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Iran president confirmed but sealed without a kiss

No kisses from Iran's leader, but words of support for embattled president

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Iran's supreme leader bestowed his formal endorsement on Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term as president on Monday but withheld a powerful symbolic gesture — the kisses and close embrace that portrayed their bond four years ago.

The awkward and halting moment came when Ahmadinejad leaned forward to kiss Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But the supreme leader raised his left hand and momentarily stopped Ahmadinejad, who spoke a few words and then kissed Khamenei's robe.

The uneasy body language reflected much of the political tension and collateral damage since the disputed June 12 election sent Iran into its worst internal unrest since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Ahmadinejad limps toward his next four-year term as a hugely polarizing figure: backed by the Islamic system but scorned by millions of opponents who claim the vote was rigged. Khamenei, meanwhile, has been rattled for the first time by protesters questioning the near limitless power of the theocracy he controls.

Both now are battered and bound together against the pro-reform backlash. But it's still a potentially testy relationship.

Khamenei appeared to signal he is willing to stand by Ahmadinejad — as he has since the election — but that the supercharged political climate requires new sensitivities to public opinion.

Ahmadinejad also crossed a political line last month by resisting Khamenei's calls to dismiss a top aide — whom Ahmadinejad eventually dumped.

After Ahmadinejad's surprise election in 2005, Khamenei allowed him to kiss his hand in a show of profound loyalty. Then Khamenei drew him close and kissed him on both cheeks with a benevolent smile. This time, Ahmadinejad moved toward Khamenei but was offered only the chance to kiss the leader's robe — a gesture of respect but far more restrained than four years ago.

"It's as if Khamenei was saying, 'Hey, listen. Don't think that we are this close team we once were,'" said Patrick Clawson, deputy director at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The state Islamic Republic News Agency reported that Ahmadinejad had a cold, suggesting this could be the cause for the more cautious reception.

Even the ceremony itself displayed Iran's seemingly unbridgeable rifts.

The list of no-shows was a roster of top critics of the election outcome and the fierce crackdowns. The absent included runner-up Mir Hossein Mousavi and another pro-reform candidate, Mahdi Karroubi, and two former presidents: Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

Also reported missing were any members from the family of the patriarch of the Islamic Revolution, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, whose portrait looked over the hall in central Tehran. Khomeini's relatives do not have high-profile political duties, but some have been critical of hard-liners in recent years.

Iran's main state TV channels did not have live coverage of the ceremony in an apparent effort by the Islamic rulers to avoid emphasizing the boycotts to domestic audiences. But Iran's state-funded channels in Arabic and English broadcast extensive images of Khamenei and Ahmadinejad — possibly seeking to display a sense of high-level solidarity on the international stage.

Ahmadinejad's next stop is to take the oath of office Wednesday in parliament, where many pro-reform lawmakers have echoed the claims of fraud in the election. Opposition groups could also use the occasion to rally another wave of marches and protests.

Sporadic clashes broke out late Monday in north Tehran after security forces boosted patrols, witnesses said. Later in the night, many of Ahmadinejad's opponents went on their rooftops and chanted, "Death to the dictator."

In remarks quoted on state TV, Khamenei gave no hint of any change in attitudes toward Ahmadinejad. He called the president "brave and hardworking" and described the election as a "golden page" in Iran's political history. Last week, Ahmadinejad sought to deflect claims of discord with the ruling establishment by saying his rapport with Khamenei is "like father and son."

But there was no denying Khamenei's more subdued tone toward Ahmadinejad.

Despite Khamenei's repeated praise of Ahmadinejad, the showdowns over his declared victory have reached the highest levels of Iran's leadership and opened unprecedented criticism of Khamenei and the theocracy itself.

Iran also faces some important tests early in Ahmadinejad's second term.

President Barack Obama has given Iran a September deadline to show a willingness to open dialogue on its nuclear ambitions and other key issues.

Last month, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said the opportunity of talks with Washington "will not remain open indefinitely." The European Union also has signaled that Iran must move quickly to address Western concerns about Tehran's nuclear program — which some fear could lead to atomic weapons. Iran insists it seeks only energy-producing reactors.

The political upheaval could distract or complicate Iran's study of possible contacts with Washington. It also could force the leadership to tone down Ahmadinejad's normally fiery rhetoric and limit his foreign travel to avoid provoking internal critics.

Ahmadinejad has given no hints of major policy concessions ahead.

In a July 16 speech, he again vowed to push ahead with Iran's nuclear program. He also said Iran wants "logic and negotiation" with the West but insisted the U.S. apologize for its interference in the election. Iran, he declared, would become a world power that "will bring down the global arrogance" — one of the phrases often used for the United States.

Iran's leadership is also desperate to show cohesion at home.

Ahmadinejad opened a brief — but potentially disruptive — confrontation with Khamenei's ruling theocracy in July by refusing to drop his top deputy, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, who angered conservatives last year when he made friendly comments toward Israelis. But Ahmadinejad relented and dropped Mashai.

Khamenei also took an apparent jab Monday at opposition leader Mousavi and others who have said the election was marred by abuses.

"This election was a test. People passed the test ... and some of the elites failed. This election made some (figures) the losers," state TV quoted Khamenei as saying.

But even conservatives have turned against the leadership over the election and the harsh crackdowns that followed. On Sunday, Ahmadinejad's main conservative election challenger, Mohsen Rezaei, demanded trials for those accused of killing protesters.

More than 100 people, including many prominent reformist political figures, face trial for allegedly supporting the postelection unrest. The trial is scheduled to resume Thursday.

The largest reformist clerical group, Majma-e-Rouhanioun-e-Mobarez, condemned the trial as a "ridiculous show" and said the reported "confessions" by two prominent activists were of no value.

The Association of Teachers and Researchers, an influential pro-reform clerical group at Qom Seminary, also said the trial "lacks legal legitimacy" because there is no jury or access to defense attorneys.

