

Case of jailed Americans highlights infighting in Iranian regime

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The case of two American citizens—Shane Bauer and Josh Fattal—convicted and jailed for spying and illegally entering Iran in 2009 has become the latest issue to highlight the increasingly bitter divisions within the Iranian elite between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Last Tuesday, in an interview with the *Washington Post*, Ahmadinejad said he was helping to arrange the release of Bauer and Fattal in “a couple of days”. The two were to be bailed for \$500,000 each and allowed to leave the country under a deal brokered by Oman, similar to the one that freed Sarah Shourd last year. Shourd was the third member of the hiking party that claimed to have strayed across the border from Kurdish Iraq into Iran.

Ahmadinejad described his actions as a “unilateral pardon”, suggesting that he was seeking to exercise his presidential powers without reference to others, especially Khamenei, who has the ultimate say in foreign policy. His comments to the American media on the eve of his trip to New York to attend the UN General Assembly, indicated a small gesture toward easing tensions with the US.

The following day, the Iranian judiciary publicly slapped Ahmadinejad into place. A judiciary official told the English-language broadcaster Press TV: “The two Americans are going to stay in prison for a bit longer. Reports of their imminent release are wrong.” Mohammed Javid Larijani, head of Iran’s Human Rights Council, told *Fars News* that Bauer and Fattal were spies for the US and that would not be rewarded. Larijani’s brothers—Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani, who heads the powerful judiciary, and parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani—are regarded as close supporters of Khamenei.

The sharp public differences over the two Americans are not an isolated incident. Last week, Ahmadinejad was compelled to defend his chief-of-staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, who had been under fire over allegations of involvement in a \$US2.6 billion bank fraud. An unnamed businessman has been accused of forging documents to obtain credit to buy state-owned

institutions being privatised. A leaked letter, allegedly signed by Mashaei, giving the go-ahead for one of the purchases without the necessary formal procedures, has been published on some conservative web sites.

Ahmadinejad lashed out at his opponents for “spreading lies and propaganda” and “accusing the clean and anti-corruption government of being involved in it.” In a not-so-veiled criticism of Khamenei’s backers in the judiciary and the clerical hierarchy, he called on Sadeq Larijani to appoint “honest people” to find and prosecute those behind the bank fraud—“whether [they are] in the government, judiciary or Parliament, or those with sacred attire.” He declared that the attack on his cabinet was “a red line” and “defending it is my duty.” Significantly, Iranian state television did not broadcast the speech, which was only published on the president’s web site.

The feuding between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei has been intensifying for months. Both represent different wings of the so-called conservative faction that came together following the June 2009 presidential election to suppress the largely middle class Green movement of “reformers” who challenged the legitimacy of the Ahmadinejad’s re-election. This “colour revolution” was seized on by the US and its allies as the means for trying to fashion a regime in Tehran more sympathetic to American interests in the region.

The global financial crisis that erupted in 2008-09 impacted on the Iranian economy, which had already been hit by US and international sanctions, opening up new fissures in the country’s reactionary clerical regime.

In an attempt to end the standoff with the US over Iran’s nuclear program and ease the sanctions, Ahmadinejad backed a complex deal in October 2009 with the US and other major powers that would have involved the exchange of Iran’s stockpile of enriched uranium in return for fuel rods for the Tehran research reactor. The agreement collapsed, however, in part because of the Obama administration’s intransigence over its details, but also as a result of sharp opposition in Tehran

from Khamenei's supporters, who accused the West of "trying to cheat us."

Ahmadinejad also faced opposition from the conservative parliamentary bloc over his plans to dismantle the system of prices subsidies for fuel, food, transport and water. All factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie agreed that the subsidies worth up to \$100 billion annually had to be eliminated. Differences emerged, however, over how quickly they were to be abolished and whether compensation should be paid to low-income earners for price rises. Ahmadinejad, who made his mark as a right-wing populist, promised direct handouts to the poor.

The abolition of the subsidies, which has been repeatedly praised by the International Monetary Fund, was finally implemented last December. In the end, Ahmadinejad's "targeted subsidies" amounted to just \$40 a month—a pittance that has rapidly been eroded by skyrocketing prices. Even this small subsidy has come under attack as being unaffordable. Most recently, allegations were made in July on a web site belonging to parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani that the government could not pay the cash subsidies and was illegally shifting money from other funds.

The exact nature of the differences over economic and foreign policy is not yet clear. What has become evident, however, is that a vicious power struggle is underway as Ahmadinejad and Khamenei manoeuvre to secure the main levers of power. Under Iran's Islamist constitution, the cleric Khamenei has the final say over important policy and appointments, including security and foreign policy. The Supreme Leader has reacted vigorously to any move by Ahmadinejad that could undermine his authority.

In April, the two rivals directly crossed swords after Ahmadinejad forced Khamenei's appointee as intelligence minister, Haidar Moslehi, to resign. Khamenei immediately reinstalled Moslehi, prompting Ahmadinejad to stop attending cabinet meetings for 10 days in a silent but ineffectual protest.

In May, Ahmadinejad dismissed the ministers for welfare, industry and oil and was strongly criticised when he took over the post of oil minister himself. The tussle over the oil ministry was only settled in July when the government and conservative parliamentary factions came together to appoint General Rostam Ghassemi, a commander in the country's Revolutionary Guard. His appointment was widely regarded as a backdown by Ahmadinejad.

Ahmadinejad and his supporters, particularly chief-of-staff Mashaei, have been accused of belonging to a "deviant current" that has questioned the political domination of Khamenei and the clergy. In late June, several of

Ahmadinejad's prominent backers were arrested amid accusations that anyone who defied the Supreme Leader was guilty of apostasy.

In mid-July, *Al-Arabiya* reported that the head of the Revolutionary Guard, General Ali Jafari, had said in an interview that his force was in charge of dealing with the "deviant current". He indicated that members of the "deviant current" would not be permitted to run in parliamentary elections in 2012 or the presidential poll in 2013, while some "reformers" might be allowed to nominate. Ahmadinejad hit back by implying that the Revolutionary Guard was involved in lucrative cross-border smuggling.

Commenting last week on the *Foreign Policy* web site, Geneive Abdo, from the US-based Century Foundation, wrote: "According to Ali Falahian, Iran's former intelligence minister, the traditional conservatives [backing Khamenei] are now drafting a list of potential candidates for the parliamentary elections, but it will not include representatives from Ahmadinejad's faction. 'Drawing clear boundaries with the deviant faction is one of the main goals of conservatism,' he said."

The outcome of this political infighting, in which the fate of the two jailed Americans is the just the latest episode, is not at all clear. What is fuelling the divisions, however, are the country's deepening economic and social tensions. Since the abolition of economic subsidies, prices have soared beyond the reported official inflation rate of 12-14 percent. Some people have refused to pay their utility bills and publicly shredded them in protest. The official jobless rate is 11.5 percent.

If a movement of working people erupted like that in Egypt, there is no doubt that all the feuding factions of the Iranian regime would immediately drop their differences and come together to suppress any threat to bourgeois rule.



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