

# Challenges Facing Iran's New Government

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#), [Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



### [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](#)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.

### [Mohsen Sazegara \(/experts/mohsen-sazegara\)](#)

Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute where he will focus on the prospects for political change in Iran and the role of the international community in the movement for democracy in Iran.

In the late 1970s, as an undergraduate at Sharif University of Technology in Iran



## Brief Analysis

Iran's bold August 7 decision to resume uranium conversion -- previously frozen under an agreement with Britain, France, and Germany -- came only four days after new president Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad took office. This confrontational step suggests that the new administration may take strong actions to advance its hardline agenda. At the same time, the new government may not be as unified as it appears. Signs of serious division have emerged among the ruling elite, and these differences could preoccupy Iranian politicians for some time to come.

### Khamenei on Top?

At first glance, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei appears to have achieved his dream of unifying power over Iran's various institutions, a situation that has not been seen since the 1980 establishment of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei himself served as president from 1980 to 1988 under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, but at the time the Iranian constitution placed most executive powers in the hands of the prime minister. The latter position was eliminated in 1989, however, concurrent with Khamenei's elevation to Supreme Leader. Khamenei has long been in charge of the judiciary, and after the 2004 parliamentary elections, he appeared to gain full control over the legislative process. Ahmadinezhad's election seemed to complete the assumption of power by Khamenei's hardline faction.

Yet, the Supreme Leader's battle against the reformists came at an unexpected price. Khamenei lost veterans of the Islamic Republic who could protect him from political delegitimization, such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and former speaker of the parliament Mehdi Karrubi. The only political force left to him is the fundamentalists. In other words, the real winner of the last election is not Khamenei himself, but his supporters: the fundamentalists.

Khamenei knows that many of the fundamentalists support him solely because of the economic and political interests and privileges they gained after Khomeini's death. Ultimately, they hope to monopolize political power, which will require directing Khamenei's actions in their favor and preventing others from influencing him. In short,

before Ahmadinezhad's election, the threats against Khamenei emanated from the reformist front, which sought to curb his absolute power; now, however, it is the pro-fundamentalist leaders who will create still-greater crises by attempting to limit his power.

#### Khamenei and the Military-Security Faction

Ironically, perhaps the gravest danger to Khamenei's supremacy comes from a source he did much to empower: the military, especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij militia. The Supreme Leader himself allowed the security and military forces into politics, and now that they have power, they and their political allies have turned on him. For example, Khamenei appointed ex-IRGC officers to highly politicized and administrative positions such as director of state radio and television. Military officers have moved into crucial competitive political positions as well, often at the expense of old conservatives. Many of these officers hail from a bazaar background -- Ahmadinezhad being a prime example. His election not only brought despair to the reformists, but also disappointed moderate figures like Karrubi and Rafsanjani, who accused the military of electoral fraud and interference. Khamenei tried to ignore such claims, ordering them silenced for the sake of regime expediency. The election thus pushed reformists and moderates alike off the real map of power in Iran.

Yet, the same dagger that Khamenei used to subdue the people may, in the end, stab him in the back. The new fundamentalists can pose a threat to Khamenei in his role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. They seek to militarize the Iranian government through the political opportunities afforded them by the Supreme Leader. Such militarization could in turn undercut the religious and political legitimacy of the system and therefore of Khamenei himself.

Unfortunately for Khamenei, he is unable to placate the demands of the militarist faction, nor can he replace military commanders in the manner of the shah, who constantly shuffled his general staff in fear of a coup, assassination, or civil war. Yet, there are plausible rumors that Khamenei has begun to replace some IRGC commanders. One likely target for dismissal is Gen. Muhammad Bagher Zolghadr, deputy commander of the IRGC and the most powerful man behind Ahmadinezhad. Open Conflict on the Clerical Front

To come out on top in Iran's internal power struggle, Ahmadinezhad's faction needs support in the Assembly of Experts, the elite religious body that elects Iran's Supreme Leader. Despite its passivity over the past sixteen years, it is the sole body empowered under the constitution to restrain or depose the Supreme Leader. Currently, not a single member of the assembly opposes Khamenei; indeed, the body has followed his lead on every act and decree. Yet, a struggle has already begun between the ayatollah's supporters and the president's faction in preparation for next year's assembly election. For example, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi in Qom is the clerical patron of the military-security faction. He heads some clerical institutions (e.g., the Institute of Imam Khomeini for Research and Education; Dar Rah-e Hagh; Bagher al-Olom) and has a government-guaranteed income from his involvement in the sugar trade and other governmental sources. In a telling statement, Yazdi recently claimed that "Ahmadinezhad's administration is the first Islamic administration in the history of the Islamic Republic."

This new "Islamic administration" could pose a series of challenges to Khamenei. For example, Yazdi and the militarist faction have begun to exert control over the seminary school management board. This may prove to be a critical development because the only candidates permitted by the Guardian Council to run for the Experts Assembly have been mojtaheds, that is, high-degree clerics. Traditionally, the process of conferring clerical status (technically, the faculty of ijtehad) has been decentralized, with grand ayatollahs granting it directly to their pupils. In recent years, however, Khamenei has attempted to nationalize this function. Verification of clerical status has become a governmental process, attainable only through two institutions: the Guardian Council and the seminary school management board. New circumstances in the wake of Ahmadinezhad's election may allow those institutions to restrict the process of ijtehad verification, certifying fundamentalist clerics and driving out less extreme or

politically quietist clerics. As a result, the Experts Assembly to be elected in 2006 may wind up with a fundamentalist majority sympathetic to the military-security faction. This majority could overcome the internal contradictions of past assemblies and become a serious check on Khamenei's powers.

### Signs of Conflict in the Majlis

Although Khamenei stage-managed the removal of reformists in the 2004 Majlis elections, the parliament is not truly united. For example, the ayatollah's first attempt to use the new Majlis to suppress opposition provoked a fight between traditionalists and militarists, which in turn exacerbated other factional tensions. These conflicts were exposed during the presidential election in June, when traditionalist candidate Ali Larijani broke with Ahmadinezhad and his militarist backers.

Such developments suggest that the honeymoon for the new president and the Supreme Leader has already ended, sooner than many critics expected. For example, Ahmadinezhad's election was quickly followed by a struggle over the selection of the new cabinet, with conflict centering on the president's choice of foreign minister. Ahmadinezhad and his faction declined to appoint Khamenei's man, former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati, to his old post. They also confronted the ayatollah over the commerce, oil, and intelligence ministries.

Tension has also emerged between the president and the Majlis. When Ahmadinezhad unofficially sought the parliament's opinion on his list of cabinet candidates, the legislators refused to respond. Indeed, only 120 of the current parliament's 290 members back the president. Of the remainder, ninety members hail from the traditionalist faction, fifteen are allied to former president Muhammad Khatami and his Mosharekat Party, and sixty-five are independent. The president needs the support of traditionalist legislators, but they are withholding it until he meets certain demands. In particular, they insist that their candidate for president, Larijani, be given more important posts in addition to his responsibility for nuclear negotiations with Europe, which he was granted last week.

### Conclusion

Political infighting has been a defining characteristic of the Islamic Republic from the time of Ayatollah Khomeini. Such infighting did not take the form of open competition between conflicting interests, which is the essence of the democratic process. Instead, Iran has suffered from a hidden power struggle that hampers the government's functioning. Time will tell whether Khamenei can preserve his power from the military-security faction that he unleashed and which is now aligned with fundamentalists.

While the West's principal concern is Iran's nuclear program, Tehran seems more focused on domestic political maneuvering. That said, Iran's complicated internal political situation may impede external negotiations regarding the nuclear program. Most every Iranian faction will find it difficult to offer compromises to the West, for fear that opponents at home will criticize the concessions.

Mehdi Khalaji has just joined The Washington Institute as a fellow. After studying at Qom seminaries from 1986 to 2000, he served as a broadcaster with both the BBC and Radio Farda, the U.S. government's Persian-language service. Prominent Iranian dissident Mohsen Sazegara is a visiting fellow at the Institute. ❖

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