, and that any sign of compromise will create space for people to target him.

This belief is not unfounded. Khamenei's main political power base lies with the IRGC (and, to a lesser extent, with the judiciary). The Green leaders oppose the IRGC's political and economic role, however, believing that Ahmadinezhad would have been unable to manipulate the election without the Guards' interference. Therefore,

although reining in the IRGC would undercut Khamenei's power base, it is a central prerequisite for any viable compromise. As Karrubi stated in a February 6 interview with Der Spiegel, "If Ahmadinezhad loses his support, then the parliament will topple him. Many conservative groups oppose him. He is only able to hold on to power with the help of the militias.... There is no sign of a willingness to compromise from our side -- and also not from the other side either."

Finally, Khamenei believes that any compromise in this situation will give key rivals such as Rafsanjani the upper hand. If he agrees to negotiate with politicians, he would effectively be admitting that in his twenty years of leadership -- especially the recent period during which he gained control over all three branches of government -- he did not do a good job, and that statecraft is beyond him.

The Supreme Leader faces a serious dilemma. Both of the most likely scenarios -- more violence by government forces or significant compromise under opposition pressure -- would weaken his authority. In other words, he loses either way. The only scenario that would benefit him is if the protests fade away without violence, which at this point seems unlikely.

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