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Iran Update: Khamenei on the Way Out?

by Hossein Askari

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Writing on this site on June 17, I indicated that Ayatollah Khamenei had decided to interfere in the presidential election because he and his backers (the intelligence services and the Revolutionary Guards) were afraid of a takeover by Hashemi Rafsanjani if Mir Hossein Moussavi won the presidential election. So Khamenei and his backers preempted the possibility that he might be replaced as supreme leader by rigging the election in favor of their man, Ahmadinejad. After the election and the initiation of protests, it appeared the regime had two options, with neither boding a promising future—a total crackdown against dissent and closing of clerical ranks or mandating new elections. The government largely adopted the former option. But the clerics did not close ranks as expected and a critical rift that may be irreparable has developed. An increasing number of powerful clerics and technocrats now see only one available option for saving the clerical system without unimaginable bloodshed—replacing Ayatollah Khamenei and soon. Let's fill in the blanks.

Even before the election, a number of clerics and technocrats felt that the Islamic Republic was in serious trouble. Corruption, economic mismanagement and consolidation of all levers of power by Ahmadinejad, with the supreme leader's support and blessing, had gone too far. The Islamic Republic was no longer distinguishable from a corrupt run-of-the-mill dictatorship. What made it even more troubling to some of these religious scholars was that it was all being done in the name of Allah and Shia Islam.

The election and its aftermath took matters onto another plane of abuse for these scholars. The poll results were so fraudulent as to insult human intelligence. Khamenei abused his position by prematurely confirming Ahmadinejad's victory, treating the opposition with little regard and, worst of all, attributing it to "divine intervention." The brutal crackdown caused much agony among religious scholars. Some scholars saw their religious influence continually eroded under the Khamenei-Ahmadinejad system. Some might have even seen all of this as shame brought upon Shia Islam. But above all, religious scholars saw the recent actions of the regime as a perversion of everything Islamic. Iran and Shiism were losing face rapidly, not only among other Muslims, but also in the world at large. No true religious scholar could sanction the regime's actions as Islamic.

Thus the statement on Saturday by a group of relatively senior religious scholars (Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qum) that the election was a fraud and the government illegitimate has further undermined the regime's mantle of religiosity. Many members of the group are students of

Grand Ayatollahs Montazeri and Saneii (who have already forbidden collaboration with the regime) and are teachers and researchers at Mofid University in Qum. Some members marched with the protesters after the elections. Their actions and statements are essentially targeted at all of Iran's Grand Ayatollahs, to push them into collective action against the regime. Some members of the group have even gone as far as arguing for dissolution of the whole system, including the *velayat-e-faqih*. The Republic will now have an increasingly harder time defending its "Islamic" designation. It is religious illegitimacy, not the absence of democratic values, which will eventually undermine the regime in Tehran.

Still many, if not most, religious scholars in Iran uphold the clerical system introduced by Ayatollah Khomeini. They and much of the Iranian public may want the system preserved, but this may be difficult, if not impossible, with Ayatollah Khamenei as the supreme leader. He has in the eyes of many betrayed Ayatollah Khomeini's vision and legacy. A replacement for Ayatollah Khamenei will have to be made soon if further defection and bloodshed is to be forestalled and the system preserved.

While Hashemi Rafsanjani covets the post of supreme leader, he won't ascend to the position under the prevailing circumstances. The clerics, with the support of the intelligence services, the Revolutionary Guards (including the Basij) and the regular military, will have to settle on a true Islamic scholar who has no political ambitions, who is not corrupt, who is dedicated to Islam and who can restore Iranian and regional faith in the regime. While the new supreme leader will be the public face of the Islamic Republic, the day-to-day responsibilities of the office will in all likelihood be in the hands of seasoned politicians, such as Hashemi Rafsanjani.

The regime is at the proverbial "tipping point." The United States and the West should act cautiously if they are to support the aspirations of the Iranian people.