

Iran can't reform itself

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Since Ayatollah Khomeini's era, all Iranian presidents have acted as the executive of the Supreme Leader. But lately Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has failed to comply. Where will the confrontation lead?

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sacked his intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, in April, but was forced to reinstate him a few days later under pressure from the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. What began as an incident has led to an open rift within the leadership of the Islamic Republic.

Iran's constitution has many contradictory concepts. The system is called a republic, yet it is based on the concept of Velayat-e Faqih: the guardianship of the leading religious authority who is supposed to rule on behalf of the Hidden Imam ([1](#)). The constitution gives the Supreme Leader enormous powers: his word is regarded as that of God and any opposition to him is seen as opposition to God, liable to the severest punishment. Iran is a republic founded on universal suffrage and its constitution allows presidential and parliamentary elections; yet the Guardian Council has to approve the credentials of all the candidates. The system has a parliament, but it can only legislate on the basis of sharia and all its resolutions must be approved by the Guardian Council, to ensure compatibility with sharia and the constitution.

In 1997 Mohammad Khatami was elected president. He tried to reform the system from within and introduce a degree of democracy, calling for the establishment of civil society and advocating the rule of law, not the rule of sharia. He opened up Iran's foreign policy, called for a dialogue of civilisations and took tentative steps towards the West.

After Khatami's two terms as president, Khamenei was determined not to repeat the mistake of allowing another reformist government, and in 2005, with the backing of hardliners, the Revolutionary Guards and the Basij (paramilitary groups of young men from disadvantaged backgrounds), supported the election of the relatively unknown [Ahmadinejad](#), former mayor of Tehran and member of the Revolutionary Guards.

He launched a populist programme of distributing oil wealth among the poorer classes, promising to return the society to the purity of its earlier days under Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. There was a concerted campaign against reformers: many of their leaders and intellectuals were arrested and imprisoned, and what was left of the reformist media was shut down. Female

activists, artists, musicians, filmmakers and human rights advocates were repressed, many were arrested and their activities curtailed.

Before the last presidential election in June 2009, the reformers tried to reorganise themselves, and turned to Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who had been a popular prime minister during the Iran-Iraq war. Mousavi revived many of Khatami's slogans, appealed to the educated and reformist classes, and according to all independent accounts, won a resounding victory. Yet overnight everything changed, and the following day it was announced that [Ahmadinejad](#) had won by a large margin (2). Ayatollah Khamenei appeared on the scene and even before the election results had been confirmed, put his full support behind Ahmadinejad, describing his election as a "divine blessing".

Millions of Iranians poured into the streets demanding "Where is my vote?". The Green Movement was born and Iranian streets witnessed the biggest demonstrations since the 1979 revolution. The security forces, Basij militia and plainclothes thugs attacked, killing 70 demonstrators, wounding hundreds and detaining 4,000. When the Iranian regime claimed this spring that the uprisings in the Arab world had been inspired by the Islamic revolution, Mousavi and his reformist ally, Mehdi Karrubi, called on the Iranian people to demonstrate on 12 February to honour the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt. According to some reports, more than 350,000 people did so, in spite of the regime's ban, facing bullets and beatings. Two were killed, scores injured and hundreds arrested. The following day the regime arrested both Mousavi and Karrubi and their wives. (Mousavi was not even allowed to attend the funeral of his father, who died while he was in detention.)

'Iranian' Islam

Ahmadinejad thought he could profit from all this and steer a more independent course, but had forgotten that he governed at Khamenei's behest. To win back some of the people who had lost faith in the regime after the election, Ahmadinejad and his friend Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, who had been appointed first as vice-president and later as chief of staff in the president's office, began praising Iran's ancient history and spoke of an "Iranian Islam". Mashaei has spoken of the "Iranian school of Islam", saying that Shiism is the most perfect interpretation of Islam, as it is based on the guidance of the imams; that Iranians have always been monotheistic and so enriched Islam; that Iranians have a "pure understanding of the truth of faith", and that "Iran is the very manifestation of faith".

Ahmadinejad has supported these views. When the British Museum lent Cyrus's Cylinder (3) to Iran, Ahmadinejad gave a speech at the Iranian Archaeological Museum, praising Cyrus both as the founder of the Iranian empire and as a great moral guide of mankind. In a one-hour interview, he used the word "Iran" 45 times. This emphasis on Iran angered conservatives who described his comments as heresy. His former mentor and supporter, Ayatollah

Mesbah Yasdi, spoke openly against the idea of Iranian Islam: he described Ahmadinejad's ideas as shameless, and referred to the affair as the second "sedition", after the sedition of the reformist movement.

Conservatives were also angered by predictions by Mashaei and Ahmadinejad about the imminent return of the Hidden Imam; this year a series of documentary films, *The Reappearance is Imminent* were released, suggesting that world events – natural disasters, wars, uprisings in Muslim countries, the recession – were the signs of the Imam's imminent return. The concept is similar to millenarian views in Judaism and Christianity, but the widely distributed films referred to Ahmadinejad by name as the embodiment of Shu'aib bin Salih, a saintly figure who would accompany the Hidden Imam.

The president and Mashaei could not compete with Ayatollah Khamenei and senior clerics in Islamic credentials. But with the coming of the Hidden Imam, the clerical establishment would be useless, and the president would help establish an era of peace and justice throughout the world. Ahmadinejad has always made a great show of his devotion to the Hidden Imam: he always starts all his public speeches with a prayer about his return, and has taken his cabinet to a well in Jamkaran Mosque near Qom, from where the Hidden Imam is supposed to emerge.

This presumption was even more unpalatable to the clerics than the concept of Iranian Islam. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi said ordinary people should not interpret the traditions concerning the Hidden Imam or predict his reappearance. The interpretation of holy writ was the exclusive right of leading clerics. Another senior cleric Gholam Reza Mesbahi-Moqaddam objected: "If, God forbid, Ahmadinejad means that Imam Zaman [the Hidden Imam] supports the government's actions, this is wrong. Certainly Imam Zaman would not accept 20% inflation rates, nor would he support this and many other mistakes that exist in the country today."

Lay versus clerical Islam

Ahmadinejad and Mashaei have started to undermine clerics by laughing at them as out of touch with the modern world. In 2008 Mashaei hosted a ceremony in Tehran in which women played tambourines while another carried the Qur'an to a podium to recite verses. The clerics thought the festive mood, especially the use of music, disrespectful to the Qur'an, and even forbidden according to sharia. Mashaei called the clerics unfeeling, and said that music enhances spiritual qualities and purifies the soul; those who cannot appreciate this are worse than animals.

Ahmadinejad and Mashaei imply that people do not need clerics to teach them about Islam. While all previous presidents had close relations with the grand ayatollahs in Qom, Ahmadinejad and his allies have deliberately kept their distance. The president has taken his cabinet on provincial visits, but his visit to

Qom province was postponed and when he did visit, on 25 May, he took only a few ministers and did not meet any leading cleric.

There is a struggle for power between Ahmadinejad and his supporters, and Ayatollah Khamenei and senior clerics, backed by the main commanders of the Revolutionary Guards. The attacks on Ahmadinejad by Khamenei's supporters have been vicious and had a religious dimension. Mashaei has been accused of sorcery, "spiritualism" and associating with the *jinn*s (genies). More than 20 presidential aides and advisers have been arrested on charges of sorcery.

The confrontation is not entirely based on religion, though. The Majlis (parliament) had called for the merging of ministries to reduce bureaucracy. Ahmadinejad merged the ministry of roads and transportation with housing and urban development, energy with oil, industries and mines with commerce, welfare and social security with labour, without the prior approval of the Majlis. He declared himself the caretaker minister of oil, just as Iran gained the chairmanship of OPEC for the first time after 36 years. The Guardian Council declared his action illegal, but he did not accept the ruling. A meeting was held between the leaders of the three powers in the presence of the Supreme Leader who said that the Guardian Council's ruling was final and the government had to obey it; the president remained obstinate. In June, the Majlis took the unprecedented step of referring him to the judiciary to be prosecuted for violation of the law. The next day, Ahmadinejad was forced to appoint a new head for the oil ministry.

The tug of war between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei continues. Ahmadinejad might resign, or he might be impeached, or at best he might be allowed to continue as an enfeebled president.

Mohammad Reza Bahonar, the first deputy speaker, said on 2 June: "Earlier on, we came to the conclusion that the Master [Khamenei] was prepared to incur many costs and put an end to the life of the government, but we saw that the Master still would like the present government to continue its work calmly to the end of its legal term and the life of the tenth government may end naturally." But he called on the government to distance itself from the "deviationist movement", those who joined the June 2009 demonstrations. How will Ahmadinejad respond?