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Ahmadinejad on the Rope

By M. Mahtab Alam Rizvi

6/29/2011

Tensions between the president and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei have been bubbling to the surface. Ahmadinejad is running out of options.

The [simmering tension](#) between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is now out in the open, with developments over the past month exposing the fault lines within the Iranian establishment. And many have been left wondering what the future holds for the president.

The problems started when Khamenei insisted on reinstating the intelligence minister, Heider Moslehi, who is believed to have resigned in April under pressure from Ahmadinejad. Khamenei is believed to have gone as far as issuing Ahmadinejad with an ultimatum – either accept his decision, or resign from the presidency. In response, Ahmadinejad boycotted the presidential palace for more than a week, declining to chair cabinet meetings and not attending religious services at Khamenei’s home.

Moslehi’s resignation not only antagonised the supreme leader, but also the president’s past supporters, especially [Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi](#) (Ahmadinejad’s earlier spiritual mentor) who reportedly said that: ‘A human being who would behave in a way that angers his closest friends and allies and turns them into opponents is not logical for any politician.’ He added that disobedience to the supreme leader was the equivalent to ‘apostasy from (sic) God.’

Yazdi's remarks were issued after Ahmadinejad fired Moslehi without consulting him. Many Iranians believe that the supreme leader is God's 'representative' on earth. No doubt the president was under significant pressure from the Iranian clergy to abide by the supreme leader's decision. A report on the news website Azad Negar [suggests](#) that Moslehi had earlier ordered the replacement of the chief of the intelligence ministry's Bureau of Planning and Budget, who was in fact backed by the president's chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaehi. Since Mashaehi opposed the move, Moslehi was instead asked to resign.

But the Moslehi issue is only one thread in the complicated tapestry of reasons behind the conflict. The key explanation for the tensions can actually be traced back to Ahmadinejad's appointment of his close friend Mashaehi as first vice president, shortly after the beginning of his second presidential term in 2009. At the time, Khamenei challenged Mashaehi's appointment, and Ahmadinejad had to reluctantly accept the supreme leader's orders. However, he responded by immediately appointing Mashaehi as chief of staff in the presidential office, a hardly less influential position.

Khamenei's supporters believe that the confrontation between the president and supreme leader began as Mashaehi's influence grew, not least because he is opposed to the overarching role and influence of the clerics in Iranian politics. They also hold him responsible for the production of a controversial film.

In May, a clerical court [accused](#) the president's cultural council head of sorcery because he backed a film that declared that the Twelfth Imam, Mohammad Mahdi, would soon appear on earth, and that the three people who would pave the way for his coming are Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah. The film sparked outrage among the clerics, who see Ahmadinejad as undermining their privileged spiritual position as the true representatives of the Hidden Imam and the interpreters of Islamic teaching.

Mashaehi has been blamed as the main driving force behind the making of the film, and was also accused of spreading superstition and undermining the position of the Hidden Imam (charges that Mashaehi has denied). Indeed, some in the Khamenei camp believe that Mashaehi is in effect acting as president, with Ahmadinejad depending heavily on him. The allegations that Ahmadinejad's administration has been engaged in using supernatural powers, sorcery and evil spirits has only served to fuel the internal struggle for supremacy within the Iranian establishment.

Ahmadinejad's position became even more precarious when the Iranian parliament challenged his decision this month to assume control of the oil ministry, referring the issue to the judiciary. The Iranian parliament, repeatedly at odds with Ahmadinejad over key policies, approved a finding by its energy committee that the president's move to take control of the oil ministry after dismissing Massoud Mirkazemi was inappropriate. By law, if parliament refers the president or one of his cabinet ministers to the judiciary three times for violating the law, the Majlis then have the right to impeach that person.

Iran's Mehr news agency reported that several members of parliament had attempted to summon the president for questioning over these recent events. It also noted that 90 of the necessary 175

legislators had signed a petition likely aimed at impeaching Ahmadinejad. Impeachment would require final approval from the supreme leader, who has the last word on all such issues.

So, is Ahmadinejad's influence waning as many believe? Certainly, unless he springs a surprise and calls his supporters onto the streets, then his star appears to be fading. However, even such a bold move would likely ultimately benefit the Green Movement and those seeking change.

Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad's position has been weakened further because of the failure of his foreign policy, which has seen Iran become completely isolated as a result of the president's stand on the nuclear issue.

The real game, of course, will likely begin when the next parliamentary election takes place in March, followed by the presidential election in June 2013. The qualifications of the candidates both for Majlis and the presidential election will be scrutinised by the Guardian Council, which works partly on the recommendations of the intelligence ministry.

Regardless, Khamenei is likely to emerge victorious. However painful for Ahmadinejad and his supporters to accept, the supreme leader remains, under the Constitution, the most powerful figure in the country.