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One Year after a Rigged Election: Iran's Introverted Politics

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Although the United Nations Security Council has now voted for new sanctions against Tehran, the Iranian regime and opposition -- preoccupied this week with the anniversary of last year's fraudulent presidential election -- seem more concerned about domestic political struggles. To outsiders, it is an often-confusing contest, with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei continuing to support President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad while leaders of the opposition Green Movement choose their battles carefully.

Yet despite the introverted nature of their struggle, both sides recognize the potential domestic political impact of a nuclear agreement -- even the controversial trilateral Turkey-Brazil-Iran proposal -- with the international community. The leaders of the opposition Green Movement are against such a development, believing that any deal with the current regime would lend legitimacy to Ahmadinezhad's presidency and weaken their pro-democracy movement. Mir Hossein Mousavi, one of last year's presidential candidates and now an opposition leader, disapproved strongly of both the October 2009 and May 2010 fuel-swap proposals for the Tehran Research Reactor. He even described last month's Turkey/Brazil-brokered agreement as "another Treaty of Turkmenchay" (an 1828 accord with Russia signed by an incompetent Iranian king and seen as humiliating to Iran).

For the regime's part, although Khamenei probably considers even the trilateral deal an unjustified interference in Iran's sovereign rights, others in the regime believe that a trilateral nuclear deal could have a domestic political bonus. In particular, an agreement with some measure of international recognition would complicate U.S. diplomacy, divert attention from the internal crisis, and marginalize any further waves of protests.

Khamenei's Uncompromising Vision

Despite the recent absence of street protests, the opposition's rhetorical attacks on the regime have grown increasingly radical, describing Khamenei's leadership as ruthless, unjust, and contrary to Islam, democracy, and human rights. There seems little prospect of any compromise between the two sides. Although Green activists insist that they seek reform and not revolution or regime change, Khamenei is firmly convinced otherwise. He believes that what he calls *fitna* -- the unrest provoked by the opposition -- is a threat to his rule, not merely a reaction against Ahmadinezhad and his rigged electoral victory. In his view, the Greens are an extension of the West's "soft war" against the Islamic Republic and therefore connected to Western governments and intelligence agencies.

More specifically, Khamenei believes that the opposition's goals are threefold: (1) to remove him from power or significantly limit his authority, (2) to neutralize the regime's military forces, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij militia, and (3) to establish a state based on the Western model of democracy, human rights, women's rights, cultural pluralism, and religious tolerance. It does not matter to him that the Greens reject the use of violence -- as long as they pursue subversive goals, the regime is entitled to crack down with all means at its disposal.

More than anything else, this perception of subversion has motivated Khamenei's actions over the past year.

He has jailed the heads of two prominent reformist groups (Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami and Mujahedin-e Enghelab-e Islami), deprived reformists of any kind of media platform, and made it illegal to quote Mousavi or another 2009 presidential contender, Mehdi Karrubi, in the press.

Khamenei's vision has led him to crack down even on former colleagues and important political figures, including Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the leader of two significant political bodies -- the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council -- and a former president who helped Khamenei come to power. For example, the attorney general has filed lawsuits against three of Rafsanjani's children, accusing them of giving government money to reformist candidates and encouraging people to protest. One of Rafsanjani's sons was compelled to flee the country in the face of serious threats. Meanwhile, another former president, Muhammad Khatami, is banned from leaving the country. Even the family of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini is not immune from the Supreme Leader's paranoia: during a June 4 speech on the anniversary of his grandfather's death, Hassan Khomeini was interrupted by a hostile pro-Khamenei crowd.

These developments amount to a struggle over who has inherited the legacy of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Mousavi and Rafsanjani were closer to Khomeini than Khamenei ever was, but the latter remains convinced of his mandate. In his own June 4 speech, Khamenei not only compared himself to Ali, the first (and infallible) Shiite Imam, but also likened opposition leaders to the companions of the Prophet Muhammad who had squabbled over the leadership of Islam after his death.

Pressure to Be Even More Hardline

Khamenei is also facing divisions within the ruling elite. Although conservatives rallied behind Ahmadinezhad following the contested election, divisions at the top are increasingly apparent today, as demonstrated by recent statements from Ahmad Jannati, the powerful Guardian Council secretary and once-passionate advocate of the president. On May 28, Jannati stated that "post-election turmoil prevented us from criticizing Ahmadinezhad's government, but it does not mean that we are without criticism. We refrained from publicizing our criticism and complaints for the sake of expediency and because we did not want them to be exploited by people who are involved in the unrest, but how long must we keep silent?" Jannati was one of several officials who publicly called on the government and judiciary to execute more prisoners and treat protesters more harshly.

A Costly President

Although Ahmadinezhad once seemed the ideal president for Khamenei -- fully loyal to the Supreme Leader and his revolutionary ideals -- he has turned out to be very costly over the past year. For example, he has run into fierce opposition from regime conservatives in the predominantly conservative Majlis. The parliament continues to fight Ahmadinezhad over economic issues, leading the president to repeatedly complain that the body is uncooperative. On May 31, deputy Majlis speaker Muhammad Reza Bahonar accused him of "purposefully" violating the law. And last year, after Ahmadinezhad presented his list of ministers to the legislature for a vote of confidence, Bahonar said that eight or nine of the nominees would not have been voted through without the Supreme Leader's direct recommendation. Indeed, were it not for Khamenei's backing, the Majlis could have opposed the president much more easily.

In the past, Iranian presidents were considered responsible for their own policies. But since last year's turmoil, Khamenei has come to identify himself personally with Ahmadinezhad's presidency. This shift in responsibility makes Khamenei a very fragile and combustible figure. And Ahmadinezhad, lacking a solid power base within the political elite, is in an even more fragile position. If Khamenei were to withdraw his support, the president could be removed very easily.

Conclusion

Many in the United States seem hopeful that the Iranian opposition will support more appealing policy

preferences than the regime itself. Given current circumstances, however, there are some issues on which Green Movement leaders cannot be expected to express sympathetic views. These include the legacy of Ayatollah Khomeini, relations with the United States, attitudes toward Israel, and the nuclear program. In many cases, revealing their true views on these subjects would likely expose the Greens to numerous risks, including fragmentation and government wrath. Instead, they are attempting to unite and mobilize people by focusing on democracy and human rights.

An optimistic interpretation of Khamenei's position would be that as his rule has become more authoritarian, it has also become more divisive and fragile, thus helping the opposition attract support in those parts of Iranian society that have seemed silent. Although the Greens may not be able to show up on the streets by the millions as they did a year ago, they have succeeded in damaging the regime's legitimacy, weakening the appeal of populist, self-promoting public ceremonies, and making it costlier for the government to stage any future rigged elections. A new ingredient in the domestic political debate may turn out to be the close, but unintentional coincidence of today's UN Security Council vote and the June 12 anniversary of the disputed elections.

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