

The Ayatollah in His Labyrinth

The competing forces in Iran's political system are poised to collide in this summer's presidential election.

BY ABBAS MILANI

At the heart of Iranian politics there is an irreconcilable tension, rooted in the democratic nature of the 1979 revolution and the undemocratic power structure that emerged afterwards. On the one hand, there is the country's quasi-republican institutions and regular, albeit controlled elections; on the other is the state's guiding concept of god as the sole sovereign, and the Supreme Leader as the unimpeachable manifestation of this divine authority.

The contradictory aspects of Iran's political system are poised to collide in the June presidential election. The testy relationships between the Supreme Leader and elected presidents has long been the most obvious reminder of the tensions within the Islamic Republic: As Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, the closest ally of Khamenei, announced recently, every president since Khamenei became leader 24 years ago -- Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad -- has lacked a firm enough belief in his divine mandate. In the coming election, the Supreme Leader has the difficult task of ensuring the election of a pliant president without provoking the rise of uncontrollable domestic discontent.

Three different sources of tension threaten to make this election problematic for the Islamic Republic. First, the widening rift between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei -- supported by his allies in the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the conservative clergy -- is increasingly hard to hide, even manage. A key element of this feud is Ahmadinejad's effort to not only challenge the authority of Khamenei,

but to ensure the election of his own hand-picked successor -- Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, who at one time held 14 important posts in the government and is also father-in-law to the president's son.

For a long time, it has been the common lore of Iranian politics that Ahmadinejad and Mashaei are planning to do a Dmitry Medvedev-Vladimir Putin duet in Iran, swapping the presidency back and forth between each other. The conservative clergy, including Khamenei himself, have in the past openly objected to Mashaei, accusing him of all manner of malfeasance and disreputable views -- particularly the belief that Shiism's 12th Imam has been directly guiding and managing the affairs of the Ahmadinejad camp. As conservative clerics never tire of claiming, such "contacts" and "guidance" from the 12th Imam are the monopoly of the Supreme Leader -- and a critical source of his claimed legitimacy.

Money will be a key weapon in this struggle for power: According to sources inside the regime, Ahmadinejad has amassed billions of dollars in a slush fund to use in the upcoming election. In an unprecedented act, the government's own intelligence minister -- who Ahmadinejad had fired, but was then reinstalled by the special order of Khamenei -- warned last month that government funds might be used illicitly in favor of one candidate. The government also announced a plan to hire hundreds of thousands of new employees, a move denounced by Ahmadinejad's opponents as an attempt to place his supporters in areas needed to ensure his victory. The hiring spree was subsequently declared null by the Government Accounting Office, which added that governors who hire anyone will be prosecuted.

The vitriol between the Ahmadinejad and Khamenei camps is only getting worse. Some in the regime have accused Ahmadinejad of being in secret negotiations with not just the United States, but with the domestic opposition. High-ranking officials in the regime's security and intelligence apparatus have warned of planned disturbances even larger than those after the 2009 election, where an estimated 3 million people came out in Tehran to protest what they considered Ahmadinejad's rigged reelection. This time, the officials claim, the "troubles" will begin in smaller cities and spread to the capital.

Ahmadinejad has proved his willingness to strike back against his rivals. The president's camp is reported to have many potentially damaging documents and recordings from prominent members of the regime, giving the upcoming election a peculiar air of theatrical and political anticipation. The show has, in fact, already begun: In February, Ahmadinejad played a recording in the Majlis that purported to show the speaker's brother asking for kick-backs.

Considering the increasingly harsh criticism of Ahmadinejad by high-ranking members of the IRGC and the president's continued defiance of Khamenei, there is even a low possibility the president might not be allowed to finish his term. Last month, the Khamenei-controlled state television broadcast a half-hour documentary ostensibly about the impeachment of the Islamic Republic's first president, Abolhassan Banisadr. However, many saw it as a direct warning to Ahmadinejad that a similar faith might await him if he continues on his current path.

The second source of tension revolves around whether reformists will be allowed to participate in the election -- and even if they will want to. If they do participate, the question will be who they are allowed to field as a candidate. Khamenei

recently met with a delegation of three reformist leaders, and 18 reformist groups subsequently asked for another meeting with the supreme leader -- indicating at the same time their view that the only viable candidate who can help navigate Iran through this period is Mohammad Khatami. Some reformists have also named Rafsanjani as a possible compromise savior.

Many in the reformist camp have hinted that freeing reformist leaders Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Zahra Rahnavard, and Mehdi Karroubi -- who has been under house arrest for their role in the 2009 protests -- is a precondition of their participation in the election. Clearly Khamenei and the IRGC have to make a cost-benefit analysis: Does the domestic discontent, the increasingly dire economic situation, and their international isolation pose enough of a threat to justify bringing Khatami or Rafsanjani -- two men they have vilified in the past four years -- back into the fold? Or would such a tactical retreat only bring them embarrassment and signal their weakness?

Khamenei and his allies could, of course, allow a nominally reformist candidate -- one with little name recognition or charisma -- to run. Such tokenism might help fulfill the regime's stated goal of engineering a large voter turnout: the head of the National Police said that according to their surveys, a minimum of 60 percent of voters -- but more likely around 70 percent -- will participate in the upcoming elections. The fact that local council elections are slated to take place at the same time as presidential election is also intended to increase voter turnout.

There is clearly discord in the current regime over how to proceed. Two of the most important IRGC commanders have recently been replaced -- one was in charge of the IRGC's university, and the other was in charge of one of the IRGC's most important economic conglomerates, a firm called Khatam al-Anbia that is

engaged in everything from building roads to defense to oil and gas pipeline construction. Moreover some of the more radical elements of the IRGC continue to insist that reformists of all hue are "tools" of American, British and Israeli designs to defeat the Islamic regime.

The third source of tension in this unfolding saga is the behavior of the candidates clearly favored by Khamenei and his allies. This troika calls itself the 2+1 Coalition, and is made up of Ali Akbar Velayati, for many years Iran's foreign minister and now a senior advisor on foreign relations to Khamenei; Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaff, the mayor of Tehran and former commander of the IRGC's air force; and Gholam Ali Hadad Adel, Khamenei's son's father-in-law. Each of the three has carved out a niche for himself: Velayati markets himself as the experienced, pragmatic foreign policy hand, Ghalibaff is a capable manager of the economy, and Hadad Adel's claim to fame is his proximity to the leader. There are a disproportionate number of "fathers-in-law" in critical positions of authority in Iran -- a subject that might one day deserve a study of its own.

The coalition appears poised to present a united front in the coming election. Velayati recently announced that the group will soon announce their candidate for the presidency, and said that they are already in the process of forming a cabinet - which, he added, will surely include the two other members of the coalition.

While the troika has positioned itself as closest to the Supreme Leader and most subservient to his wishes, there are at least two other announced candidates who consider themselves part of the same "Principalist" camp: The longtime IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei and the colorless former Foreign Minister

Manouchehr Mottaki, who was embarrassingly fired from his job while he was negotiating in Africa. There is almost no chance that either will emerge as a serious candidate in the months ahead.

There is one more important factor to consider: The outcome of the upcoming election is related not just to normal domestic feuds, division of spoils, and concerns about the level of discontent in society, but also to the regime's international policies. The nuclear negotiations and sanctions are forcing the regime to make tough choices -- to either go down the path of some accommodation regarding its nuclear program, or further entrench its defiant posture.

Some of the reformists have indicated that the burden of proof of the peaceful nature of the country's nuclear program now rests with Iran, due to its past mismanaged policies and reckless statements. Thus, they favor more intrusive and comprehensive inspections. But even advocates of the status quo seem poised to accept more limited stockpiles of 20 percent enriched uranium and more flexibility in allowing inspections, in return for an end to sanctions. The latter group, led by Khamenei, is really insisting that whatever the nature of a possible agreement, the Islamic regime must be allowed to declare victory.

No matter the outcome of the coming election, Khamenei and the IRGC will still hold the key levers of power in Tehran. But who will be allowed to participate -- and who will be allowed to win -- will be a crucial sign in understanding the labyrinth of power in Iran, as the regime prepares to tackle its mounting domestic and international problems.

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