

Iran: Ahmadinejad between Dismissal and Resignation

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Relations between the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, have certainly been seriously impaired although the latter had used to boast their father-son bond and the former had long supported him, asserting that among Iranian officials, Ahmadinejad is the closest to him.

Ahmadinejad has sought to create a course of judgment independent from that of the Supreme Leader three times. The first time was when he appointed his son's father-in-law and friend, Rahim Mashaei, as his vice president despite the severe criticism he received and he did not yield until Khamenei bluntly ordered him to dismiss Mashaei.

Ahmadinejad reattempted to create his own course of judgment when he "offensively" dismissed his foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, due to disputes regarding foreign policies and after introducing a diplomatic path parallel to that of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs despite Khamenei's disapproval. The third attempt that caused confrontation followed when he dismissed the Minister of Intelligence, Hojjatul-Islam Haydar Moslihi, despite the Supreme Leader's objection. The Supreme Leader, who was dissatisfied with Ahmadinejad's audaciousness, then directly addressed Moslihi (circumventing Ahmadinejad,) in an unparalleled precedence in the Iranian politics, with a letter praising his achievements and ordering him to hold on to his position.

In truth, Khamenei can depose Ahmadinejad from office if he finds it beneficial to do so, especially with the increase of criticism from the Ayatollahs of Qom and strained relations with the legislative and judicial authorities.

Although Khamenei sent signals revealing his wish to have Ahmadinejad complete his presidential term, the Iranian President's performance and intensifying language indicate harbingers of confrontation whose sphere is not limited to the Supreme Leader, who plays the principal role, but includes clergy, preachers, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (majlis al-shura), and, more importantly, the Revolutionary Guard (which was an ally and supporter of Ahmadinejad up until recently).

This work seeks to examine the state of conflict and confrontation in the Iranian political structure and display their reasons. It also tries to draw a detailed map of the chief parties involved in the confrontation, the president's choices, and the prospects or prognosis of the confrontation in the near future.

The Tent Regime

Opinions on the framework of the political system in Iran vary and contradict. Some maintain that its set up resembles that of a tent and is based on the principles of protection and privilege while others maintain that the regime of an Islamic republic is merely that of a sultanate. Advocates of the "tent theory" believe that the Vilayet-i Faqih System, i.e. Guardianship of the Jurist, is not pyramidal but instead resembles a tent for its existence is not based on the individual Sultan or the Guardian Jurist but on several parallel columns of power. Despite their parallelism and multitude as well as the competition and antagonism within them, they cooperate to protect their interests and exclude anyone who seeks to destroy the tent's columns. These very columns directly and indirectly share resources including oil revenues which are not unrelated to Ahmadinejad's current crisis. Hence, these parties appear to be keen on maintaining the regime and the Guardian Jurist's role is the allotment of power sources among the different wings.

The roots of conflict stem in fact from the Iranian constitution. From its very beginnings, it has been contradictory: while it recognizes the republic, the parliament, and civil society; it is religious and jurisprudential in nature and grants immense authority to the Guardian Jurist

and clergy. This paradox is, at a certain point, responsible for the existence of chronic tension and gravitation within the Iranian political system and the constitution itself is what provoked discussion from the Revolution's earliest days of triumph and eventually resulted in two tides: "reformist" and "fundamentalist."

Despite the exclusion of reformists from the political game, the division still exists but has shifted to the fundamentalist tide or between the fundamentalist tide itself and its associated tide, the "Ahmadinejad tide." The divergence and contradiction in the constitution is concentrated on the aspect of legal structure; thus it was not so odd when former prime minister and head of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (majlis al-shura) were described as "heads of fitna," i.e. upheaval, when the crisis of the tenth presidential election arose in 2009 as it was not surprising when the "Ahmadinejad tide" is described as the "tide of perversity."

Mahdism: Anticipation or the End of the Republic?

The absent Leader of the Time was powerfully present in Ahmadinejad's political crisis and constituted a crucial core in the dispute and attacks he is subject to by several parties, most important of which being the Revolutionary Guard. (The Islamic Consultative Assembly and clergy in Qom also took part in the attacks.) The issue of "Mahdism" is not independent from the entire political competition and gravitation in Iran and in fact exceeds ideological aspects to become a struggle for influence and power. Consequently, any discussion of the approaching emergence of al-Mahdi is seen as sabotage to the Iranian government's legitimacy and as its termination because the coming of the Savior will render the Supreme Guide of the Revolution as his representative unneeded. In addition, the Iranian constitution explicitly provides that supreme executive power is only effective "in the absence of the Guardian of the Era", and after his emergence, executive and spiritual power in Iranian society and the world transmitted to him, thus entailing the elimination of the current leader.

Criticism came about openly from commanders of the Revolutionary Guard and religious figures cautioning against what it labels the "tide of perversity" in Ahmadinejad's government. They pressured the president to renounce any relations with those close to him leading this "tide of upheaval." The expression "tide of perversity" circulated and became a new political term in the Iranian political dictionary after the expression "tide of upheaval" regressed. As for "tide of perversity," it denotes Ahmadinejad's party led by his Chief of Staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

Ahmadinejad has not shown any signs of ending his support for Mashaei or any of those close to him and believes that his targeting is no more than a "dishonest competition, or may stem from lack of knowledge of the truth of his intents. He also described the accusation directed at his party as baseless lies.

The demonization of Mashaei is carried out systematically and before the Islamic Consultative Assembly election it was said that Ahmadinejad seeks to win the elections in favor of his party. Mashaei, according to the fundamentalist narrative, is a "sorcerer that has relations with individuals that practice witchery and claim ties to jinn" and Ahmadinejad has fallen under his spell, which the latter has mocked and has requested that he who made this statement invalidate such sorcery and spare the president from his claws.

This comes as a response to statements made by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, the cleric who had always been supportive of Ahmadinejad, declaring "Ahmadinejad is under the influence of witchery for this condition is not at all normal." Yazdi also indicated several times that the sorcerer is none other than Rahim Mashaei.

Ahmadinejad's Mahdist discourse came forward during stages of different political aims ranging from general indications to the question of the Leader of the Age and his imminent return to its correlation to prodigies and miracles. Then, there has been an attempt to ideologically coordinate between the Islamic Republic and international political occurrences and its proceedings as well as the government of the Leader of the Age.

The documentary entitled "The Appearance is Imminent" could not be released without causing a massive political and religious controversy in Iran as it talks about the return of al-Mahdi and the signs of his appearance. It has been distributed extensively throughout cities and villages of Iran. Ahmadinejad and his political party have been accused of being behind the production and promotion of this film to achieve political ends. The film seeks to affirm the roles of the Supreme Guide of the Islamic Revolution, Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in the appearance of the absent Imam, confirming that they are from among the most significant figures paving the way for his return. The film, which was released during its director's detention, relates historical narrations of the appearance of the Twelfth Imam in the Shiite doctrine, al-Mahdi. After examining a number of political proceedings and events the region has witnessed and continues to witness (especially in Iraq, Egypt, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and even Iran itself), the film reaches the conclusion that Khamenei and Ahmadinejad are proponents of al-Mahdi, to whom they will yield. The film almost asserts that his appearance is very soon. It also relates Shiite narrations about the character of Khamenei providing that he is in fact al-Sayyid al-Khorasani, leader of the strong army that will yield to the Promised Savior; it also provides that Ahmadinejad is Shu'ayb bin Salih who will lead a war against corruption and defeat the Suffyani army, thus paving the way for the appearance of the Leader of the Age and Guardian of the Era.

The film has been met with religious reactions. Several researchers and clerics have challenged the credibility of the references and narratives used in the film for substantiation. The notable religious figure, Ayatollah Makarim Shirazi, shed skepticism about the film, criticized mainly the designation of a time for the appearance of the Leader of the Age for [he believes] this will be a blow to people's beliefs and faith in Mahdism and considers it pure lies. Shirazi, who spoke to crowds in the Jamarkan Mosque, believes that it is "the enemies who are behind the distribution of this film free of charge," and called for prosecuting those responsible for the film. Nonetheless, others described the film as "a great cultural phenomenon." Although some blame Ahmadinejad for the production of the film and his label as "Shu'ayb bin Salih" (which he strongly denies), "Shu'ayb" has appeared several times in Iran. Hojjatul-islam Mohammad Sabir Ja'fari, Research Specialist of Mahdist Issues and Editor-in-Chief of the Iranian publication, 'Aman, has examined several cases in which "Shu'ayb bin Salih" was designated since the Islamic Revolution. Among them was the designation of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani as "Shu'ayb bin Salih" during his presidency of Iran. Afterwards the designation went on to include former Chief Commander of the Revolutionary Guard, Rahim Safavi, and Khatemi's Minister of Defense, Ali Shamkhani (whose Arab roots and father's name (Salih) as well as the fact that residents of his neighborhood call him "Shu'ayb" only fortified that).

[In this context,] Ahmadinejad has set for his government what he sees as the Revolution's mission, namely, "creating the conditions for the Promised Appearance." However, describing him as more passionate about the notion of appearance [of al-Mahdi] than any other political leader in Iran is not accurate and is overruled by Iranian political reality, for Mahdist thought is deeply embedded in political and religious discourse in Iran. Accordingly, the assertion that Mahdist thought resonates among many politician in Iran is credible to some extent; the ideal state, as seen by Chairman of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, 'Ali Larijani, is that which is linked to the revolution of al-Mahdi.

Despite the criticism of some of the Ayatollahs of Ahmadinejad's discussions of al-Mahdi's imminent appearance, they do not deny it nor ban awaiting it. Some even support the Iranian president's view on the necessity of preparing for the reception of al-Mahdi. Mohammad Abd al Lawi has allocated an extensive research to discuss the state that prepares for the appearance stating, "The state preparing [for al-Mahdi] does not generate colonization, war, and upheaval as did Hegel's state. Rather, it produced jihad, i.e. liberation from tyranny."

Mahdism is a feature of the confrontation between Ahmadinejad and the clergy. The former is accused of using Mahdism as a tool to marginalize the latter—which possesses great influence in Iran—by exposing the moral and economic corruption of some clerics to undermine their key religious power base. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, this will lead to the weakening of their status and their role in the power structure in the Islamic Republic.

Ahmadinejad attributes his animosity towards some clerics (whom he describes as "enemies of Allah") to an issue unrelated to Mahdism: "their moral and financial corruption." The case of the "Balizdar leaks" formed a milestone in the relations between Ahmadinejad and religious authorities as Balizdar, former Director of the Office of Infrastructure Studies at the Research Center of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, discussed in a lecture he gave at Hamadan University more than 123 files of individuals he accused of corruption including forty-four luminaries in Iran, nine of which are key religious figures.

Bazaar Authority

Upon discussing the current authority crisis in Iran and the confrontation between Ahmadinejad and the Consultative Assembly that is controlled by the fundamentalist tide, one cannot discount the economic policies of Ahmadinejad's government nor ignore the proximity of the fundamentalist tide to the bazaar. Because of this connection, fundamentalists took a stance opposing government intervention in the economic domain and called for the allocation of a large number of governmental economic institutions to the private sector. This tide supports only the most minimal of state intervention in economic matters believing intervention would be detrimental to economic progression. Consequently, it favors privatization, the policy of economic transformation, and the utilization of external resources in the economy. These issues comprise the basis of its dispute with the government of Mir-Hussein Mousavi during his time as prime minister as it triggered its support for the policy of economic adjustment adopted by Hashemi Rafsanjani. This is the core of its conflict with Ahmadinejad.

The fundamentalist tide is skeptical about Ahmadinejad's political and economic achievability and is constantly prepared to criticize his economic performance. A number of notable fundamental figures from the Islamic Consultative Assembly have also censured him and Ahmad Tavakkoli, Director of the Majlis Research Center, questioned the sincerity of Ahmadinejad's slogans of justice. One of the supposed shortcomings of Ahmadinejad's policies is his failure to consult with the Consultative Assembly regarding the plan for economic change in addition to his continuous replacement of ministers and officials. In addition, fundamentalists asserts that Ahmadinejad's economic policy increases inflation in varying degrees, ranging between 25 and 50 percent, which will lead to an increase in prices and merchants' monopoly on commodities, which will in turn cause economic collapse.

The Greater Clash with the Guard

The "Ahmadinejad maneuvers," especially those for economic activity carried out without the supervision and blessings of the government, initiated confrontation with the Revolutionary Guard. Ahmadinejad should have known that his venture to dismiss Moslihi (who happens to have extensive history in the Guard) and the Minister of Petroleum, Masoud Mir Kazemi (who is also a prominent member of the Guard), was not going to be without consequences. Leaders of the Guard have begun to chase and arrest individuals close to Ahmadinejad who, as previously mentioned, as labeled as the "tide of perversity" – which they believe poses a threat to Iran almost as great as that posed by the "tide of upheaval" (whose label the Guard uses to describe the "Green Movement" and its symbols).

Ahmadinejad has exchanged interests with the Revolutionary Guard but still seems unsatisfied with the expansion of the Guard's commercial activity without coordinating with his government. He raised the issue of the docks which do not fall under the supervision of the government and described it as "illegal," adding, "Some unofficial institutions own their own docks through which they smuggle commodities and currency without being scrutinized by the government." He also accused the Revolutionary Guard, during a talk he gave on Iranian television, of smuggling commodities and hard currency out of the country by constructing these docks and threatened to block them. Muhammad Ali Ja'fari, Commander of the Revolutionary Guard, responded promptly denying Ahmadinejad's statements "a pure diversion to cover for real smuggling hubs."

Ja'fari did not deny the existence of naval docks in Iran under the control of the Revolutionary Guards but he pointed out that "no commercial practices are carried out through them." This coincides with what the Iranian Student News Agency (ISNA) revealed as it released the names of eighty docks belonging to the Guard in the provinces of Hormozgan, Bushehr, Sistan, Baluchestan, and Khuzestan in southwest Iran as well as other docks on the northern coast in Mazandaran.

Ali Alfoneh, Iranian Researcher at the American Enterprise Institute, states that "The Revolutionary Guard constructed docks without the required permits to smuggle petroleum and import commodities far from the government's official outlets."

Alfoneh further adds, "The unauthorized construction of docks by the Revolutionary Guard has been happening for over twenty years, dating back to the first term of President Hashemi Rafsanjani after the Iran-Iraq War, when the Guard was finished war and began implementing economic projects independent from the government's supervision."

Clearly, the economic branch of the Revolutionary Guard, Khatam al-Anbia, has begun to control substantial projects in the gas and petroleum sector whose value amounts approximately to ten billion dollars. Accordingly, controversy was instigated regarding the economic role of the Guard upon announcing its readiness to replace Western companies with massive gas projects of a complex technical nature.

Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guard's close ties are not attributed to this institution's military scope but rather to its existence as an economic empire that has the greatest influence on the course and future of the Iranian nuclear program. Ahmadinejad has realized that refusing to accept the West's demands and bearing punishment or deviating from and aborting them is not possible without the support of this institution. Perhaps this explains the American decision to punish a number of companies with commercial ties to Khatam al-Anbia.

Ahmadinejad's Options

Rafsanjani has previously predicted Ahmadinejad's fate to resemble that of Banisadr and Muhammad Khatami had spoken about the confrontation between Ahmadinejad and the leaders of the Revolution. Despite the theoretical possibility of deposing Ahmadinejad from office, practically it is met with several constraints which the Leader—who oversees the process of restricting the President while keeping him in power till the end of his term—realizes. Nonetheless, Ahmadinejad's political future is linked to his own performance: either he surrenders and accepts eliminating members of his party one after the other and then resigns, or he chooses to resist—which entails confronting the Consultative Assembly that, in turn, has prepared a large file to interrogate him. If it comes down to interrogation, the Assembly will strip him of his legitimacy and issue a decree of his incompetence. A close examination of Ahmadinejad's character and reactions during the past six years, his way of managing battles, in addition to his personal qualities indicate that he will choose confrontation wagering the protection of his supporters and proponents.

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