

Iranian president publicly accuses rivals of corruption

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Amid a deep economic crisis, tightening US-led sanctions and continuing US and Israeli military threats, an ongoing political feud between Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the country's parliament again erupted into the open last weekend. The public brawl is another sign of the bitter divisions wracking the Iranian regime in the lead up to presidential elections on June 14.

Ahmadinejad appeared in parliament on Sunday in a bid to head off the impeachment of his labour minister, Abdolreza Shekholeslami, for appointing another presidential ally, Saeed Mortazavi, as caretaker of Iran's social welfare organisation. Mortazavi was suspended from his post as former prosecutor general of Tehran over allegations that he was responsible for the torture and deaths of prisoners.

Amid stormy scenes, Ahmadinejad played a secretly filmed tape that implicated the parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani and his brother Fazel in corrupt activities. It purportedly showed Fazel Larijani meeting with Mortazavi and seeking a bribe in return for Ali Larijani's support for a business deal involving a company linked to the former prosecutor. "If the honourable speaker sees fit, we can turn over the 24 or 25 hours [of recordings] to you," Ahmadinejad declared.

Larijani accused the president of "mafia-style activities" and actions that "corrupt the integrity of society", then refused to allow him to respond. After the president left, the parliament voted 192 to 56 to remove Shekholeslami, who is the ninth minister to be dismissed during Ahmadinejad's second term. Under the country's constitution, if a majority of cabinet ministers are removed, a parliamentary vote is required to reapprove the entire cabinet.

The public feuding continued yesterday with the

arrest of Mortazavi. Prior to leaving for Egypt, the first trip by an Iranian president since 1979, Ahmadinejad attacked the judiciary, saying it should be "the judiciary of the nation and not one special family's private organisation." Another of Ali Larijani's brothers, Sadeq, heads Iran's judiciary.

The very public row highlights the sharp divisions within the so-called conservative faction of the Iranian ruling elite, between the president and the country's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. While the supreme leader backed Ahmadinejad for the presidency in 2005, and again in 2009 amid Western-backed protests by the so-called Green movement to force a fresh election, sharp differences emerged and deepened.

In foreign policy, Ahmadinejad was increasingly viewed as rather unstable and unreliable, as the regime manoeuvred to proceed with its nuclear program while seeking to avert tougher sanctions and a US or Israeli military attack. While stridently defending Iran's nuclear programs and denouncing US threats, Ahmadinejad also signed off on a complex agreement in October 2009 to ship out Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium in return for nuclear fuel rods. The deal collapsed, in part because of sharp opposition from Khamenei's supporters who accused the US of "trying to cheat us."

On economic policy, Ahmadinejad has been accused of incompetence and populist pandering to the poor. He has faced sustained opposition from the parliament led by speaker Ali Larijani, who has close ties to supreme leader Khamenei, over his ending of large price subsidies for fuel, food and water beginning in 2010. All factions agreed with the austerity measure, but Ahmadinejad's opponents criticised his plans to offer limited direct handouts to the poor to compensate for price rises.

Ahmadinejad and his supporters also came under attack for questioning the authority of supreme leader Khamenei, who under the constitution has ultimate say in state matters, especially foreign and military policy. Revolutionary Guard leader General Ali Jafari publicly branded the Ahmadinejad faction in 2010 as a “deviant current”, a designation that threatens their ability to stand in elections.

Khamenei’s supporters won a clear majority in parliamentary elections last March and have used the parliament, along with the judiciary, as a means of frustrating Ahmadinejad’s policies and removing his appointees. Shortly after the election, parliament forced Ahmadinejad to submit to a lengthy questioning of his appointees, economic policies and tense relations with Khamenei, which was broadcast live in an obvious attempt to humiliate the president.

Last October, as US-led sanctions sent the oil exports and the value of the country’s currency plummeting, parliament threatened to repeat its interrogation. Speaker Larijani denounced the government, saying bad management was responsible for 80 percent of Iran’s problems and the president’s “Robin Hood methods” had not helped. He called for the second stage of the removing subsidies to be delayed as the official inflation rate hit 23.5 percent.

At the same time, in another public humiliation, judiciary head Sadeq Larijani blocked attempts by Ahmadinejad to visit Tehran’s Evin jail, where his top aide Ali Akbar Javanfekar was being held. Javanfekar had been arrested in September, while Ahmadinejad was at the UN General Assembly, convicted of publishing “materials contrary to Islamic norms” and jailed for six months.

In the end, Khamenei stepped in to prevent parliament from conducting a second questioning of the president and called for greater unity in the lead up to the presidential election. The intervention was not to protect Ahmadinejad, but to try to avoid a further widening of a rift in the regime that could open the door for the opposition of workers who confront continuing layoffs, rising unemployment and skyrocketing prices for essential items.

It is clear that Khamenei is deeply concerned that the US and its allies will exploit the elections to try and foment a second version of the so-called Green Revolution with the aim of installing a regime more

aligned with Western interests. The supreme leader and his supporters are determined to find a more reliable figure as president and to block candidates nominated by Ahmadinejad or the so-called reformers.

No one has as yet announced their candidacy, although it is highly likely that Ali Larijani will stand. Ahmadinejad is constitutionally barred from standing for a third term, but will clearly have a candidate in the race. The two so-called reformist candidates who led the Green movement in 2009—Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mehdi Karroubi—remain under house arrest.

Khamenei maintains tight control over the election via the Guardian Council that vets candidates for the presidency, and has rejected calls for “free elections” by the reformist faction. At the same time, the efforts of parliament to remove Ahmadinejad’s supporters from key posts are aimed at ensuring that his faction cannot use these positions to support its candidate in the election.

By raising explosive allegations of corruption in parliament last weekend, Ahmadinejad has signalled that he will not go down without a fight and is implicitly challenging Khamenei’s call to keep these divisions behind closed doors. The country’s worsening economic and social crisis, as well as threats of US attack, will only compound the political turmoil in ruling circles prior leading up to the election.



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