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Ahmadinejad faces his toughest test

By Kaveh L Afrasiabi
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Embattled Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad faces daunting domestic and foreign challenges as he begins the second four-year term of his presidency. Analysts say he must tread a careful path of diplomacy to survive the dangers ahead.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei endorsed Ahmadinejad's re-election on Monday, calling June's controversial election result a national verdict on the president's record. In Khamenei's words, the poll was a "vote for the productive and dignified discourse of Islamic revolution; a vote on anti-hegemony and brave resistance to the world's hegemonic powers; a vote for the struggle against poverty and corruption and for simple lifestyles, closeness to people and empathy for the have-nots."

In turn, Ahmadinejad promised at the endorsement ceremony "invite all for active participation and planning". Experts believe this could mean Ahmadinejad's cabinet, to be introduced within the next two weeks, will be a more inclusive and politically heterogeneous body.

The struggle over the makeup of the next cabinet is shaped in part by the supreme leader's decision to play a more active role in governmental affairs. Khamenei's recent intervention led to the removal of Ahmadinejad's pick for vice president, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai. Some Khamenei loyalists, including Mohsen Esmaili, a jurist at the Council of Guardians, have left subtle signals that the supreme leader's endorsement, or *tanfiz*, is not a one-shot deal but rather continuous support that can only be withdrawn by the leader himself.

Already on the defensive for his delayed reaction to the leader's letter regarding Mashai, Ahmadinejad must now work to prove his loyalty to Khamenei. At the same time, he must try to maintain - perhaps even increase - his margin of independence as the head of the executive branch. His first attempt at re-establishing his independence was the symbolic reappointment of Mashai as his chief of staff after being forced by the leader and his own hardline supporters to drop Mashai as his first vice president.

In addition to confidence-building measures at the top, Ahmadinejad's other pressing priority is to build trust at the base of society. Experts feel the lingering dispute over the election results and the widening gap between Ahmadinejad and important aspects of Iran's civil society, including the Iranian intelligentsia, must be addressed.

"Mr Ahmadinejad has a big challenge in finding suitable personalities for his next cabinet in part because some who are qualified for ministerial posts based on their merits unfortunately do not meet the political criteria because they have opposed him," said a Tehran University political scientist on the condition of anonymity.

Some technocrats, who are aligned with the group known as Executives of Construction, support former president, Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who declined to attend the endorsement ceremony on Monday. Former president Mohammad Khatami and the reformist presidential hopefuls, Mir Hossain Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, also failed to show up to support Ahmadinejad's electoral victory.

But another presidential candidate, Mohsen Rezaei, who has conceded defeat and is the secretary of the Expediency Council headed by Rafsanjani, is poised to play a mediating role. Rezaei has called on the judiciary to hold a "parallel trial" for what he calls "rogue agents" who violently suppressed the post-election riots.

A similar endorsement ceremony will take place on Wednesday in parliament, or Majlis. Depending on the number of absent deputies - so far only 12 have announced they will boycott it - the event could be a timely boost for Ahmadinejad. The newly re-elected leader will be asked to address the complaints of many MPs who feel his first term showed a callous disregard for the will of parliament.

Relations between Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani, speaker of the Majlis, are poor. In light of Larijani's close rapport with the supreme leader, much depends on the ability of the two men to work out some of the problems between them to address pending legislation.

One proposal before the Majlis suggests streamlining government bureaucracies by merging some ministries with government organizations; a move that some experts believe could cause tensions between the executive and the legislative branches of government. There are also a host of foreign policy issues, such as Iran's US\$280 million loan to Bolivia, which is opposed by a number of MPs.

Ahmadinejad is caught between factional politics and an unstable environment at home, and an approaching foreign policy crisis over the nuclear standoff with the international community of Tehran's uranium-enrichment program. Experts believe he has no choice but to tackle the sources of his political weakness at home and abroad.

In his speech at Monday's endorsement ceremony, Ahmadinejad echoed the leader's sentiment on the elections' significance with respect to the "discourse of Islamic revolution" and went on to call for Iran's "active involvement in global management".

This may indicate there will be no significant departure from his first-term focus on such issues as a "strategic opening to Latin America" or his "looking East" approach. A clue to the significance of the latter is Iran's economic ties with India. For example, an Indian company's delivery of gasoline to Iran could be disrupted if the United States adopted as law a proposed

bill that penalizes foreign companies for selling fuel to Iran.

According to Tehran energy expert Nersi Ghorban, the bill does not close the loopholes for "third parties", such as energy brokers to funnel gasoline to Iran in the aftermath of US gasoline sanctions. Still, it is a sure bet that Iran's consumers will be paying higher prices at the pumps.

A gasoline sanction on Iran in October or November is a foregone conclusion, in the belief of many Iran analysts. This timeframe corresponds with an informal two-month deadline on nuclear talks that has been given to Iran by the US and its Western allies.

Iran is eager to avoid this, which is why the Foreign Ministry and the Supreme National Security Council are fine-tuning a new "package" that would present concrete ideas about how to end the nuclear standoff in a mutually satisfying manner. Analysts predict that Iran may need to re-adopt the Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency by late September to stop new sanctions by the "Iran Six" nations (Britain, the United States, France, China, Russia and Germany).

With little time to waste, the second Ahmadinejad administration must develop a deft nuclear policy, even as domestic instability continues to weaken its mandate. The national consensus behind the firebrand president who spoke with authority on foreign policy issues for the past four years has vanished. In its place is a new, divisive political environment ill-suited for bold and effective foreign policy.

For Ahmadinejad, it is truly a hard path ahead.