ISS Opinion

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IS THE KHAMENEI-AHMADINEJAD SPAT RESHAPING IRANIAN POLITICS?

Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, right, and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, left

The very public disagreement between Iran's Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, over the sacking of Intelligence Minister, Heydar Moslehi, has catapulted the conservatives that currently control all the major institutions of the Islamic Republic into an acrimonious tailspin.

The acrimony has gone well beyond the initial disagreement between Iran's two executives and is now threatening to mire the office of the president with public challenges from other key institutions of the Islamic Republic including the judiciary, parliament, and Guardian Council.

Whether these challenges are merely intended to rein in the president – who has become accustomed to regularly ignoring laws – or whether they will lead to his impeachment in parliament, and his eventual removal, is difficult to know. Iranian politics has always been far more ad-hoc than outside observers tend to acknowledge. Much will depend on the choices made by various interlocutors, including Ahmadinejad.

And the president is finding himself under an unprecedented attack for surrounding himself with a "deviant group" accused of transgressions ranging from the promotion of sorcery to pilfering government coffers.

The president was also told in no uncertain terms by the Guardian Council that while he has the right to dismiss the petroleum minister, he cannot then appoint himself as caretaker of that ministry. And for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic, the parliament has lodged a complaint with the judiciary against the president for his refusal to implement a law establishing a Ministry of Youth and Sports.

Furthermore, the parliament has just agreed to begin investigating the office of the president for allocating government funds to approximately nine million citizens in the name of "justice shares" right before the 2009 presidential elections. Although it is against the law for presidential candidates to use government resources to fund their campaigns, the charge against Ahmadinejad was ignored when leveled by his reformist opponents in the 2009 campaign. With the March 2012 parliamentary elections promising to be a mostly intra-conservative affair, it is the conservatives' turn to worry about the vast economic resources the government, i.e. Ahmadinejad's faction, has at its disposal.

Even more importantly, the discussion between Ahmadinejad and his chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, about orchestrating a Putin-Medvedev scenario in the next presidential election is all but over. Ahmadinejad appears now more like a lame duck president than a man with plans to undercut clerical rule by using the support of institutions such as the Islamic Revolution's Guard Corps (IRGC) or his populist base.

How did this rather sudden change of political environment happen?

Iranian politics has always been a bit raucous. Prominent individuals and key institutions are often pitted against each other. But the current commotion is unique in that

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an incumbent president stands accused of harbouring staff who are consciously working to undermine the Islamic Republic and its clerical backbone.

Conservatives in Iran have rarely been comfortable with Ahmadinejad. On several occasions since the 2009 elections, his avid supporters even publicly suggested that his appeal to the electorate was more to do with his personality than support for the conservatives in general. Meanwhile, well-known conservatives, particularly in the parliament, have criticised Ahmadinejad for ignoring legislations; this is being seen as somewhat imperial behaviour.

But this mutual antipathy was essentially kept from spilling over by the enmity toward the reformist-inspired "sedition" in challenging the election results, and the desire – following the lead of Ayatollah Khamenei – to avoid publicly displaying their divisions.

This decorum was shattered on April 17 when, in response to Ahmadinejad's sacking of Moslehi, Khamenei released a letter in which he asked the recently-dismissed spy chief to continue performing his duties. Overruled and publicly humiliated, Ahmadinejad expressed his displeasure by boycotting cabinet meetings for 11 days.

Under the Iranian Constitution, the president has the right to dismiss his chosen ministers. Khamenei, however, justified his intervention by referring to the principle of maslehat, or the greater interest of the country, without explaining how this interest had been violated by Moslehi's dismissal.

In any case, the sacking and reinstatement could have been ignored or treated as indicative of the expected tensions in Iran's dual executive structure. But Ahmadinejad's decision to challenge Khamenei by not showing up to work simply opened the floodgate of criticisms that have steadily been amassing against him.

Although Ahmadinejad returned to work and expressed his allegiance to Khamenei in a television program (where he argued that only a strong and powerful president could fulfill the Leader's plans for the country), the political environment had already changed. The presumption of support he had from Khamenei has disappeared. This will have significant implications for Iranian politics during the remaining two years of his presidency.

These implications can already be seen in the president's interactions with other institutions. Ahmadinejad's decision to sack three ministers under the pretext of the government's decision to merge their ministries with other ones drew an immediate reaction from the parliament. The parliament maintained that it must first approve the mergers. Ahmadinejad's decision to install himself as caretaker of the Petroleum Ministry was met with a response from the Guardian Council too, as mentioned above.

Ahmadinejad's claim of executive privilege (or effectively running the government as the president pleases) is not new. He has argued that the president, as the only official of the Islamic Republic directly elected by all the people, is uniquely positioned to decide what is best for the country. His refusal to implement laws passed by the parliament is also not new. For instance, he has yet to disburse the funds allocated by the parliament for the improvement of Tehran's metro system.

In such conflicts, Khamenei has played a mediating role. But instead of resolving the conflict in a decisive manner that gives the power to one institution or the other, he has intervened either on a case-by-case basis or not at all. This implicitly gives Ahmadinejad the nod to ignore legislative mandates. Khamenei's refusal to establish clear precedents has effectively weakened the parliament by forcing it to make repeated appeals to the Leader's office to intervene and rein in the presidency.

While such an approach has enhanced the power of Khamenei's office, it has also emboldened Ahmadinejad to think that he can take on any institution – including the office of the Leader – that he considers an obstacle to the day-to-day running of the country.

Khamenei's apparent withdrawal of support from Ahmadinejad may be a signal to other institutions to deal with these legal infractions as the law mandates. And this is why some feel that the path to questioning and eventually impeaching the president may well have been opened in parliament.

But such an outcome does not reflect well on Khamenei either as he invested heavily in the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency after the contested 2009 election. It is in this sense that the unusually strong attacks against Ahmadinejad may be intended to clip his wings, rein in his excesses, make him a lame duck president, and give the country time to begin thinking about less polarising presidential candidates.

At the same time it would be very uncharacteristic of Ahmadinejad to accept this attempted restraint without a fight. In short, Iran's next two years may end up being even more politically raucous than the previous two years.