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In Iran, an Iron Cleric, Now Blinking

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR

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For two decades, Ayatollah [Ali Khamenei](#) has remained a shadowy presence at the pinnacle of power in Iran, sparing in his public appearances and comments. Through his control of the military, the judiciary and all public broadcasts, the supreme leader controlled the levers he needed to maintain an iron if discreet grip on the Islamic republic.

But in a rare break from a long history of cautious moves, he rushed to bless President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) for winning the election, calling on Iranians to line up behind the incumbent even before the standard three days required to certify the results had passed.

Then angry crowds swelled in cities around Iran, and he backpedaled, announcing Monday that the 12-member [Council of Guardians](#), which vets elections and new laws, would investigate the vote.

“After congratulating the nation for having a sacred victory, to say now that there is a possibility that it was rigged is a big step backward for him,” said [Abbas Milani](#), the director of [Stanford University](#)’s Iranian studies program.

Few suggest yet that Ayatollah Khamenei’s hold on power is at risk. But, analysts say, he has opened a serious fissure in the face of Islamic rule and one that may prove impossible to patch

over, particularly given the fierce dispute over the election that has erupted amid the elite veterans of the 1979 revolution. Even his strong links to the powerful [Revolutionary Guards](#) — long his insurance policy — may not be decisive as the confrontation in Iran unfolds.

“Khamenei would always come and say, ‘Shut up; what I say goes,’ ” said [Azar Nafisi](#), the author of two memoirs about Iran, including “Reading Lolita in Tehran.” “Everyone would say, ‘O.K., it is the word of the leader.’ Now the myth that there is a leader up there whose power is unquestionable is broken.”

Those sensing that important change may be afoot are quick to caution that Ayatollah Khamenei, as a student of the revolution that swept the shah from power, could still resort to overwhelming force to crush the demonstrations.

In calling for the Guardian Council to investigate the vote, he has bought himself a 10-day grace period for the anger to subside, experts note. The outcome is not likely to be a surprise. Ayatollah Ahmed Jannati, the council’s chairman, is one of Ayatollah Khamenei’s few staunch allies among powerful clerics. In addition, Ayatollah Khamenei appoints half the members, while the other half are nominated by the head of the judiciary, another appointee of the supreme leader.

“It is simply a faux investigation to quell the protests,” said [Karim Sadjadpour](#), an Iran specialist at the [Carnegie Endowment for International Peace](#).

Ayatollah Khamenei was an unlikely successor to the patriarch of the revolution, the Ayatollah [Ruhollah Khomeini](#), and his elevation to the post of supreme leader in 1989 might have sown the seeds for the political crisis the country is facing today.

The son of a cleric from the holy city of Mashhad, Ayatollah Khamenei was known as something of an open-minded mullah, if not exactly liberal. He had a good singing voice; played the [tar](#), a traditional Iranian stringed instrument; and wrote poetry. His circle of friends included some of the country’s most accomplished poets.

In the violence right after the overthrow of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, a bomb hidden in a tape recorder permanently crippled his right arm, and he was elevated to president in 1981 after another bomb killed the incumbent. He managed to attract the ire of Ayatollah Khomeini himself once, ironically, by publicly questioning some aspects of having a vilayat-e-faqih, or supreme leader system.

He also clashed repeatedly with [Mir Hussein Moussavi](#), the powerful prime minister at the time. After being trounced in the official election results by Mr. Ahmadinejad, Mr. Moussavi, the reformist presidential candidate, challenged Ayatollah Khamenei in the one area where he has always been vulnerable: his religious credentials.

Mr. Moussavi wrote an open letter to the clergy in the holy city of Qom about the election results. By appealing to the grand clerics, he was effectively saying Ayatollah Khamenei's word as supreme leader lacked sufficient weight.

Ayatollah Khamenei was elevated from the middle clerical rank, *hojatolislam*, to *ayatollah* overnight in what was essentially a political rather than a religious decision. He earned undying scorn from many keepers of Shiite tradition, even though Iran's myth-making machinery cranked up, with a witness professing he saw a light pass from Ayatollah Khomeini to Ayatollah Khamenei much the way the imams of centuries past were anointed.

Still, lacking a political base of his own, he set about creating one in the military. It was the end of the Iran-[Iraq](#) war, and many senior officers returning from the front demanded a role in politics or the economy for their sacrifices. Ayatollah Khamenei became a source of patronage for them, giving them important posts in broadcasting or as leaders of the vast foundations that had confiscated much of the pre-revolution private sector.

“By empowering them, he got power,” said [Mehdi Khalaji](#) of [the Washington Institute for Near East Policy](#).

In the wake of the election debacle, questions are being raised about who controls whom. But over the years, Ayatollah Khamenei gradually surmounted expectations that he would be eclipsed.

“He is a weak leader, who is extremely smart in allying himself, or in maneuvering between centers of power,” said one expert at [New York University](#), declining to use his name because he travels to Iran frequently. “Because of the factionalism of the state, he seems to be the most powerful person.”

But many analysts say the differences between factions have never been quite so pronounced nor public as in the past few days. Former President [Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani](#), once a close Khamenei ally who helped him become supreme leader, sent an open letter to him in the days before the election warning that any fraud would backfire, Mr. Milani noted. If he allowed the

military to ignore the public will and to destroy senior revolutionary veterans, the decision would haunt him, Mr. Rafsanjani warned: “Tomorrow it is going to be you.”

Everyone speaking of Ayatollah Khamenei tends to use the word “cautious,” a man who never gambles. But he now faces a nearly impossible choice. If he lets the demonstrations swell, it could well change the system of clerical rule. If he uses violence to stamp them out, the myth of a popular mandate for the Islamic revolution will die.

“The Iranian leadership is caught in a paradox,” said Ms. Nafisi, the author of memoirs about Iran.