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The IRGC shakes its iron fist

By Shahir Shahidsaless
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The disputed presidential [election](#) in Iran is transforming into a ferocious struggle between religious radicals and reformists. This has been a historical battle in Iran which has been going on for the past 100 years between tradition and modernity. Behind the scenes there is another story - the fight is also over large sums of money.

Reformists claim the 125,000-member Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), or Sepah, controls as much as half of the total imports in terms of value through illegal jetties, and governs almost one-third of the whole economy. From engineering and construction to oil, wherever huge sums of money are involved, openly or covertly, the IRGC's presence is apparent.

Despite the massive amount of money flowing into the organization, there are no reports or rumors inside Iran claiming that the funds are used for personal gain by IRGC commanders. This leaves the logical assumption that the relentless efforts by the IRGC for having access to a large amount of capital, beyond its official budget, is to finance its vast operations inside and outside the country.

The striking influence that the IRGC gained beyond Iran's borders in the four years of President Mahmud Ahmadinejad's presidency, especially in Iraq, is arguably one the main factors that established the position of Iran as a decisive player in the region, threatening the authority of the United States.

In March 2008, after a fierce fight broke out between the Mahdi militia and the Iraqi army in [Basra](#), the second-largest city in Iraq, Iraqi lawmakers traveled to Iran to win the support of the Quds force commander to stop the military operations of Muqtada al-Sadr. Ghasem Soleimani, the commander of the Quds force, an offshoot of the IRGC responsible for overseas operations, brokered a truce within 24 hours.

The IRGC's intelligence operations, as well as allegedly equipping, organizing and financing Islamic movements in the region, demand a considerable amount of money. In terms of ideology and personality, Ahmadinejad was an ideal character to assist the IRGC in

materializing its ambitions. His stubborn determination, ideological conviction, [populist](#) and fanatical appeal, and his welcoming of confrontation made him a candidate worthy to invest in. From his rise to power in 2005, up until the current election, Ahmadinejad had the persistent, overt and obvious support of the IRGC.

In February, 2009, a National Audit Office report revealed that US\$1 billion of oil money was missing. Reformist opponents of Ahmadinejad have estimated the missing oil dollars could be as high as \$46 billion.

Some observers have assumed that the Islamic Republic of Iran, through the IRGC, has spent a good portion of these missing billions in Iraq and Lebanon. Interestingly, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrollah was the first foreign political figure to congratulate Ahmadinejad on his re-election.

Thanks to the efforts of the IRGC during his first term, Ahmadinejad dramatically changed Iran's position in the region.

It is widely believed that only an exclusive group of individuals, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, have been in the loop of dealings with the IRGC's finances. This would make it very costly for the IRGC if an outsider came to power. It could not only jeopardize their alleged control over oil revenue, but also hundreds of projects - including oil and gas - that are granted to companies affiliated with the organization.

Khamenei's support of Ahmadinejad during the 2005 presidential elections was revealed by Mehdi Karrubi, ex-chairman of Majlis (parliament) and a reformist candidate in last week's presidential vote. In an open letter, Karrubi, referring to illegal interference of "a network", explicitly accused Mojtaba Khamenei - Khamenei's son - as one of the conspirators.

Khamenei's support of Ahmadinejad was also evident during the recent election. In its wake, the defeated candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi unhesitatingly said he wouldn't accept the results. Khamenei, snubbing the legal process, declared Ahmadinejad the victor.

According to the law, the Electoral Commission is to wait for three days before certifying the results of the election. The candidates can file complaints outlining specifics of the irregularities to the Guardians Council, the body tasked with supervising the electoral process. The supreme leader should sign off on the process only after the Guardians Council gives the results a clean bill of health.

In an unprecedented move and well before the three days deadline expired, Khamenei endorsed and sealed the process by asking all Iranians as well as defeated candidates to support the [elected president](#). Chaos erupted in Tehran's streets within hours of the televised broadcast of the statement.

No one knows better than the exclusive group which deals with the secret projects of the IRGC, how costly and risky it would be to let a team of strangers take over the administration.

More importantly, if a new team were to discover the magnitude of the missing dollars, and how and where they were spent, the results would be utterly unpredictable. Mousavi's intention to focus on national issues was made clear during his [presidential debate](#) with the

incumbent president. He attacked Ahmadinejad for giving priority to [foreign policy](#) matters such as Palestine and Lebanon over Iran's national interests. This could have meant trouble for the IRGC.

It is safe to assume that prior to the elections, the IRGC - as the principle center of authority in Iran - was well aware of what could lie ahead. Heading into [election day](#), independent analysts inside Iran almost unanimously believed that Mousavi was the favorite to win. In turn, the IRGC made an alarming and meaningful statement.

Yadollah Javani, a top official and political brain of the Sepah, two days prior to the election day, accused reformist opponents of Ahmadinejad of trying to launch a "velvet revolution" - a reference to the former Czechoslovakia's non-violent revolution that ousted the communist [government](#) in 1989. Javani said that the IRGC would crush a possible post-election attempt to shape such a revolution.

Where to go from here?

Mousavi is facing a disturbing paradox. During his presidential debates, he repeatedly accused Ahmadinejad of being a "lawbreaker". In fact, condemning Ahmadinejad's administration as a "threat to the establishment" shaped the core of his campaign. Mousavi would say: "If the law is bad we have to change it, but we cannot ignore it."

Now Mousavi has filed a complaint (See [Mousavi states his case](#), Asia Times Online, Jun 18) regarding the outcome of the election, and Khamenei has ordered the Guardians Council to investigate claims of voting irregularities. Knowing that the Guardians Council is led and controlled by Ahmadinejad's allies, namely Ahmad Jannati, the chairman of the council, the outcome of the investigation seems predictable. The ruling will likely be: Yes, there have been some irregularities, but nothing major to drastically change the fate of the election. If this scenario happens, it would put Mousavi in an awkward situation where he is doomed if he objects to the ruling, as it would be against the law, and is doomed if he doesn't.

On the other hand, Mousavi's opponents are facing a complex dilemma as well. If, as requested officially by Mousavi, the election is declared null and void - which would mean that new elections must be held - it would be the first time since the 1979 revolution that people would gain victory against the government through a nationwide uprising. This could set a trend threatening the future of the Islamic Republic.

Such a surrender would expose Khamenei to more challenges by the encouraged and energized masses that are ultimately seeking his fall. At the moment, the protesters are testing their chances and limitations.

A new election is also problematic, as the difference between the second and first election would fatally and permanently damage the regime's credibility nationally and internationally. Evidence is mounting that there has been some big fraud involved. There have been claims that in many cities the number of votes exceeded the eligible voters by as much as 40%.

Vote aggregation has been conducted by computer for the first time in the history of the Iranian elections. The results of the vote counts, which were announced in 10 different stages, showed a linear correlation between the total votes of Ahmadinejad and Mousavi from the very first to the last announcement.

An iron fist is the most probable alternative; and also has its own limitations. So far, protesters who are holding huge demonstrations daily don't show any sign of retreat. For the next 10 days, until the Guardians Council announces its ruling, it is expected that the streets of Tehran and other large cities will remain chaotic and restless.

With or without Mousavi, if the demonstrations linger after the Guardians Council's ruling, it is logical to expect the IRGC will intervene. As Javani, Sepah's top official stated, their troops would crush what he likened to the "velvet revolution".

Beating and killing protesters will critically damage the legitimacy of the regime. The government will get by for the time being, but as a Persian saying holds, it will "push the fire under the ashes". A volcano will be formed; a volcano that will eventually erupt.