

# Why Iran's Islamic Government is Unraveling

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**O**N JUNE 12, 2009, THE DAY OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN'S tenth presidential elections since the 1979 revolution, it seemed for many in Iran and around the world that democracy had finally triumphed over theocracy. By apparently voting to oust President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the incumbent who had the backing of clerical hardliners in the regime, including Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—the Iranian people demonstrated that the theocratic regime had lost its tyrannical grip on their aspirations. Yet the mullahs and their allies in the government bureaucracy had other plans. To prevent the most important popularly-elected political office in Iran from slipping beyond their control, the regime decided to engineer what Khamenei infamously described as an “electoral miracle.” So, after a hard-fought election with the largest turnout of voters in Iranian history, Ahmadinejad was allegedly re-elected to a second term.

As people flooded into the streets to protest the fraud, the theocratic regime unleashed the Basij paramilitary forces to suppress them. Bearing the brunt of the repression was the Green Movement, a broad-based, loosely-knit grassroots movement that coalesced around a diverse group of dissident clerical and secular politicians like Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Seyyed Mehdi Karrubi, and Mir Hossein Mousavi.

As the Iranian regime regained control of the streets, it appeared at first that the mullahs had prevailed. But it soon became clear how narrow the Islamic Republic's victory over the Iranian people actually was, and how brittle the regime had become in the process. While the disputed elections brought to light the full extent of citizens' outrage and the government's flagging legitimacy, it also brought into the

open many festering disputes within the regime itself between competing political and ideological orientations.

This clash over the tenets, goals, and institutions of national administration has serious ramifications for the future of Islamic government within Iran. In essence, the revolutionary Shiite ideology of *velayat-e faqih*, or the rule of the jurist, which brought the Islamic Republic into existence, is no longer binding even the clerical establishment together. Nor is it linking the clerical establishment to other branches of Iran's government let alone to the Iranian people. Even though it seems unlikely to collapse in the near future, the Islamic regime has begun to unravel, and appears to be headed down the path of becoming "neither Islamic nor a republic," as branches of the state continue to attempt to wrest power exclusively for themselves.<sup>1</sup> This struggle between competing factions may prove to bring about the Islamic Republic of Iran's ultimate demise.

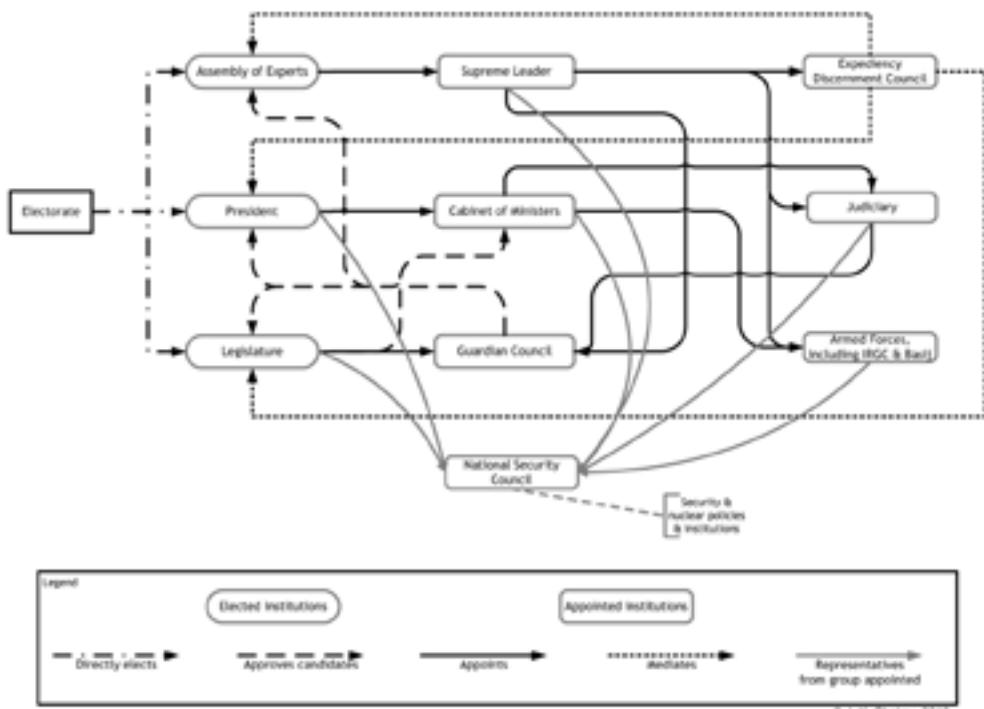
## Clerical Contentions

OF ALL THE IRANIAN STATE'S INSTITUTIONS, ONLY THE THEOCRATIC BRANCH'S highest office comes with a constitutionally-approved, *de-facto* permanent appointment—that is, the position of *rahbar*, or supreme leader. The supreme leader is appointed by a body known as the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan*), which consists of 86 *mojtahids*, or Muslim scholars, who are themselves elected to eight-year terms of office. An influential supreme leader can exercise considerable authority, if not final say, over many aspects of Iranian politics, society, economy, and religion. This authority includes shaping the outcome of elections and the trajectory of Iranian foreign policy, such as the objectives of nuclear power.<sup>2</sup>

Iran's current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, was appointed in June 1989 after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Before his appointment, Khamenei served Khomeini as deputy minister of defense and then as representative to the IRGC. Thereafter, with his mentor's backing, Khamenei was elected to two consecutive terms as president of the Islamic Republic. Despite this political career, Iran's mullahs initially resisted Khamenei's appointment as supreme leader because he didn't even hold the rank of ayatollah at the time, and many complained he lacked the requisite religious scholarly credentials to hold such office.

Yet of those candidates for supreme leader who were religiously qualified, none eventually proved to be as politically acceptable to the Islamic regime's rulers as did Khamenei. One leading candidate, Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, had fallen out of official grace for becoming a moderate. Another leading candidate, the politically pragmatic Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Golpaygani, failed to gain

## IRAN'S GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE



IRAN'S POLITICAL SYSTEM is often regarded as consisting of three governmental branches: executive, legislative, and judicial.<sup>3</sup> The regime's theocratic branch is not usually thought of as melded together with this administrative hierarchy, but it should be, because theocracy underlies and shapes all aspects of Iranian society and politics. Shiite Islam and its representatives, the *mullahs* or clerics, have become an intrinsic and central part of Iranian statecraft. In the words of Iran's Islamic revolutionary founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, "It is the laws and ordinances of Islam ... Islamic government may therefore be defined as the rule of divine law over humans."<sup>4</sup> Likewise, the military must also be included in any analysis of Iran's political system, for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) or *Pasdaran*, in particular, has become a major influence in Iranian political life. The *Pasdaran* is likely to remain a pivotal political force for the foreseeable future.

the Assembly of Experts' support. With no politically acceptable alternatives, the assembly elevated Khamenei to the highest religious and political position in Iran.<sup>5</sup>

Since rising to the position of *rahbar* and *veli-ye faqih*, or guardian jurist, over twenty years ago, Khamenei has proved to be a shrewd politician, and he has steadily and methodically increased the power of his office. His political opponents have

been imprisoned. He has isolated influential mullahs from Shiism's quietist school, which challenges the very core of the Islamic Republic as it maintains that clerics should only play an advisory, rather than a direct, role in Iranian political life.<sup>6</sup> He has also assiduously nurtured ties within the IRGC and the paramilitary Basij forces, thereby ensuring that any popular opposition to his authority could be effectively countered. This is precisely what occurred after the last presidential election, when security forces suppressed popular protests quickly and violently.

Just as importantly, Khamenei has been able to foil efforts from within the regime itself to remove him from office. Since coming to power, Khamenei has actively promoted those who support his overall agenda, and surrounded himself with a clique of extremist mullahs who are hostile to plurality, moderation, and fundamental rights. He and his cohorts have accrued for themselves lavish lifestyles—something quite contrary to what is popularly expected of high-ranking religious figures.<sup>7</sup> Fiscal and sociopolitical perks are spread by his administration to most members of the Shiite clergy, as long as they publicly toe the supreme leader's line. Such incentives have made ordinary mullahs loath to depose the theocratic system, even though many disagree with it on theological as well as political grounds.<sup>8</sup>

It was this power base within the polity that proved most valuable to Khamenei when Rafsanjani led an effort to impeach and remove him from the supreme leadership through the Assembly of Experts. To foil this attack, the supreme leader's network of appointees in the clerical and judicial establishments launched an assault on Rafsanjani, impugning his religious credentials and questioning whether he was even entitled to hold the rank of ayatollah. They also attacked Rafsanjani's family.<sup>9</sup> Rafsanjani was eventually forced to concede considerable political and ideological ground to Khamenei. Even though he previously served two terms as Iran's president, and despite currently serving as chair of both the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council (*Majma-ye Tashkhis-e Maslahat-e Nezam*, which mediates political squabbles between the branches of government), Rafsanjani has been forced to publicly acknowledge Khamenei's leadership as paramount.<sup>10</sup>

His recent failure to oust the supreme leader notwithstanding, Rafsanjani may still be the one senior cleric who can seriously challenge Khamenei's grip on power. Because he is over 70 years of age, Rafsanjani is precluded by Iran's Constitution from holding presidential office for a third term. There are no age restrictions on elevation to the post of supreme leader, however. Ironically, Rafsanjani might even benefit from the abolition of the theocracy and its conversion to a federal system, for he remains an influential, wealthy, and popularly electable politician.

While many clerics who backed the Green Movement early on have since broken ranks, there are indications that many other mullahs, including some who have thus far remained silent, may still yet align themselves with the expanding ranks of

discontented people to seek the abolition of the office of *rahbar*, under which they have lost any real ability to govern themselves. For example, Ayatollah Hossein Mousavi Tabrizi, the influential Secretary of the Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers (*Majma-ye Mohaqeqin-e Modarresin-e Howze-ye Elmiyye-e Qom*, also known as the Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qom), has noted that “the guardianship of the jurist should last only as long as the people desire it and then be replaced by citizens’ franchise.”<sup>11</sup>

The Assembly of Experts has thus far resisted all calls to amend the constitution, not least because disbanding the office of supreme leader would also make the assembly itself obsolete. To forestall the assembly’s members from blocking any effort to revise the constitution, some Iranian intellectuals are privately suggesting that the assembly be transformed into an upper chamber, or a Senate, of a bicameral legislature. Indeed, the *majles* or consultative legislature had been a bicameral body from the period of the Constitutional Revolution of 1905 until the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Rafsanjani was among those in the Assembly of Experts who pushed this idea in tandem with his attempt to oust Khamenei. His effort failed because other members of the assembly believed Rafsanjani would then seize absolute power.

So today, thirty years after ousting their shah, Iranians are now subject to an autocratic theocracy, and are increasingly outraged by the fact that the Islamic revolution has replaced one despot with another. Although Khamenei remains in office, he is respected by neither many Shiite clergymen and politicians nor most ordinary Iranians.<sup>12</sup> More important, the office of *rahbar* itself is no longer invulnerable due to mullahs concluding that Khamenei has failed them politically. Khamenei continues to advocate an “active presence of people believing in religion and the values of the Islamic revolution” to hold change at bay.<sup>13</sup> Yet increasingly, Iranians are openly calling for constitutional and governmental transformation. Hence, it is far from clear how the Islamic Republic will be able to recover from this crisis of its revolutionary ideology, especially insofar as it involves defections from within the religious establishment itself.

## Executive Machinations

AS THE CRISIS WITHIN IRAN’S THEOCRATIC BRANCH HAS DEEPENED, YET ANOTHER challenge to the Islamic Republic and to *velayat-e faqih*, or the guardianship of the jurists, upon which it was founded, has arisen from within the regime’s executive branch.

Iran’s president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is best known to the world as an anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denying, and apocalypse-threatening firebrand. Yet within Iran,

Ahmadinejad is also widely viewed as an astute, manipulative, and populist politician. Since first elected president in 2005, his power has been growing. His re-election to a second term, in fact, was engineered by loyalists in the Interior Ministry, endorsed by the Guardian Council of the Constitution (*Shura-ye Negahban-e Qanun-e Assasi*, a body that is chaired by the powerful Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati), and ultimately confirmed by Supreme Leader Khamenei himself.<sup>14</sup> It was, of course, Khamenei's imprudent and hasty confirmation of Ahmadinejad as the election's victor that triggered the crisis of 2009 and nearly ended the theocracy. Importantly, Khamenei backed Ahmadinejad because he believed the president would become ever more beholden and subservient to the office of supreme leader. Instead, Ahmadinejad has rebelled against his clerical patron.

In the turmoil that engulfed the country following his re-appointment, Ahmadinejad and ideologically-kindred bureaucratic appointees—known collectively as the *Osulgarayan*, or the Principlists—sensed an opportunity to dramatically enlarge their power, and they seized upon it. As popular attentions shifted away from elections fraud toward far more fundamental and constitutional issues, the Principlists sought to take advantage of Khamenei's beleaguered status specifically, and the growing weakness of the theocracy and its clerical backers as a whole, so as to place more power and independence into the hands of secular autocrats.<sup>15</sup>

In effect, Ahmadinejad perceived a power vacuum within the clerical establishment, plus the shifting tide of public sentiment against theocracy, and he moved decisively to fill it.<sup>16</sup> The president and his supporters believe that the period of religious sovereignty will soon be over. In a country where overt allegiance to fundamentalist Shiism and obedience to the religiopolitical authority of ayatollahs is expected of senior state officials, Ahmadinejad and his clique have fast emerged as a stark exception. Their behavior displays increasing autonomy from the theocrats in both domestic and foreign affairs. The root cause of their independence has been the post-election struggle within the government itself, as Ahmadinejad's cronies undermine the religious establishment in order to gain an increasingly larger share of power.<sup>17</sup>

Since the president's re-election, the Principlists have managed to seize considerable new powers, including substantial control of state funds.<sup>18</sup> They have arrogated these new powers in a way that many Iranians regard as being as dictatorial and as reprehensible as the theocrats' rule, but which some Iranians—especially those who have become fed-up with the mullahs' theocratic rule—seem to desire and even approve. Ahmadinejad publicly chastises his rivals in the other branches of Iran's government for "running to Qom for every instruction," adding that Iranian politicians "should not leave the burden of administering the country on the shoulders of the [supreme] leader, the religious scholars, and other [clerics]. We must administer the country."<sup>19</sup>

In a bid to undercut the religious basis of the clerics' political authority, Ahmadinejad

has begun emphasizing “pragmatic values” in governance.<sup>20</sup> His chief of staff and relative through marriage, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, has been a leading exponent of this approach. According to Mashaei, “an Islamic government is not capable of running a vast and populous country like Iran. Running a country is like a horse race, but the problem is that these people [the clergy] are not horse racers.”<sup>21</sup> In response to these attacks, Shiite clergymen have declared that they “will not tolerate attacks on the principles of religion.” Yet these protestations have largely fallen on deaf ears in the regime’s executive branch.<sup>22</sup>

Meanwhile, Ahmadinejad has been actively populating the government with appointees, and promoting those who share his overall agenda. In the face of strenuous objections on religious grounds from clerics and legislators, the president nominated three women for Cabinet-level portfolios in 2009. Ahmadinejad went so far as to ridicule his clerical opponents, demanding to know why women shouldn’t hold cabinet positions. More recently, he threatened to replace ineffective male administrators with more efficient women. In the end, only Ahmadinejad’s nominee for health minister, Mazieh Dastjerdi, was confirmed. Yet Dastjerdi herself has only further provoked the clergy’s ire by publicly arguing, contrary to Islamic tradition, that a woman’s rights should be conceived of as unique to them as individuals, and separately from their fathers and husbands.<sup>23</sup> Ahmadinejad has subsequently appointed other women to senior administrative posts, including provincial governorships.

Moreover, Ahmadinejad has selected only one cleric, Heidar Moslehi, to fill a Cabinet position, as Minister of Intelligence and National Security (there were three mullahs in his previous government).<sup>24</sup> Moslehi is unlikely to subvert the president, thanks to his own close ties to the secular autocrats via the IRGC where he once served as a commissioner. Essentially, the president is methodically building a bureaucratic base faithful to him, and at the expense of those who serve the theocrats.

Ahmadinejad’s dismissive attitude toward the theocratic, legislative, and judicial branches of the Islamic Republic has been followed by his subordinates and even by some family members. In January 2010, science minister Kamran Daneshjou inaugurated an international conference for women in the sciences at Tehran. Azamossadat Farahi, Ahmadinejad’s wife, defied both tradition and clerical approval by delivering a keynote speech at the conference that described women, knowledge, and science as “cornerstones of Allah’s creation.” Since the 2009 elections, Farahi has become a visible fixture in Iranian politics by participating in a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement, and by publicly raising the issue of women’s lack of rights in the Islamic Republic.<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, realizing that anti-government sentiments are fueled, in part, by years of behavioral restrictions, Daneshjou is encouraging attendees at funerals and memorial services to observe a moment of silence instead of reciting the first chapter of the Quran as has been obligatory. Likewise, the government’s cultural

advisor, Javad Shamghadari, is recommending that the *hejab*, or veil, should not be mandatory—much to the horror of mullahs and orthodox laypersons.

Denunciations as “heretics” and “infidels” have not swayed the president and his bureaucratic cohorts from these secular agendas, which are designed to further weaken theocrats’ hold on power.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, the clerical establishment has been unable to muster an effective response to the president’s broadsides. The president maintains close personal ties with Ayatollah Mohammad Mesbah Yazdi, an influential ultraorthodox scholar in the Assembly of Experts, who might ordinarily be expected to be a staunch defender of the Islamic Republic’s clerical establishment. But even this has not reined in Ahmadinejad’s drive to consolidate his power by abjuring beliefs and practices central to the theocracy. In fact, Yazdi, the consummate theocrat, has himself been accused by other theocrats of plotting against the supreme leader with the help of his presidential acolyte—a sign of just how splintered the Shiite clergy have become.<sup>27</sup>

Whenever possible, Ahmadinejad, his ministers and his staff seek to avoid meetings with the Expediency Discernment Council, a body that’s led by two of the president’s fiercest political rivals—Rafsanjani is its chairman and former presidential candidate Mohsen Rezai is its secretary. Consultation with Khamenei is, for the most part, perfunctory as well. In fact, hardline clerics and legislators grumble that Ahmadinejad and his ministers regularly defy the supreme leader. But, having validated Ahmadinejad’s re-election, their reprisals are limited to attempts at blocking certain executive actions—such as a nuclear deal with the West. Moreover, when rebuffed by the theocrats, the president often finds ways to work around them. For instance, when the theocrats recently blocked the president’s attempt to reach an agreement directly with the IAEA and U.S. for a nuclear fuel swap, he struck a similar deal with Turkey and Brazil. While it was relatively easy for regime hardliners to reject an agreement with the West, they had to consent to working with other developing countries. And even though the U.S. rejected the latter agreement, it served to bolster the Principlists’ cause at home and in the Third World.

## The Principlist-Military Complex

AHMADINEJAD AND HIS PRINCIPLIST ALLIES HAVE CULTIVATED A SERIES OF ALLIANCES in yet another vitally important branch of the Iranian government—the armed forces. Iranian sources indicate that the president is using the IRGC and its ancillary wing, the Basij, to centralize power within the executive branch.<sup>28</sup> The upper ranks of the military have served as training grounds for many of the increasingly secular militants now in power—including the president, who was himself an influential

Basij organizer while studying at the University of Tehran prior to serving in the IRGC's 6th Special Operations Unit.<sup>29</sup> The IRGC, for its part, is utilizing its connections with the executive branch to acquire major financial stakes in important industrial sectors that are being privatized, including oil and gas, construction, manufacturing, and agriculture. It is becoming a major player in Iran's foreign policy as well, funding development aid, weapons technology, and the spread of anti-Western ideology in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.<sup>30</sup>

So in exchange for helping Ahmadinejad intimidate the clerical establishment and ordinary Iranian subjects through the threat and actual use of violent force, the military is deepening its hold over the Iranian economy. As the U.S. government convinces growing numbers of multinational corporations to cease business with Iran, the IRGC's development wing is stepping in to fill the void. Seizing the opportunities created by international sanctions, the IRGC's ever-increasing array of companies is steadily taking over every major industrial sector within Iran. They are utilizing their growing industrial expertise to engage in international trade, construction, and military-related ventures in other Third World countries.<sup>31</sup> Because the state sector provides a major employment pool, the military is entangling the general population in its tentacles. Moreover, as ostensibly private companies are increasingly tied to the executive branch and its supporters via financial stakes, the positions of Ahmadinejad and the IRGC grow stronger vis-à-vis the clergy.<sup>32</sup>

The ideology undergirding this Principlist-IRGC bid for power was echoed by Mohammad Ali Jafari, an IRGC general, who stated publicly that preserving the government "is more vital than performing daily prayers."<sup>33</sup> In a stark example of what this new policy means in practice, the IRGC has begun assuming control over the administration of important Shiite rituals, and has appointed prayer leaders and blocked the participation of clerics who do not bend to the IRGC's will or who criticize the president—such as Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the late Ayatollah Khomeini.<sup>34</sup> Ahmadinejad and IRGC commanders even keep leading ayatollahs and prominent politicians on short leashes by regulating their movement within and outside Iran. They do the same for all other citizens by controlling airports, harbors, and overland border crossings. The IRGC maintains its own media outlets, seizes and closes down news sources critical to its activities, and arrests editors, broadcasters, and reporters. Many of these activities are conducted with Iran's Ministry of Intelligence and National Security, which is also known as Vezarat-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar (VEVAK). The IRGC and VEVAK are linked to the assassination of dissidents, too.

Under Ahmadinejad's presidential patronage, the Basij militia's annual operational budget has grown to 14.85 trillion *rials* (U.S. \$148.5 Billion)—an amount that allegedly funds as many as twenty million volunteers.<sup>35</sup> Iran's annual budget is the equivalent

of U.S. \$349 billion, and its population is estimated at between 70 and 74 million. As such, the paramilitary draws upon a major share of revenue and manpower in the Islamic Republic. In exchange, Basij cadres have been at the forefront of the regime's efforts to violently quash protests against Ahmadinejad's presidency. Meanwhile, the IRGC, although much smaller than the Basij with approximately 150,000 soldiers, are now the best trained, equipped, and funded of Iran's regular military forces.<sup>36</sup>

So, even though supreme leader Khamenei originally endorsed both Ahmadinejad's re-election and the IRGC's growing influence as a means of reinforcing clerical power and rule in the wake of last June's electoral dispute, his actions inadvertently helped to create a major, secular-oriented challenge to the theocracy from within the government itself.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, the Iranian people's own demands for representative government, and their challenge to the political legitimacy of rule by Muslim jurists, have also weakened the status quo. Thanks in part to this conspiracy of factors, the secular autocrats within the administration and the military have been able to find common cause, and they've been consolidating their grasp on power by turning to totalitarianism and away from the revolutionary Shiite Islamism of the clerics—who the Principlists have begun excoriating in public as *monafeqan*, or backstabbers of the regime.<sup>38</sup>

## Electoral, Legislative, and Judicial Maneuvers

THE EXECUTIVE BRANCH, HOWEVER, HAS ONE MAJOR WEAKNESS: ITS LEADERSHIP serves for a fixed time period. Ahmadinejad's current term of office ends in August 2013 and, by constitutional stipulation, he can run for a third presidential term only after sitting out the next election. No prior Iranian president has been successful in a third bid—a fact proven once again by Ahmadinejad's own victory over Rafsanjani, when the latter attempted to regain the presidency for a third time in 2005. The mullahs know that if they can stall the executive branch's power grab for a few more years, Ahmadinejad may be gone from the political scene and the secular autocrats would be greatly diminished. For these reasons, the Guardian Council can be expected to vet presidential candidates even more closely for the 2013 election to avoid secular-leaning power-grabbing leaders like Ahmadinejad.

In response, Ahmadinejad's cohorts have now launched attempts to remove the consecutive and overall term limits which exist on election to presidential office.<sup>39</sup> This is very much a long shot, because Ahmadinejad has alienated many powerful

politicians including Rafsanjani and the legislature's leadership. But if the Principlists are successful, the mullahs will face a serious challenge, and Iran could move politically from a theocratic system to a more secular, but no less dictatorial one.

Should current conditions hold, Ahmadinejad's replacement as president is likely to be Ali Larijani, who serves as Speaker of the unicameral legislature, or majles. Ali Larijani hails from a family of well-known and increasingly influential clerics.<sup>40</sup> Under Larijani's oversight, members of the majles, who are elected to four-year terms by the general population, have forged stronger ties with the theocrats in an attempt to counter the rising political power of the executive branch. According to the Islamic Republic's constitution, all candidates for election to the majles are screened by the Guardian Council, whose own membership consists of six Muslim jurists selected by the supreme leader, and another six selected by the parliamentarians. This presents an opportunity for the ayatollahs, who may seek to regain some of their power by determining the eligibility of candidates for the 2012 parliamentary elections and then utilizing a well-stocked legislature, sympathetic to clerical rule, to block executive actions.

Should the theocrats pursue this electoral strategy, they are likely to receive considerable backing, at least in the short-term, from the judiciary, which is headed by Speaker Larijani's brother, Sadeq Larijani. Sadeq Larijani previously held an eight-year term on the Guardian Council, courtesy of an appointment by Khamenei, and his connections to the clerical establishment run deep. Sadeq Larijani has made a number of recent pronouncements stressing the importance of judicial independence, and these appear aimed at protecting the judiciary's autonomy from Ahmadinejad's appointees, and at counter-balancing the executive branch's attempts to create an imperial presidency.<sup>41</sup>

The judiciary seems more than willing to play political hardball as well, as it has recently sought to place the blame for the gross violations of human rights since June 2009 squarely on Ahmadinejad and his allies in the executive branch, on the civil bureaucracy, and on the Basij militia forces. Needless to say, success creates new opportunities, and despite the theocrats' best laid plans, the Larijani brothers may eventually choose to make their own play for political supremacy at the theocratic branch's expense.

Yet, contenders are emerging from Ahmadinejad's camp to challenge Ali Larijani, the legislators, judges, and the theocrats. Principlists, too, have begun planning for the next round of majles and presidential elections. Their leading candidate for now is Ahmadinejad's relative and chief of staff Mashaei. Mashaei's political and economic policies are in line with those of the IRGC. His policies including attitudes on Islam, women's rights, and international affairs (such as relations with Israel) are more tolerant than those of the mullahs and even his presidential mentor. Ayatollahs regularly denounce him as impious, and he retaliates by calling them "ineffective

administrators like the prophets Noah and Moses.”<sup>42</sup> Indeed, Mashaei may appeal to a wider range of the Iranian polity more than any other prospective candidate precisely because his politics have been more agreeable to intellectuals, artists, entrepreneurs, and the youth.

Like Mashaei and other Principlists, even Ahmadinejad has sought to reach out to Iran’s demographically numerous younger generations (who make up 50 percent of the country’s total population) by claiming that he, too, is “strongly against” clergy-instigated crackdowns on Iranians’ social choices and behaviors, as he believes “it is impossible for such actions to be successful.”<sup>43</sup>

The military apparatus also has an inherent weak spot. Commanders of the Pasdaran and the Basij rise through the ranks, retire at the end of their careers, and can be reassigned or even stripped of their commands by public officials. Technically, the armed forces report to the defense minister, and thereby to the president. However, the supreme leader can and routinely does exercise his constitutionally-granted authority to intervene in military affairs, including promotions and assignments. By shuffling generals between postings, and even summarily removing some from their positions, Khamenei recently has sought to prevent military officers from developing personal power bases to the detriment of the mullahs.<sup>44</sup>

Such tactics do not always prove successful. To Iran’s immediate east, the historical role of Pakistan’s military commanders as powerbrokers and coup d’état leaders is well-known and much-feared by the mullahs. Ideally, the ayatollahs led by Khamenei hope they can restore a balance between the executive, legislative, judicial, and military branches of Iran’s government—as seems to be happening in Pakistan—so that the theocrats might once again reign supreme over elected and appointed officials.<sup>45</sup> The future of the Islamic Republic, and of theocratic rule, very much depends on their ability to do so. For now, their success seems unlikely; rather, the Principlists and their IRGC and Basij allies are on the upsurge within Iran’s ruling hierarchy.

## The People’s Challenge

SO WHERE DO THE GREEN MOVEMENT AND OTHER DEMOCRACY-SEEKING GROUPS fit into the political struggles that are gripping Iran? Many formerly prominent leaders of the opposition appear to be putting their long-term political and personal self-interests above all other considerations and are maneuvering to make amends with the fundamentalist mullahs. Initially on the upsurge, their protests have fizzled out in recent months. Rank and file dissidents have been arrested, tortured, abandoned, and left without rights and leadership as the state effectively maintains control of public gatherings. Ideologically, theologically, and strategically, the Greens

and other opposition elements are now becoming internally divided and politically marginalized.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps the most influential of all the opposition leaders to have recently come in from the cold is Rafsanjani, that consummate political survivor.<sup>47</sup> Having failed in his efforts to push Khamenei aside, Rafsanjani has once again accepted the supreme leader's authority, claiming that an enemy plot against the Islamic system and the *velayat-e faqih* has been successfully thwarted. Rafsanjani has extolled his former foe as "the most qualified person to resolve the current problems" and has fawningly remarked that "the supreme leader has never endorsed extremism or transgression of the law." He also has resumed urging the general public "to support the Islamic Republic" because "the era of suppression and imposing decisions upon the people has come to the end."<sup>48</sup> Of course, this is not to say that Rafsanjani isn't keeping his options open. Ever the opportunist with few discernible principles, Rafsanjani is still trying to straddle the fence—recently claiming the "government should try more to satisfy public opinion."<sup>49</sup>

Another Green Movement leader and former two-time Iranian president, Seyyed Mohammed Khatami, has largely retreated from public view. He is said to have written to Khamenei "recognizing the regime's authority" and seeking reconciliation and an end to violence. In so doing, Khatami has managed to evade house arrest or defrocking—the fate of other dissident clerics—even though from time to time he still urges the regime not to impose its will upon the people—and especially not violently.<sup>50</sup>

Even the defeated presidential candidate and former Speaker of Parliament Seyyed Mehdi Karroubi, who still grumbles that last June's presidential election was rigged, has reined in his rhetoric. Though he insists he hasn't made a deal with the regime, he speaks today only of "reforming the government, not toppling the theocracy." In proclaiming this, Karroubi clearly seeks to maintain revolutionary Shiism as the basis of the Iranian state.<sup>51</sup> While he has been attacked relentlessly in recent months by supporters of both Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, Karroubi stands to regain acceptance among Iran's clerical and political elites if he continues mollifying his words and actions.

Mir Hossein Mousavi, originally the most prominent of the unsuccessful presidential candidates, has become increasingly isolated. For now, he remains semi-defiant, still rejecting the presidential election's results. In an attempt to broaden his appeal and to reverse his diminishing influence and public visibility, he has sought to convince labor and teachers' unions to join a revamped opposition movement—albeit one loyal to the state.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Mousavi has attenuated his reformist agenda, insisting that he cares only for "[following] up people's rights and demands with honesty."<sup>53</sup> Of course Mousavi, who is a former prime minister of the Islamic Republic and has served as Iran's representative on Hezbollah's leadership council,

has never been a true reformer but more of a political opportunist. Mousavi also oversaw violent enforcement of political repression during his time in office as prime minister.<sup>54</sup>

Not surprisingly, Mohsen Rezai, who also ran as a secular presidential candidate, is attempting to bring Mousavi back into the Islamic Republic's corrupt political mainstream. Rezai's attempts at reunifying the divergent groups of the Islamic revolution carry the authority of his own roles as a former commander of the IRGC and current secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council.<sup>55</sup>

Once stalwarts of the Islamic regime, who were then denounced for backing the popular Green Movement, Rafsanjani, Khatami, Karroubi, and Mousavi are slowly returning to the fold and the status quo rather than taking the risk of being swept aside by the wide-ranging changes the movement's rank and file would usher into Iran. The Green Movement's very success in unmasking the government as intolerant, corrupt, and violent has unnerved its original leaders. While the Green's leadership was not truly committed to regime change to begin with, the rank and file has been demanding that the government and the political system be discarded. As the Green's leaders have backtracked, they've also begun trying to temper both the populist uprising and the public's desire for change.<sup>56</sup> So the leaders, in turn, are being rejected by the public. Their cancellation of public protests on June 12, 2010—the much-contested presidential election's anniversary—was as much to escape the embarrassment of their declining prestige and influence as it was to avoid violence from the Basij.

As hardline clerics such as Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami have regained control, they have stressed the need for social unity while denouncing the remaining nonconformists as *mohareb*, or enemies of God.<sup>57</sup> Consequently, Karroubi and Mousavi comment repeatedly and publicly that they do not wish to be “topplers [of the theocracy] ... have held positions within the regime ... [and are] soldiers of the revolution and the Islamic Republic.”<sup>58</sup> That is precisely the reason why they do not represent a hopeful future for Iran, where every citizen will have full representation free from coercion.

Much of the political turmoil that was sparked by the 2009 presidential election is now blamed by fundamentalist mullahs on the moral turpitude among the protestors. Consequently, there's been a new push by the clerical establishment to reinforce what they construe as appropriate Islamic political morality. For instance, Ayatollah Naser Makarem-Shirazi, speaking in a mosque at Qom, urged that a governmental “ministry to propagate virtue and ban vice must be formed to deal with moral issues, [especially] in schools, universities, and the media.” He went on to claim, “When importance is not attached to moral issues, political and economical problems arise and decadence spreads.”<sup>59</sup> So rather than face the reality of their political failure, the theocrats continue to proffer moral explanations, including faltering faith allegedly arising from “rotten and corrupt” secularism, caused by globalization.<sup>60</sup>

## Hope for the Future

DESPITE THE REVERSALS OF SOME OF THE GREEN MOVEMENT'S MOST VISIBLE LEADERS, dissent against the Islamic Republic has spread throughout Iran and remains fueled by long-standing constitutional and socioeconomic problems that are unlikely to be solved by the incumbents. By virtually all accounts, the Green Movement's desire for sweeping change has now become broad-based and mainstream, and consequently the betrayals of some of its leaders may prove over the long range to be less detrimental than they appear now. On the other hand, organized opposition to the regime has been weakened, at least temporarily. The opposition desperately needs to find new leadership among Iran's discontented and highly rebellious youth. Events have demonstrated that it cannot rely on ageing individuals, whose personal experiences, stature, and wealth are tied to the status quo and the Islamic revolution that created it. Entrepreneurs and intellectuals also need to take up the herculean task of challenging a government that tries desperately to quash all dissent. Only then can a revolt against the hardline ayatollahs and their despotic counterparts succeed.<sup>61</sup>

The fact that the Islamic regime is itself internally divided, and will likely remain so, suggests that the opposition will have ample opportunity to succeed in the future. Widespread discontent, coupled with the steady collapse of Iran's national economy, fuels not just more public challenges to the regime's durability, but it also feeds the desires of various government factions—the theocrats, the Principlists, the opportunists and the true reformers—to cling to and enhance their power, even at the expense of the Islamic Republic itself. At this time, therefore, perhaps the most promising vehicle for broader changes may be the ongoing battle within the regime between the theocrats led by Khamenei and the secular autocrats led by Ahmadinejad. The ideological clashes and attendant power grabs between these two factions could ultimately weaken them both, thereby permitting the Green movement and other reformists to regroup and, eventually, to flourish.

For now, the desire to see freedom triumph despite the odds stacked against it may seem hopeless, but it should not. Historically, Iranian governments have been unable able to suppress their people's aspirations—neither in 1905 during the Constitutional Revolution nor in 1979 during the Islamic Revolution. Yet this time around, there are both religious and totalitarian overtones in the struggles within the Islamic Republic's ruling hierarchies, and between the regime and the people's opposition. Iran's emergence from the 1979 revolution's stifling legacy could therefore become much bloodier domestically, and its policies more erratic and fraught with danger internationally, before improving.

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