

Factional struggle deepens within Iranian ruling elite

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A tense factional struggle within Iran's clerical regime continued as tens of thousands of supporters of defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi took to the streets of Tehran for a sixth day running to demand fresh elections.

Mousavi called Thursday's protest to mourn the deaths of at least seven demonstrators killed in clashes on Monday. In a bid to shake off the opposition's image as being based mainly among the upper middle classes, the rally was staged in Imam Khomeini Square in the predominately working class south of the capital, where incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad draws significant support. Coverage was limited as Iranian authorities have placed restrictions on foreign journalists, including a ban on attending "unauthorised" demonstrations.

To date, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who backed Ahmadinejad, appears to be taking a conciliatory line towards Mousavi and his backers. He has not authorised wholesale repression against Ahmadinejad's opponents.

Curbs have been placed on the Internet and the media, and, according to Amnesty International, at least 170 people have been detained, including a number of prominent journalists and "reformers." But the opposition protests have been allowed to proceed day after day without significant harassment.

The deaths on Monday apparently took place after protesters stoned a compound of Basijis, a volunteer militia with strong ties to Ahmadinejad, who fired back on the crowd. Students from Tehran University also reported that five students were killed on Sunday night when their dormitories were raided by the Basij militia. Parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, an influential figure known to be close to Khamenei, has publicly criticised the attack, blaming the Interior Ministry for the crackdown and other violence against opposition protesters.

Through the Guardian Council, Khamenei has also made several other conciliatory gestures towards Mousavi. The Guardian Council, an unelected body that supervises the presidential election, has already agreed to a limited recount of ballot boxes. It announced yesterday that it had received 646 complaints about electoral irregularities from the three presidential

challengers—Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and Mohsen Rezaei—and will meet with all four candidates on Saturday.

Attention will be focussed tomorrow on Khamenei, who has announced that he will lead Friday's prayers in Tehran in a televised appeal for national unity. Mousavi, who is expected to attend, has put off a further opposition rally until Saturday. All factions of the ruling elite are fearful that continuing street protests have the potential to unleash far greater social forces motivated by pent-up anger over the lack of basic democratic rights, rising unemployment and deteriorating living standards.

The political differences between the backers of Ahmadinejad and Mousavi are tactical in nature. So-called pragmatic conservatives led by former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani came together with various "reformers," including ex-president Mohammad Khatami, to support Mousavi as a means of affecting a shift in foreign and economic policy.

Rafsanjani and Khatami have both been critical of Ahmadinejad's anti-US demagoguery that has led to Iran's further economic isolation. With the election of Obama, layers of the Iranian elite see the opportunity to ease tensions with the US, impose a free market agenda and open the country up to foreign investment. Despite their tactical character, these disputes are nonetheless bitter and have intensified as Iran has been hit by falling oil prices and the global economic recession.

Mousavi's supporters, backed by an extraordinary, one-sided campaign in the international media, denounce the election outcome that gave 63 percent to Ahmadinejad as "rigged." But few observers deny that Ahmadinejad had a considerable base of support among the urban and rural poor—the overwhelming majority of the country's population.

Mousavi's denunciations of Ahmadinejad's handouts to the poor, his advocacy of pro-market reform and his backing by the billionaire Rafsanjani, who is widely viewed as corrupt, were pitched at the well-to-do urban middle classes, not the majority of working people.

A lengthy, firsthand report by *Time* correspondent Joe Klein noted that while election rigging may have taken place, "it is

entirely possible that Ahmadinejad would have won anyway, but narrowly, perhaps with less than 50 percent of the vote, setting up a runoff election.” Like other reporters, Klein noted the class divide in Tehran. On election day, he went to Ahmadinejad’s childhood neighbourhood and commented: “The lines at the central mosque were every bit as long as they were at the voting stations in sophisticated north Tehran. There was a smattering of Mousavi supporters, but Ahmadinejad worship was palpable.”

Klein also concluded that Ahmadinejad had overwhelmingly won the TV debates with his opponents prior to the polls, describing the debates against the reformers Mousavi and Karroubi as “routs.” He wrote: “They appeared paralysed by what they considered his coarse impertinence; in American terms, these might have been debates between George Bush the Elder and Newt Gingrich, a gentlemanly establishmentarian against a rude populist brawler.”

In the course of the debate, Ahmadinejad openly attacked Mousavi’s supporters, Rafsanjani and Khatami, as corrupt. Rafsanjani responded with an unprecedented open letter demanding that Khamenei pull Ahmadinejad into line or face “volcanoes” of anger.

The incident publicly exposed the real line-up behind Mousavi that is now being played out in a factional struggle within the regime for the levers of power. While the so-called reformers like Khatami have played their role in casting Mousavi, previously known for his hard-line conservative views, as a liberal, the key powerbroker is Rafsanjani. As *Guardian* correspondent Simon Tisdall noted, the man nicknamed the “shark” and the “kingmaker” has made “no bones about helping to finance and direct Mir Hossein Mousavi’s campaign to topple Ahmadinejad.”

Rafsanjani brought together conservatives and reformers in an alliance behind Mousavi, but may have also had a hand in nominating Karroubi and Rezaei to split the Ahmadinejad vote and force the election to a second round. He opened his string of private universities for Mousavi supporters to use as campaign bases. His son Mehdi Hashemi Rafsanjani, who ran a sophisticated election monitoring operation from Azad University, boasted to the *New York Times* that “it is parallel to the Interior Ministry. But ours is secret.”

Following last Friday’s poll, Rafsanjani has remained silent, but is reportedly in Qom, a centre of Islamic scholars, marshalling support among the clerical establishment. Rafsanjani heads the powerful Assembly of Experts—the only body that constitutionally has the power to discipline or even remove Khamenei as supreme leader. Such a step would be unprecedented and would inevitably provoke an open political battle with unpredictable consequences. The *Guardian* also reported that some opposition chants are beginning to target Khamenei himself, likening him to the Chilean dictator General Pinochet.

Many signs point to fierce factional infighting behind the scenes.

Several prominent dissident clerics have made public criticisms of the election result. The Association of Combatant Clerics—an influential group of leading ayatollahs—has also issued a statement describing last Friday’s poll as invalid. According to state-owned Press TV, the organisation has applied for permission to protest on the streets of Tehran on Saturday.

At the same time, Ahmadinejad and his backers have been at work. Some 220 of 290 members of parliament have written to Ahmadinejad endorsing his win. The high figure is significant, as Ahmadinejad has faced sharp opposition from parliament, particularly over his budgets and economic policies. Just prior to the election, the parliament rejected Ahmadinejad’s proposal for cutbacks in government subsidies on fuel, electricity and water, mainly because it did not include restraints on overall state spending.

Amid this intense factional struggle, both sides are exploiting the concerns of working people and youth for democratic rights and decent living standards to their own ends. Despite his vague promises of freedom, Mousavi is no more committed to “democracy” than his opponents. The implementation of his free market agenda, which will inevitably result in huge new burdens on the majority of working people, cannot be imposed without provoking resistance. As he did during his term as prime minister in the 1980s, Mousavi would not hesitate to use the full force of the state to enforce his policies.

The only social force capable of mounting a consistent struggle for basic democratic rights and an end to poverty and unemployment is the working class. The essential task is the building of a revolutionary party to mobilise workers, together with the urban and rural poor, independently of all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie. Such a movement must fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government and a socialist Iran as an integral part of the struggle for socialism throughout the Middle East and internationally. That is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.



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