



Ahmadinejad's Second-Term Gamble

By Ali Alfoneh

A month into Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term, the Iranian president has shown contempt not only for those who challenged him in the election, but also for any structures that could check his power. He has thumbed his nose not only at parliament, but also at the supreme leader. Ahmadinejad's nominees for the cabinet are troubling. While his selection for defense minister of a man wanted in conjunction with a terrorist attack in Argentina has raised hackles, the militarization of his other picks is equally extensive and demonstrates the president's intention, in his second term, to broaden the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in Iranian society. At the same time, while reformist leaders are too preoccupied with defending themselves at show trials to mount an effective opposition, the judiciary appears to be the new base for hard-line opponents of the president. It is uncertain, however, whether an antagonistic parliament or judiciary will even matter should the IRGC consolidate its domestic grip during Ahmadinejad's second term in office.

Rather than be grateful for the supreme leader's support amidst the flawed presidential elections, Ahmadinejad continues to embarrass Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Ahmadinejad failed to wait for the supreme leader to sign the constitutionally mandated "decree formalizing the election of the President of the Republic by the people,"¹ in effect, signaling that he saw Khamenei's role as little more than a formality. Then, in an attempt to deflect attention from the disputed election, Ahmadinejad appointed Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, his daughter-in-law's father, to be his first vice president, despite Mashaei's first-term statement that "the era of sovereignty of religion is over."² Khamenei sent Ahmadinejad a handwritten note demanding Mashaei's dismissal. The supreme leader may be used to instant obedience, but Ahmadinejad kept the vice president on for six additional days.³ Mashaei resigned after a week, but Ahmadinejad then appointed him to head his presidential office.⁴ Ahmadinejad brushed off complaints from the

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supreme leader's circle that he displayed impertinence, quipping that his relationship with the supreme leader was "beyond that of political and bureaucratic frameworks. [Our relationship] is of the kind between love and belief and between a father and a son."⁵

Ahmadinejad's appointment of cabinet ministers demonstrates his contempt for parliament. Instead of first submitting nominees for ministry posts to parliament, Ahmadinejad revealed his picks to head the industry, finance, intelligence, cooperatives, social welfare, and health ministries

Key points in this Outlook:

- The Iranian president's cabinet picks demonstrate his intention, in his second term, to broaden the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Iranian society.
- Ahmadinejad's choice of vice presidents and advisers reflects a preference for loyalty over expertise.
- The judiciary appears to be the new safe haven for hard-line forces antagonistic to Ahmadinejad.

at a television press conference.⁶ He snubbed parliament further by refusing to submit his cabinet formally within two weeks of his inauguration.⁷ He waited twenty-four hours after the deadline in what appeared to be a sign of presidential contempt toward the formal power centers.⁸

While a demand for absolute obedience seems to have been Ahmadinejad's main criterion in selecting his cabinet, his candidates for the defense, intelligence, interior, and oil ministries signal Ahmadinejad's second-term agenda.

Ahmadinejad's choice of vice presidents and advisers reflects a preference for loyalty over expertise. With the exception of Ali Akbar Salehi, appointed to head the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran, and Parviz Davoudi, an economist whom he brought on as an adviser, Ahmadinejad chose the rest of his inner circle from among those who surrounded him as mayor of Tehran from 2003 to 2005. The appointments of Hamid Baghaei, a minor bureaucrat in Mashaei's office during Ahmadinejad's mayoralty, to be vice president and head of the Cultural Heritage Organization and Mehrdad Bazrpash, a Basij leader at Sharif University, to be vice president and head of the National Youth Organization demonstrate Ahmadinejad's disregard of expertise. This is also true of Masoud Zaribafan, Ahmadinejad's nominee to be vice president and head of the Martyrs Foundation. Little is known about the relationship between youth affairs adviser Hojjat al-Eslam Mohammad-Javad Hajj-Ali-Akbar and the president. The mysterious Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi—appointed as senior adviser, a newly coined term in Iranian bureaucracy—seems to have distinguished himself from the lot by having commanded a great spiritual and political influence on Ahmadinejad for more than thirty years.⁹

Militarization

While a demand for absolute obedience seems to have been Ahmadinejad's main criterion in selecting his cabinet,¹⁰ his candidates for the defense, intelligence, interior, and oil ministries signal Ahmadinejad's second-term agenda. His appointment of Ahmad Vahidi

as defense minister is of particular interest. As former IRGC intelligence department chief, Vahidi was not only involved in the arms-for-hostages at the heart of what became the Iran-Contra Affair,¹¹ but is also a former Qods Force chief wanted by Interpol for the July 18, 1994, terrorist bombing at the Jewish community center in Buenos Aires.¹² The Qods Force embodies the Islamic Republic's asymmetric warfare against the United States, so this appointment should be seen as a clear signal to the United States.

Had it not been for Khamenei's intervention on behalf of Hojjat al-Eslam Heydar Moslehi, intelligence nominee, the Ahmadinejad cabinet would be devoid of any clerical representation. Moslehi seems to reflect the supreme leader's suggestion more than Ahmadinejad's personal preference but may have been a perfect compromise between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad. On one hand, he satisfies clerical interests because he dresses in clerical robes. On the other, as a former ideological and political indoctrination commissar of the revolutionary committees in Tehran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's representative to the IRGC's Karbala and Khatam al-Anbia bases during the Iran-Iraq war, and representative of Khamenei in the IRGC ground forces and the Basij, Moslehi has spent more time with the IRGC than with fellow clerics. Additionally, Moslehi inherits a ministry that Ahmadinejad purged and that is now dominated by Hojjat al-Eslam Ahmad Salek, former representative of Khomeini to the Vahidi-led Qods Force intelligence department.¹³

Ahmadinejad's appointment of IRGC general Mohammad Mostafa Najjar to be interior minister completes the militarization trend within the Ministry of Interior that began in 1997. By replacing midlevel bureaucrats with former IRGC officers, Khamenei and Ahmadinejad now better control the body that not only manages elections, but also appoints governors throughout Iran and controls the law enforcement forces. The appointment of Masoud Mir-Kazemi as oil minister both signals Ahmadinejad's consolidation of power as he purges the last vestiges of former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's influence in the important ministry¹⁴ and—because of Mir-Kazemi's background as an IRGC officer—suggests the IRGC is poised to consolidate control over the lucrative petroleum business.

Of Ahmadinejad's three female cabinet nominees, Marzieh Vahid Dastjerdi, nominee for the health ministry, may have the greatest chance of becoming

the Islamic Republic's first female cabinet minister. Daughter of the late Colonel Houshang Vahid Dastjerdi, the Islamic Republic police chief killed in the August 30, 1981, terror bombing of the prime minister's office, she is also the sister of Brigadier General Ahmad Vahid Dastjerdi, intelligence chief at the office of the supreme leader.

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Not much is known about Sousan Keshavarz, the education ministry nominee, but Ahmadinejad's nomination of Fatemeh Ajorlou to be minister of social welfare is provocative. It was Ajorlou, a former member of a parliamentary investigations committee tasked with investigating economic corruption, who invited a relative of hers, Abbas Palizdar, to join the investigation.¹⁵ Palizdar, in turn, used the committee's preliminary findings to attack senior clergy and opponents of Ahmadinejad, including Rafsanjani.¹⁶ Palizdar was tried for acting against national security and condemned to ten years of imprisonment but was released after just thirteen months. The legal proceedings against Ajorlou have not officially concluded. The ensuing damage inflicted on the senior members of the clergy, on the other hand, was beyond repair. Her nomination, even if rejected, allows Ahmadinejad to paint himself as a defender of women and signals his desire to continue the pursuit of often arbitrary corruption charges against once untouchable clerics.

Conclusion

There is no guarantee that parliament will approve Ahmadinejad's nominees, especially given the president's dismissal of the body. While the supreme leader may want to punish Ahmadinejad for his insolence, Khamenei has also become dependent upon the president whose fortune he guaranteed. Khamenei has already alienated many of the Islamic Republic's elites and has few other allies.

In the short term, Ahmadinejad may get his way more often than not. But, in the longer-term, Khamenei may try to strengthen parliament and the judiciary in order to check Ahmadinejad. Indeed, the judiciary appears to be the new safe haven for hard-line forces antagonistic to Ahmadinejad. The new judiciary chief, Sadegh Larijani, is brother to parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, whose dislike of Ahmadinejad is legendary. Hojjat al-Eslam Mostafa Pour-Mohammad, a former interior minister who now heads the Supreme Audit Court of Iran, and former intelligence minister Hojjat al-Eslam Gholam-Hossein Mohseni Ezhehi make the judiciary a particularly well chosen institution from which to launch future attacks against Ahmadinejad.

What is uncertain, however, is whether an antagonistic parliament or judiciary will even matter should the IRGC consolidate its domestic grip during Ahmadinejad's second term in office. That is Ahmadinejad's gamble.

Notes

1. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, art. 110, chap. 9.
2. "Mashayi: Amrikayi-ha Az Bartarin-e Mellat-Ha—Ba Mardom-e Esrail Doustim—Dowreh-ye Hakemiat-e Din Gozashteh" [Mashayi: The Americans Are Among the Most Elevated Nations—We Are Friends with the People of Israel—The Era of Sovereignty of Religion Is Over], Alef News Agency (Tehran), July 19, 2008, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/content/view/29629> (accessed August 24, 2009).
3. "Ghat-I Shod: Mashayi Barkenar Mishavad" [Decided: Mashayi Will Be Dismissed], Alef News Agency (Tehran), July 19, 2009, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/49720> (accessed August 24, 2009).
4. "Entesab-e Esfandiar-e Rahim-Mashayi Be Semat-e Moshaver Va Reis-Daftar-e Reis-Jomhuri" [Appointment of Esfandiar Rahim-Mashayi As Adviser and Head of the Office of the President], Presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Tehran), July 25, 2009, available in Persian at www.president.ir/fa/?ArtID=17313 (accessed August 24, 2009).
5. "Re'is-Jomhour: Rabeteh-ye Ma Ba Rahbari Az Jens-e E'teghadi Va Pedar Va Pesari Ast" [The President: Our Relationship with the Leadership Is a Belief-Based Relationship, a Father and Son Relationship], Alef News Agency (Tehran), July 31, 2009, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/50489> (accessed August 25, 2009).
6. "Ahmadinejad 6 Vazir-e Pishnahadi-ye Khod Ra Mo'arrefi Kard" [Ahmadinejad Presented Six of His Proposed Cabinet Ministers], Fars News Agency (Tehran), August 16, 2009,

available in Persian at www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8805250918 (accessed August 19, 2009).

7. Internal Regulations of the Iranian Parliament, art. 188.

8. "Reis-e Jomhour Vozara-ye Pishnahadi Ra Be Majles Mo'arrefi Kard" [The President Presents His Cabinet Candidates to the Parliament], Alef News Agency (Tehran), August 20, 2009, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/51865> (accessed August 24, 2009).

9. "Mard-e Sayeh Este'fa Dad" [The Shadowy Man Resigns], *Hammihan* (Tehran), April 15, 2009, available in Persian at www.hammihannews.com/news/2004 (accessed August 25, 2009).

10. "Sokhanan-e Rei's-Jomhour Dar Televizion Darbareh-ye Vozara-ye Pishnahadi" [Statements of the President Regarding Proposed Cabinet Ministers], Alef News Agency (Tehran), August 21, 2009, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/51900> (accessed August 25, 2009).

11. "Vahidi Ra'y-e Balayi Miavarad" [Vahidi Will Achieve Vast Endorsement], Islamic Republic News Agency (Tehran), August 25, 2009, available in Persian at www.irna.ir/View/FullStory/?NewsId=650853 (accessed August 25, 2009).

12. Interpol, "Wanted: Vahidi, Ahmad," available at www.interpol.int/Public/data/wanted/notices/data/2007/57/2007_49957.asp (accessed August 25, 2009).

13. "Kodeta Dar Vezarat-e Ettela'at: Barkenari-ye Vazir Va Do Mo'aven-e Vazir, Bazneshastegi-ye Bish Az 20 Karshenas" [Coup D'état at the Intelligence Ministry: Removal of a Minister and Two Deputy Ministers, Retirement of More Than Twenty Experts], *Pezhvak-e Iran*, July 27, 2009, available in Persian at www.pezhvakeiran.com/page1.php?id=13483 (accessed August 25, 2009). See also Ali Alfoneh, "Iran's Velvet Revolution Within," *Enterprise Blog*, August 5, 2009, available at <http://blog.american.com/?p=3655> (accessed August 25, 2009).

14. "Modirani Ke Az Vezarat-e Naft Miravand" [Executives Who Are Leaving the Petroleum Ministry], Alef News Agency (Tehran), June 29, 2009, available in Persian at <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/48582> (accessed August 25, 2009).

15. "Darbareh-ye Sokhanan-e Palizdar: Ajorlou Be Dadgah Towzih Midahad" [Regarding Palizdar's Statements: Ajorlou Will Explain to the Court], *E'temad* (Tehran), June 16, 2008, available in Persian at www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=1638658 (accessed August 25, 2009).

16. For a survey of accusations made by Palizdar, see Ali Alfoneh, "Ahmadinejad Versus the Clergy," *Middle Eastern Outlook*, no. 5 (August 2008), available at www.aei.org/outlook/28494.