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## Ahmadinejad's Tumble and Iran's Political Terrain

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Sadeq Zibakalam, University of Tehran professor and the closest the Islamic Republic has to an intra-systemic gadfly, has written an [interesting commentary](#) in the new daily *Arman* regarding the current state of Iranian politics. The article's title, "End of the Deviation current," refers to the excuse hardline conservatives in Iran have relied upon to maintain their support for President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The "deviation current" was imaginatively concocted to blame a small clique of presidential appointees for leading Ahmadinejad astray.

Last week, Zibakalam states, proved that such a posture was no longer possible. The public interchange of letters between Ahmadinejad and the head of the Judiciary, Sadeq Amoli Larijani, ended the pretense that Ahmadinejad and his views are not the problem.

What happened last week was essentially this: Ahmadinejad's sudden transformation into the defender of the "people's rights", through his public letter to the Judiciary head that in his

capacity as the “implementer of the Constitution” he has the right and responsibility to visit Iranian prisons, was met with Amoli Larijani’s rather humiliating public lashing that a president’s visit is allowed only after the head of the judiciary’s permission. And, Amoli Larijani went on to say, the Judiciary does not think that it is in the “interest of the system” (*maslehat*) for the permission to be granted. End of conversation.

Zibakalam notes that after this exchange, even hardliners are no longer talking about the deviation current. In effect, Ahmadinejad has managed to lose every single constituency that coalesced to bring him to power in 2005 against the centrist former president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. The hardliners, who continue to call the 2005 election epic for heralding a discourse (*goftoman-e sevom-e khordad*) — at the heart and soul of which was Ahmadinejad who embodied simple living, justice-oriented policies, service to the poor, a challenge to the “aristocratic way of life,” a revolutionary stance against the West in the global arena, and the export of revolutionary values — can no longer avoid the reality that their hero is no longer one of them (or at least is acting as though he is no longer one of them).

The hardliners’ separation from Ahmadinejad does not merely lie in Ahmadinejad’s betrayal of their values and his new liberal fondness for “universal human values” and accommodation-oriented foreign policy. They are aghast at Ahmadinejad’s blatant effort to enhance his standing among the urban middle classes. To them, there is nothing wrong with Ahmadinejad trying to maintain popularity so that he can continue to play a role in Iranian politics after his term ends by August 2013. Conceivably, Ahmadinejad’s popularity can be a boon for the hardliners next presidential candidate. But Ahmadinejad’s assessment that it is the urban middle classes which need to be wooed through a liberal posture is hard to swallow. This is a problem for hardliners because it is a public abandonment of their cherished discourse, as well as a clear statement that the country’s mood is not hardline.

Ahmadinejad’s new posture is observed with quite a bit of amusement and ridicule by many who in 2009 voted for his reformist opponents, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, despite Ahmadinejad’s claim that he has been calling for their release from house arrest a couple of times. But this adds to the hardliners’ uncertainty in finding another carrier for their “discourse”, one who is both trustworthy and electable.

To be sure, so far the Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has stepped in to make sure that the “justice-centered and resistance” discourse does not vanish with Ahmadinejad’s troubles. The question of whether the Leader’s abode will try to manipulate the 2013 election in order to maintain his position as an effective executive officer (along with being the Leader) is also a real one (even if this is not as easy as many imagine it to be given the fact that the body in charge of elections is the Interior Ministry, which is still run by Ahmadinejad’s appointees, and that Iranian presidents have shown a tendency to eventually object to the office of the Leader’s interference regardless of their political orientation).

At this point, the hardliners in Iran are left with no other choice but to elevate the Leader into a God-like figure who knows everything about what is best for the country with the hope that by doing so, he may be even more likely to remain on their side. Just this week Khamenei’s chief of

staff, Ayatollah Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani [said](#), “if one day it becomes necessary and the commander in chief [Khamenei] wills it, sacred defense will again be repeated.”

However, the fear that Khamenei will eventually be forced (or connived by centrist forces) to acknowledge the same societal forces that have pushed Ahmadinejad to feign liberalism, is also there. Whether he will do so is the million dollar question in Iran, and the answer remains to be seen. (In North Khorasan a couple of weeks ago, Khamenei gave a tiny nod to the popular mood by calling for a more flexible approach to the appearance of women who don't wear their veil properly but “are still believers.”)

But showing flexibility towards certain social conducts along with continued political repression has been an old trick in the Islamic Republic and does not represent a turn. Unless something drastic happens — such as Ahmadinejad resignation or removal — we will have to wait for the June 2013 presidential election to see whether there is a move away from the hardline discourse and which part of the electorate will be given a better chance to have its say.

Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad himself is turning into an interesting figure to watch in terms of the fate that awaits him.

The Islamic Republic has treated its past three presidents differently. One past president is the current Leader due to behind-the-scene machinations that have now turned sour for its prime architect, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Former president Khamenei continues to have a constituency, particularly in the provinces and among the lower ranks of the state and multiplicity of popular or militia-based welfare organizations and networks.

Former president Hashemi Rafsanjani has lost power but still holds a position as the chair of the Expediency Council and maintains quite a bit of clout, particularly in the business community and state-run technocracy through his advocacy of anti-hardline domestic and foreign policies.

Finally, former president Mohammad Khatami has been completely cut off from access to power, but despite all the complaints about his indecisiveness, he remains a popular man in Iran at least within a certain constituency. I have no way of knowing for sure, but there are people in Iran who insist that a real poll would show that he is still the most popular politician in the country.

In other words, Iran's past three presidents, for all their faults, each have their own constituency. Ahmadinejad will be the first past president who will leave office with hardly any significant constituency and few political instruments to rely upon. His sudden shift toward some of the concerns of the urban middle classes suggests even he knows that once his access to state coffers is cut off, verbal populism will be of no use in maintaining a constituency that relies on state largesse.

Since the flight of Iran's first president, Abolhassan Bani Sadr, from the country in the 1980s, all of Iran's significant leaders have chosen to stay in Iran and precisely because of this continue to represent a voice even after they leave office because they have remained influential, each in their own way, even if purged from power and under house arrest.

Ahmadinejad stands alone, at least for now, because his confrontation with Khamenei has robbed him of support from the right of the political spectrum without any accrued benefits from the other side. In the next few months he will continue to try, as he has done in the past couple of years, to distribute as many resources among his friends as he can — even placing them in secure tenured university positions — in order to maintain some sort of political relevance after the election. But his options are limited.

Even if nuclear talks go somewhere after the US election, Ahmadinejad will not be the beneficiary of his pivot towards being a promoter of talks with the United States. He will continue to be framed as someone who, through mismanagement and bluster, brought about the enhanced sanctions regime, with Khamenei eventually taking charge and fixing the mess. He will have a hard time swallowing this reality and few believe that he will accept his checkmated predicament quietly.

But whatever Ahmadinejad does pales in comparison to what he has already done, which is to make clear, publicly, that even he is aware that public sentiments have drastically moved away from what they were in 2005 when his populist, justice-oriented platform won the day.

Ironically, this awareness was also the motivation behind the Mousavi and Karroubi campaigns in the 2009 election, and it must be quite disconcerting for those who put their reputation on the line to support Ahmadinejad's reelection to watch him place value in public sectors that are disenchanted with his management of the economy and want a less confrontationist foreign policy.