

Iran:

International Pressure and Internal Conflict

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Brief Analysis

As the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany consult today about what measures to take to influence Iran's decisions about its nuclear program, it is worth evaluating what impact outside pressure would have on President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad's administration and its ability to overcome internal political and economic challenges. International pressure has already increased tensions between different factions within the Islamic Republic and laid bare the contradictory aspects of the president's political and cultural management.

Economic and Social Tensions

In his presidential campaign, Ahmadinezhad promised the Iranian people that he would bring oil revenues to each citizen's dining table. When Ahmadinezhad's term began in August 2005, the price of crude oil was just above \$55 per barrel. That price has risen rapidly since then, partially because of the Iranian nuclear crisis, and now exceeds \$70 per barrel. Rising oil prices have increased the pressure on Ahmadinezhad to deliver, and the public perception is growing that rising state oil revenues have not improved the lives of average citizens. In the face of rising pressure, Ahmadinezhad has denied his televised promise and claimed that he said no such thing. Last month, in a press conference, Gholamhossein Elham, head of the president's office, joked that oil has a disgusting smell and therefore does not belong on the dining table.

On May 1, observed in Iran as Labor Day, workers demonstrated in Tehran and across the country, denouncing the government's economic policy. Demonstrators also asked for the release of workers who had been jailed for past protests. Some even called for the resignation of the minister of labor and social affairs and condemned the government's intervention in the internal affairs of the labor syndicates. Ali Rabii, the former top intelligence agent and a member of the Central Council of Worker's House (the most important worker's syndicate in Iran), accused the government of attempting to eliminate civil institutions and nongovernmental organizations and of orchestrating violent confrontations with workers.

The economic problems of the Ahmadinezhad government are due overwhelmingly to the poor policies his government is following and to the appointment of incompetent people to important economic posts. At the same

time, international pressure is making the president's problems worse. The continuing fall in prices on the Tehran stock market, the continuing stagnation in the real estate market, the record demand for gold (the traditional refuge in unsettled times), and the rumors of massive capital flight are all signs of nervousness over the fallout from the nuclear issue. Economic discontent will lead to mistrust of Ahmadinezhad among people who voted for him hoping that he would fulfill his promises to fight corruption and improve the lives of common citizens.

Meanwhile, the Ahmadinezhad government continues to exacerbate problems with Iranian minorities. The last year has seen violent unrest in the Kurdish, Arab, and Baluch areas. Last month, Iranian police airplanes attacked the Sistan and Baluchestan areas in order to crack down on the mostly criminal Jondollah group that killed forty people, including police officers. Some members of parliament asked for the impeachment of the interior minister, accusing him of failing to provide security in the province of Sistan and Baluchestan, as well as neighboring Kirman province.

Much more challenging to the regime would be disquiet in the Azeri areas, given the many millions of Azeris in Iran and their important role in economic, political, and clerical life (unlike other minorities, Azeris are overwhelmingly Shiites). It will be important to follow whether the substantial demonstrations among Azeris in the last week are an isolated episode—they were touched off by a cartoon published in the state-run Iran newspaper—or the beginning of more serious problems. Government news agencies acknowledged campus protests in Ardabil, Hamedan, Tabriz, Tehran, Urumieh, and Zanzan. Some Tabriz demonstrators carried radical anti-Persian signs. The government has since shut down the Iran newspaper. Parliamentarians from Iran's two Azeri provinces and other Turkish-speaking provinces have called for the impeachment of the minister of culture and Islamic guidance, whose ministry runs the Iran newspaper. Already two of Ahmadinezhad's ministers have become targets of impeachment not for political reasons but because of mismanagement.

In this context of these signs of popular unhappiness with the government, it is interesting to note that the Interior Ministry recently decided to combine two elections—municipal elections and those for the Assembly of Experts (the body that chooses the supreme leader)—into one November ballot. The elections had been scheduled to be held two months apart. Voter turnout in the last municipal and Assembly of Experts elections was very low. Combining the ballots may allow the government to claim that turnout was higher this time, and indeed many Ahmadinezhad supporters may turn out to vote if the election is presented as a de facto referendum on the government. However, reformists and even some traditionally conservative factions oppose the simultaneous elections because of concern about voter fraud. In the last presidential election, two prominent candidates—former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karrubi in the first round and Expediency Council head Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the second round—claimed dramatic changes in the election results through fraud and the intervention of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij militia. If turnout in the combined election is as low as in the past but fraud is used to inflate the figures, the result could be victory for Ahmadinezhad supporters and the claim that the populace actively supports the government rather than being turned off by all politicians. Reformists also wonder if the two elections were combined so they will not have enough time both to campaign and to challenge the disqualification of their candidates by the Guardian Council.

Tensions within the Elite

Radicalizing the Islamic Republic's nuclear policy, which was Ahmadinezhad's strategy from the beginning, and increasing the pressure on Western countries (especially the United States, Britain, France, and Germany) has generated many internal doubts about his policies. Some political conservatives, especially those close to Rafsanjani, are actively and publicly criticizing Ahmadinezhad's confrontational policies towards the West.

Rafsanjani, in his recent meeting with Qatari ruler Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifeh al-Thani, said that one of the ways to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis is for both sides to refrain from "any provocative statements." On May 1, Mohsen Rezai, secretary of the Expediency Council and the former commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, said in

an interview with journalists, “There is evidence that Iran and the United States are going at each others’ throats. To break the impasse, we should be involved in serious negotiations and diplomacy.” Rezai, who was a candidate for president in 2005 before dropping out of the race, added, “If I were president, I would change the model of Iranian simplistic diplomacy; we need cooperation in our diplomacy. In our struggling situation, negotiation is a kind of revolutionary diplomacy.”

In addition to criticism of his foreign policy, Ahmadinezhad has attracted criticism for his cultural policy from top clerics. Much of candidate Ahmadinezhad’s popularity was based on his Islamic fundamentalist cultural policy. Since taking office, he has allocated a hefty budget to religious institutions throughout the country but particularly in Qom, the center of Shiite authority. Last month, while attending a press conference with foreign journalists, Ahmadinezhad tried to correct his image as a fanatical fundamentalist by announcing that he would invite women to attend major men’s soccer games; he then asked sports authorities to renovate men’s soccer stadiums to accommodate women and families with special facilities. Four marjas (Shiite religious authorities) who support Ahmadinezhad—Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, Ayatollah Mohammad Fazel Lankarani, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi and Ayatollah Javad Tabrizi—responded with a fatwa (religious edict) forbidding the presence of women in stadiums and in public places in general. Even Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, an extremist cleric who supports Ahmadinezhad, said that the president’s decision was a mistake and should be reversed. Javad Shamaghdari, Ahmadinezhad’s cultural advisor, tried to justify the president’s decision; he noted the tradition that when the Hidden Imam returns, he will face opposition from many clerics whom he will have to behead. This statement generated a huge negative reaction from the seminaries. It is indicative of Ahmadinezhad’s approach to politics that he did not retreat until the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei ordered the government to respect the jurists’ fatwa.

Opposing the fatwa of a marja could have bitter implications for Ahmadinezhad, depriving him of support from a faction he has relied on from the very beginning. He added to his problems with the clerics with his ideological letter to President Bush. Even pro-government clerics in Qom criticized his missionary tone; Ahmadinezhad seemed to be writing as a cleric or an Islamic prophet, which he is not. The exception was Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the Guardian Council and a fanatical fundamentalist cleric who supported Ahmadinezhad. In his Friday sermon on May 12, Jannati said that Ahmadinezhad’s letter was “inspired by God” and that he was following in the footsteps of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who wrote a letter to Mikhail Gorbachev. Karrubi responded with an open letter roundly criticizing Jannati’s description of Ahmadinezhad’s letter as well as the letter itself. Karrubi wrote that a letter written by an engineer like Ahmadinezhad is not comparable to a letter written by a spiritual leader like Ayatollah Khomeini. Further, some parliamentarians from Ahmadinezhad’s faction, such as Imad Afrough, criticized not only the content of the letter to President Bush but the notion of sending such a letter at all and said that direct negotiation does not need correspondence. Some Iranian newspapers, such as Sharq, also criticized Ahmadinezhad’s letter and played down its content. Many critics in Iran believe that Ahmadinezhad has lost a great opportunity to resume direct and public communication with the United States and to resolve its problems through negotiation.

Conclusions

Controversy over Ahmadinezhad’s diplomacy and his internal policies is so widespread that even his supporters have begun criticizing his simpleminded and rash decisions. The Kayhan newspaper—controlled by the supreme leader and strongly supportive of Ahmadinezhad—on May 3 published a commentary by Mehdi Mohammadi saying that Ahmadinezhad’s government has failed to communicate with the elite. He added that the Iranian government needs to have good think tanks and to consult experts—the implication being that the Ahmadinezhad government has not been consulting widely and has not adopted wise policies.

International pressure on the Islamic Republic over its nuclear program, especially serious UN involvement in the crisis, could exacerbate the tension among Iranian leaders and encourage political groups outside the regime to use the fragility of the government to accelerate their efforts for democratic change.

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