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Analysis: Iran's 2-sided rule _ turban and helmet

Analysis: Iran's twin pillars of rule _ the turban and the helmet _ tighten grip

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Jun 25, 2009

EDITOR'S NOTE: Iranian authorities have barred journalists for international news organizations from reporting on the streets and ordered them to stay in their offices. This report is based on the accounts of witnesses reached in Iran and official statements carried on Iranian media.

Iran's Islamic regime may well ride out the post-election crisis, but not without collateral damage.

The contours of what's likely ahead are already taking shape: more isolation from the West and a leadership turning on the pressure at home, with its military forces and street-level vigilantes swiping hard at anything or anyone perceived as a threat.

On state television, the messages are shrill and defensive in blaming foreign "enemies" for the mayhem after the disputed June 12 vote. On the streets, security forces swarm over any hint of a protest, hauling away journalists, political figures, university professors and activists.

The candidate-turned-opposition leader, Mir Hossein Mousavi, is now telling his backers to hunker down for a long struggle.

It adds up to a regime turning to its survival instincts. That likely means the same pathologies that accompany any state of siege — real or perceived: more isolation, more paranoia and no hesitation to use all the weapons at its disposal.

Iran's theocracy can call on a very serious protector: the Revolutionary Guard and its millions of civilian militiamen, known as the Basij. Spread through nearly every neighborhood and village in the country, their ability to snuff out public dissent was aptly illustrated Wednesday

when a small band of demonstrators outside parliament brought an onslaught of black-clad commandos and vigilantes swooping in on motorcycles. Protest over.

Hundreds of people have been detained in the past two weeks, including Iranian journalists, aides and advisers to Mousavi and reformist politicians. On Thursday, authorities arrested 70 university professors who met with the embattled Mousavi, who is under constant surveillance by security agents. All but four were later released, Mousavi's Web site reported.

The Committee to Protect Journalists said about 40 journalists and media workers have been jailed in the post-election crackdown following election results that showed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as the landslide winner.

Mousavi's wife, Zahra Rahnavard, compared it to martial law. That's not just angry rhetoric.

The ruling theocrats know the Revolutionary Guard have the resources to battle internal unrest as long as it takes — and can give supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a buffer after facing unprecedented public challenges to his near-limitless powers, which some loyalists believe are divinely anointed.

Despite elections for president and parliament, the only real power in Iran rests with the clerics at the top. But their rule has always been backed up by the clout of the security forces. The coming months may fully display how much the turban depends on the helmet.

That's because the Revolutionary Guard and its network are just as vested in preserving the Islamic system. The 500,000-strong Guard is separate from the ordinary armed forces and serves as a private army for the Islamic establishment. But its influence stretches much deeper, including roles in Iran's ports, oil fields and missile and nuclear programs. It's a bit of the Pentagon, CIA, Homeland Security and FBI rolled into one.

There's little chance they would fold as easily as the forces of the Western-backed shah in the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

"Their name is exactly what they do: protect the revolution," said Talal Atrissi, a Lebanese political analyst who follows Iranian affairs. "Their loyalty is extremely high."

The latest waves of arrests may just be a taste of what's ahead. The clerics have shown their ability to relentlessly pound at liberal-leaning supporters and outlets — during much less critical times.

During the first years of Mohammad Khatami's reformist presidency in the late 1990s, intelligence minders and judiciary agents — both directly controlled by the theocracy — swept up hundreds of activists, writers and others. Pro-reform newspapers and publications were closed almost as fast as they could open. It came to a head in the summer of 1999 with clashes at Tehran University.

A similar clampdown is taking place against the new means of communication: Web sites and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter that have served as a kind of rumor mill and cry for help by many Iranians. A next step could be chipping away at the tacit pact with the Islamic baby boom generation: those born after the revolution and who account for nearly half of Iran's 70 million people.

The regime has permitted them a limited buffet of freedoms. These include Western music, dating, Internet cafes and generally turning a blind eye to satellite dishes and women constantly testing the boundaries of Islamic dress codes with head scarves pushed far back and coats ever shorter and tighter. The unwritten deal, however, was that it was a reward for staying clear of politics that could rattle the system.

That has broken down. Some protesters have turned Mousavi's claims of rigged elections into a journey across Iran's red lines and taboos — direct criticism of Khamenei and the ruling order. The payback from authorities could be long and severe.

Khamenei has effectively given it a green light. He has portrayed his opponents as guided by foreign "enemies," including the United States and Britain. It instantly evokes memories of the U.S. influence under the shah and an American-aided uprising in 1953 that deposed an elected government that had nationalized the oil industry and broken Britain's long control.

State media has followed up with a barrage of programming linking the unrest to outside plots, including "confessions" from alleged protesters.

This has turned the crackdown — in the minds of the regime and its backers — from a civil dispute into a defense of the country. There was also a powerful subtext to Khamenei's claims. They would attempt to disgrace any internal rivalries among the hierarchy.

With Khamenei's blanket authority weakened and questioned, speculation has risen about an inside challenge led by former President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who heads a panel that has the power to remove the supreme leader. Such an extreme measure has never been used — or even publicly discussed before — would be akin to an in-house coup.

But it shows how much Iran has stumbled into uncharted territory.

It could not have happened at a more pivotal time, with President Barack Obama offering groundbreaking dialogue and the West trying to pressure Iran to suspend uranium enrichment as part of its nuclear program. The violence, however, has brought increasingly harsh condemnations from Western capitals. Iran, in turn, has sharpened its language.

Ahmadinejad added another swipe at Obama on Wednesday, saying more criticism will make Iranians "consider you similar to (former President George W.) Bush" — who in 2002 called Iran part of an "axis of evil."

Iran has gave other signals that it may concentrate on its easy relationships and remain cool to the West. Ahmadinejad visited Russia shortly after the election. But Iran turned down a special invitation from Italy to attend a G-8 foreign minister's meeting in Trieste, beginning Thursday, to take part in discussions on stabilizing Afghanistan.

"I think it's a missed opportunity for the Iranian government," said the European Union's external relations commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner.

Chess has some of its early roots in ancient Persia, and the past weeks could just be the first moves in a long contest.

"In the past, successful opposition movements, such as the effort that overthrew (Slobodan) Milosevic in Serbia, coalesced over a time frame of years, not weeks or months," said Ehsan Ahrari, an analyst on regional affairs. "So it would be a mistake to read too much into the current form."