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Iran's Domestic Conflict Shifts Into Higher Gear

Posted By [Farideh Farhi](#)

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Although the tumult that has gripped Iran since the contested Jun. 12 election has never abated, two recent occurrences have highlighted the further sharpening of internal conflict and the government's inability to restore stability in the face of creative ways the opposition has learned to use the symbols of the Islamic Republic in order to sustain itself.

The uproar over former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's public insistence on the regime's need to respect popular demands and the government-staged outrage over the burning of the picture of the Islamic Revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, during University Student Day demonstrations Dec. 7 have made clear that the political crisis at the heart of the establishment is intensifying.

The politics surrounding both of these occurrences suggest a dangerous deadlock and an urgent need for renegotiating political power among the various contenders, as the government seems unable to bring a degree of calm and political efficacy to the Iranian political system. However, this urgent need has yet to translate into a systemic will to overcome the political paralysis that has taken hold.

As such, recent events in all likelihood augur the entry into a new phase in which direct public confrontation among key players working within the system will become the norm despite the explicit, even if half-hearted, plea by Iran's leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for calm and de-escalating the cycle of recrimination.

The latest events are important because they reveal critical aspects of the continuing turmoil in Iran. The burning of Khomeini's picture, in and of itself, would not have been of much significance as the radicalization of some elements of any protest movement in the face of repression is not unusual.

What made the occasion significant was the decision by the government-controlled Iranian television (IRIB) to broadcast scenes of the burning as a means to create an environment in which all "true believers" of the Revolution could mobilize and express their outrage publicly.

The intent of this staged outrage is two-fold. On the one hand, by focusing on the rejection of the iconic founder of the republic, government supporters want to show that even if the protest movement started as a law-abiding movement against the conduct of the election, it has now turned into a radical movement intent on undermining the Islamic Republic.

On the other hand, by forcing opposition leaders to pledge public allegiance to Khomeini, hard-line forces hope to discredit them before an increasingly angry younger population, thus demonstrating that their ultimate loyalties to the system are no different from those engaged in the ongoing crackdown.

This strategy has backfired, as have so many others, because of the ability of the opposition movement to appropriate the symbols and icons of the Islamic Republic and turn them against the government. To be sure, all opposition leaders have denounced the insult to Khomeini but they have also questioned the intent behind the IRIB broadcasts.

More important, both opposition leaders, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, as well as the Association of Combatant Clerics – an organization headed by former president Mohammad Khatami – have immediately asked for permission to stage an independent demonstration Friday in support of Khomeini's legacy, parallel to the state-controlled demonstration called by the Coordinating Council for Islamic Propagation.

This request places the Ministry of Interior, which has so far refused to grant permits for any opposition-led demonstration, in a difficult position. After all, the opposition's ability to protest and be present in the public sphere has been precisely what the government has been unable to control or prevent in the past six months because of the clever way protestors have participated in government-sanctioned demonstrations designed to celebrate key dates in the history of the Islamic Republic.

Ironically, by positioning themselves as the true heirs to Khomeini, the opposition leaders have received much help from hardliners who, in spite of their professed allegiance to Khomeini, have shown no love for his family.

The publication house in charge of Khomeini's writings and edicts, whose deputy head questioned the wisdom of the burning picture broadcasts, has been vilified in hard-line newspapers and threatened by right-wing members of parliament with investigation. At the same time, Khomeini's grandson, who runs his mausoleum, was wrongly accused of leaving the country instead of defending his grandfather.

This public contest over who is more devoted to Khomeini's legacy has been complemented with a very sharp exchange occasioned by a frank speech delivered by Rafsanjani on Dec. 5 in Mashad in which he bemoaned the pitting of the Revolutionary Guard and Basij militia against "university and high school students, professors, teachers, managers, workers, shopkeepers, and men and women."

Recalling the words of Prophet Mohammad to Imam Ali on the day the latter was chosen by the former as his successor, as narrated in the Shi'i tradition, moreover, Rafsanjani explicitly stated, "You have the right to guardianship from God, but if people accept (it), manage; and if (they do) not accept, do not impose yourself and allow them to manage their society the way they want."

Rafsanjani's words provoked a public rebuke by Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi, who read more into the former president's speech, suggesting that he was effectively calling for the removal of Khamenei himself if people do not want him. Accusing Rafsanjani of abetting "fitna" — sedition or conspiracy — against the Islamic Republic, Moslehi also unwittingly acknowledged the power of the opposition by comparing the "fitna" to an iceberg, only the top of which can be seen above the water.

Others have followed suit in attacking Rafsanjani, who currently serves as chair of both the Expediency Council and the Council of Experts.

Mohammad Yazdi, former head of the Judiciary and current member of the Guardian Council, demanded that Rafsanjani "reduce his distance with the leader", while Ruhollah Hosseinian, a hard-line MP, insisted that Rafsanjani, along with Mousavi and Karrubi, was too small to be made a martyr.

This implicitly, if unwittingly, acknowledged the fear among the government's supporters that the arrests of the opposition leaders will only deepen Iran's political crisis, a fear that was echoed Wednesday by the new head of Iran's Judiciary, Sadeq Amoli Larijani, who insisted that "the Judiciary has enough files against them, and if the system deals with them with tolerance and kindness, do not interpret it as ignorance."

Khamenei himself appears increasingly unable to control the situation. Speaking Sunday, he pleaded for calm and avoiding inflammatory language while, at the same time, he talked of "purge... of "former brothers" or "those who insist on distancing themselves from the system."

Meanwhile the inability of the political system Khamenei heads to even announce the names of individuals who engaged in publicly acknowledged acts of torture and murder in a prison he himself ordered closed last summer has underlined the growing sense that the government has become paralyzed.

Accountability for the abuses committed at Kahrizak prison has been perhaps the most easily accommodated demand of the protestors, but the government's inability or unwillingness to respond is seen as additional evidence of its inflexibility and paranoia.

Where all this will end is difficult to predict. What is clear is that, at least at the level of public discourse, almost all the taboos of the Islamic Republic have been broken. Stellar revolutionaries like Rafsanjani, Mousavi, Karrubi and Khatami refuse to back down from their criticisms of the way post-election protests have been handled.

In turn, they and their families are accused of abetting those who are conspiring against the Islamic Republic; Khomeini's family of tarnishing the Founder's legacy. And there is little in sight to suggest that those who continue to accuse and dish out violence have any coherent

strategy for getting out of the deepening crisis that they helped provoke six months ago by refusing to address any of the protesters' grievances.