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Asia times online

Iran's Guards turn on Ahmadinejad

By Shahir Shahidsaless
8/3/2009

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei formally approved the second-term presidency of Mahmud Ahmadinejad on Monday after a controversial June 12 election that led to street protests during which at least 20 people were killed. Leading reformists say the vote was rigged, and at least two defeated presidential candidates claim the new government is illegitimate.

With Khamenei's backing in place, Ahmadinejad is scheduled to be sworn in by the Majlis, Iran's parliament, on Wednesday. He will then have a two-week deadline to submit his cabinet nominees to parliament. Ahmadinejad has recently been engaged in a high-profile clash with Khamenei over these appointments, leaving many to wonder just who is really holding power in Tehran.

It was Ahmadinejad's choice of his political ally Esfandiar Rahim Mashai as Iran's first vice president that set off the political firestorm.

Supreme Leader Khamenei's July 18 letter to Ahmadinejad read: "The appointment of Mr Esfandiar Rahim Mashai as the vice-president is contrary to your own and your government's interest and it will cause discord and frustration among your supporters. It is necessary to annul this appointment and to announce it as void."

Controversy soon broke out, but the content of the Ayatollah's letter was not publicly disclosed until July 24. Pressure from theological centers, clerics, Majlis members, religious leaders, and conservative newspapers was mounting, but Ahmadinejad would not give in. "Why should he resign? ... Mashai has been appointed as the first vice president and continues his activities in the government," Ahmadinejad told the IRNA news agency on July 21.

The same day, Ahmadinejad's advisor Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh was quoted by the Iranian Student's News Agency as saying, "Mr Mashai's appointment as the first vice president won't be reconsidered at all."

Finally, the public reading of Khamenei's letter on state TV was considered the final blow. What transpired from this point on was remarkable.

In a letter to Ahmadinejad, Mashai wrote: "Pursuant to the announcement of the exalted Supreme Leader's letter from TV and Voice of the Islamic Republic, I hereby inform you of my resignation as the first vice president."

Subsequent to Mashai's stepping down, after a week of delay in response to Khamenei's letter, Ahmadinejad wrote to Khamenei: "Peace be upon you. While sending you a copy of the resignation letter of Mr (Engineer) Esfandiar Rahim Mashai ... from the position of first vice president, you are hereby informed that in accordance with article 57 of the constitution, your letter ... is fulfilled."

The tone of the letter was unusual and unprecedented. There were no customary praises or standard Farsi respect phrases; and it certainly sounded discourteous. Worse was the closing - *Ayyam Ezzat Mostadam* or "May your dignity last long". When put in the context, this phrase is very close to "good luck" when used sarcastically. More importantly, it was the content of the letter which sparked new controversy.

As evidenced by the letter, Ahmadinejad personally neither accepted nor complied with Khamenei's order in a religious or legal context. Instead, he copied Mashai's resignation letter, which he found sufficient to fulfill Article 57 of the Constitution. (Article 57 refers to the supervision of the Supreme Leader over all powers of the government.) Compliance didn't come from Ahmadinejad, it came from Mashai.

Lost in the events were Mashai's unorthodox ideas that were the root cause of the fiasco, and their relevance to Ahmadinejad's own philosophy. In July 2008, Mashai was quoted as saying, "Iran is friends with the American and Israeli people. No nation in the world is our enemy." While the conservatives stormed in fury, Mashai once again publicly declared, "I will repeat this a thousand more times, that we love the people of Israel, and I am not afraid of anybody saying that."

The debate was still hot when a second shocker came out. "Mashai's word is the administration's word, and it is very clear. Our nation has no problem with people and nations," Ahmadinejad stated in a press conference a few weeks after Mashai's remarks.

By then it was clear that what Mashai advocated was not a baseless personal vision - it was a pre-coordinated stance inside the administration. The government's plan was to limit the international damage caused by Ahmadinejad's questioning of the Holocaust as a historical event. It was an effort to separate the issue of the government of Israel from the Israeli people, and to shed light on Ahmadinejad's widely cited statement about "wiping Israel's regime off the map". Ahmadinejad and his supporters wanted to keep the powerful Israeli lobby from portraying him as an anti-Semite.

Their plan failed. In the customary Friday prayer, shortly after Ahmadinejad's comments in support of Mashai, Khamenei rejected the view as that of the Iranian government alone.

In the heat of the current clamor, the involvement of a new factor against Ahmadinejad is noteworthy. The Sepah, the name of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps, has discreetly

supported Ahmadinejad, giving him the edge to challenge Khamenei in a few pivotal instances since 2005.

There had been growing friction between Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani, the current Majlis speaker and formerly Khamenei's representative to the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and Iran's top nuclear negotiator. As a result, Larijani was basically ousted - he resigned - from the SNSC and was replaced by a close ally of Ahmadinejad. (Please see [Ahmadinejad is really the man in charge](#), Asia Times Online, March 11, 2009.)

Larijani's ouster revealed the shocking fact that Khamenei is not an untouchable power in Iran. There was now another man in charge - with his own considerable power - who had been largely and naively ignored.

At the time, Ahmadinejad was still the Sepah's man. During the recent public muscle-flexing between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei over the Mashai issue, Ahmadinejad was again counting on the support of the IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps).

This was why - despite immense pressure from many sides - he ignored Khamenei and all high-ranking conservatives, clerics and non-clerics, for a week and publicly and vigorously stood by his ally Mashai. But this time, although in a friendly tone, the IRGC confronted Ahmadinejad. The Sobhe-Sadeq, the political organ of the IRGC, in a lead editorial written by Yadollah Javani, the influential chief of the IRGC's political bureau, criticized Ahmadinejad and supported the ayatollah. This was the first time the IRGC had taken such a stance since 2005.

When Ahmadinejad came to power in 2005, the IRGC had ambitious plans to establish its dominance in major political and economic factions of the country. Thanks to Ahmadinejad's covert and overt cooperation, this huge step was nearly accomplished. Today, the IRGC no longer relies on Ahmadinejad as it did four years ago. The IRGC cast its support behind Khamenei once the personality duel became public knowledge. For the IRGC, the only logical choice was to support the Supreme Leader.

The IRGC needs the Supreme Leader - not as a person but as an institution - just as much as the Supreme Leader needs the IRGC. Both count the other to legitimize and maintain their authority. The relationship between the two institutions is organic; its vulnerability lies in the fact that their authority binds them together.

When it comes to publicly challenging the sovereignty of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC will take Khamenei's side with no hesitation. Ahmadinejad, although extremely valuable to the IRGC, has an expiration date. As long as the Islamic Republic is the ruling order, the Supreme Leadership will retain its relevance, importance and power.

Still, one should never lose sight of the fact that the IRGC could be playing a double game. The upcoming vote of confidence over Ahmadinejad's new cabinet will determine where Iran's center of gravity lies for the next four years.