

# Factional struggles deepen within Iranian ruling elites

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Nearly two months after Iran's presidential elections, the factional rivalry within the Islamic Republic's ruling elites that erupted over the disputed results has become more bitter and entrenched.

Riot police clashed on Thursday with around 2,000 opposition protesters gathered at the Behesht-e Zahra cemetery south of Tehran to mark the deaths of those killed in the crackdown on post-election demonstrations. Further clashes took place in Tehran itself as several thousand people attempted to stage rallies that had been banned by Iranian authorities.

While the protests were small, there are no signs that defeated presidential candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi and his allies are backing away from their demands for the election result to be annulled. Former president Mohammad Khatami, a Moussavi supporter, called this week for a parliamentary inquiry into the election outcome and the subsequent police repression.

The US and international media routinely report as fact opposition claims, despite the lack of evidence of election rigging. While Moussavi's "green revolution" is presented as a struggle for democracy, the agenda of the so-called reformers is for a tactical shift in Iranian policy towards an accommodation with the US and an economic opening up to Western investment.

The opposition's refusal to back away from its demands appears to have opened up cracks in the bloc of conservatives supporting incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who is due to be installed for a second term next week. The first sign of division followed Ahmadinejad's appointment of his son's father-in-law, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, as first vice-president. The decision was attacked by hardline conservatives who seized on Mashaei's remarks last year declaring Iran was "friends with ... the Israeli people."

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has

vigorously defended Ahmadinejad's reelection, stepped into the dispute ordering the president to replace Mashaei. The post of first vice-president put Mashaei in line to take over if anything happened to the president. Ahmadinejad relented only reluctantly, and then, in a slap in the face to his critics, installed Mashaei as his chief-of-staff.

The issue has continued to reverberate. Last Sunday Ahmadinejad sacked his intelligence minister, Gholam Hossein Mohsen Ezheie, after a heated cabinet meeting in which Ezheie reportedly criticised Mashaei's appointment. The same day Culture Minister Mohammad-Hossein Saffar-Harandi resigned, saying that recent events showed the "government's weakness". The moves indicate bitter behind-the-scenes wrangling inside the conservative camp over the appointment of the new cabinet next week.

At the same time, differences have emerged over the treatment of the opposition. Ahmadinejad's supporters are reportedly demanding tougher action, including the publication of confessions extracted from detained protesters and legal measures against Moussavi and other top opposition leaders. Supreme Leader Khamenei, however, has made several conciliatory gestures towards the opposition. He is clearly concerned that the ongoing factional brawling in the ruling elites could open the door to a far broader social eruption by the working class.

The death of several detained protesters, including the son of an adviser to conservative presidential candidate Mohsen Rezai, has sparked further recriminations. On Tuesday, Khamenei announced the closure of the Kahrizak detention centre, saying that it was "substandard" and had failed to "preserve the rights of detainees". While preparing to place 20 detainees on trial, 140 were released from jail with indications that more might be freed.

The *Los Angeles Times* reported this week that the Islamic Society of Engineers, a group of conservatives

close to parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, had sent an open letter to Ahmadinejad obliquely warning that he could be ousted if he attempted to consolidate power solely in his hands. According to the *Economist*, two thirds of parliament yesterday sent a separate letter to Ahmadinejad telling him to do Khamenei's bidding.

Yesterday Ahmadinejad was at pains to emphasise that there was no rift between himself and Khamenei, saying their relationship was like "father and son". However, an address by cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati at prayers yesterday underscored the continuing feuding in the conservative camp. While suggesting that Moussavi should be punished for fomenting unrest, Jannati also criticised Ahmadinejad for appointing Mashaei and called on the president to consult with parliament before naming his new ministry.

As opposition protests have subsided, the international press has increasingly concentrated on divisions within the Iranian political establishment, reflecting ambitions in Washington and other Western capitals to exploit the continuing crisis for their own ends. The current focus on anti-Ahmadinejad forces among conservatives, who might be more amenable to negotiations with the US, underscores the hypocrisy of all the statements of public concern for "human rights". The US above all wants a regime in Tehran more sympathetic to American strategic and economic interests in Central Asia and the Middle East, particularly at present to assist with the escalating war in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

A lengthy article in the *New York Times* entitled the "The Making of an Iran Policy" deals with the complexities facing the Obama administration of opening talks with Tehran amid the political turmoil, while at the same time mollifying Israel which is pressing for action, including possible military strikes, against Iran's nuclear facilities. Ominously, the article's central thrust is to promote the virtues of neo-conservative Dennis Ross, who has been installed as President Obama's senior national security adviser on Iran.

Ross, who served in the Reagan, Carter and Clinton administrations, worked at the pro-Israel think tank—the Washington Institute for Near East Policy—before becoming Obama's campaign adviser on the Middle East then joining his administration. Last year, he was involved in producing several reports that suggested a US strategy of marrying "bigger carrots"—the offer of talks—with "bigger sticks"—the threat of far tougher sanctions and possible military action. With the prospect of US-Iran negotiations receding as the crisis in Tehran

continues, the alternative is starting to loom again. Based on Israeli sources, the *Australian* suggested this week that US defence secretary Robert Gates had told his Israeli counterparts that the Obama administration had set September as the deadline before tougher measures would be taken.

As the political turmoil continues inside Iran, the most significant feature is the lack of any involvement by the working class. The pro-Moussavi protests have primarily drawn in students and more affluent sections of the middle class seeking greater economic opportunities and personal freedom. Commenting on the preparations for Thursday's protests, *Time* magazine pointed out that most were recent university students without any clear program who wanted to end the theocratic regime's "long reach into their private lives" and "change in the form of social freedom rather than political freedom".

The sentiments of the disgruntled middle class are far removed from the concerns of workers and the poor struggling to make ends meet amid high levels of inflation and unemployment. Far from offering any alternative to Ahmadinejad, Moussavi and his backers, such as billionaire ex-president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, support the slashing of public spending including welfare and price subsidies. One of the main reasons that Ahmadinejad won the 2005 presidential election was the widespread opposition generated by the social impact of the pro-market agenda of reformer Khatami during his two terms as president.

Neither faction of the Iranian political establishment represents the interests of workers and the poor. The working class cannot, however, afford to sit passively on the sideline. In the absence of a political intervention by workers, the outcome of the present factional struggle will be the regime's consolidation and a new round of attacks on living standards. Only by mobilising independently of all sections of the bourgeoisie and rallying the masses of the oppressed to its side can Iranian workers achieve genuine democratic and social rights. This requires the struggle for a workers' government and a socialist program as part of the fight for socialism internationally.



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