

The sun is setting on President Ahmadinejad

Erika Holmquist

Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's time in office has been controversial. Ahmadinejad has gone from being favored by Iran's great leader Ayatollah Khamenei to engaging in open struggles with him. Khamenei's support was a decisive factor in Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009. The election was perceived as fraudulent in the eyes of many Iranians and led to extensive demonstrations and corresponding governmental crackdowns. Since then Ahmadinejad's confrontational style of governing has had a detrimental effect on relations between him and Khamenei, mainly because Ahmadinejad has come off as challenging Khamenei's authority on several issues. As their good relationship soured, Ahmadinejad's influence in Iranian politics diminished.

Ahmadinejad has been severely criticized during this last presidential period, primarily due to the poor state of the Iranian economy. The presidential election on June 14, 2013 will close Ahmadinejad's time in office. Although he personally cannot be re-elected for a third time, his actions show that he does not want to leave the political scene quietly. He is using the little time and leeway he has left to influence political developments in his favor.

This was particularly obvious on two occasions during this year's Dah-e Fajr – the ten-day long annual celebration of the Iranian revolution. On February 3, 2013 while attending a parliamentary hearing regarding the pending impeachment of one of his ministers, Ahmadinejad attacked and displayed his rivalry with Ali Larijani, parliamentary speaker and Khamenei's close associate. In what seemed to be an attempt to shift focus from himself to Larijani and to garner goodwill for himself and his supporters, Ahmadinejad played a

video clip aiming to prove that Larijani's brother Fazel and by association the whole Larijani family is corrupt. No doubt the immediate objective was to discredit Ali Larijani in order to torpedo his chances of joining the presidential race, and thereby improving the odds for Ahmadinejad's ally Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

Ali Larijani could easily dispel Ahmadinejad's allegations by distancing himself from his brother's actions. Effectively turning the tables on Ahmadinejad, Larijani then asked the justified question of why he had not brought the allegation to the attention of the authorities instead of bringing it to the Parliament. He also explained that Ahmadinejad had contacted him prior to the parliamentary session and tried to use the clip to blackmail himself out of being questioned. Larijani added that he was glad that Ahmadinejad had done what he did, because it proved to the public what kind of person he really is. Ahmadinejad left the session in anger.

Obviously, Ahmadinejad's attack on Larijani in Parliament was a failure, and it leaves many questions unanswered. For example, why did he eliminate the element of surprise? If he wanted to embarrass Larijani perhaps it would have been smarter not to tell him beforehand about what would happen. But, by using the material to allegedly blackmail himself out of being questioned in Parliament – had it succeeded – he could have avoided public bad will in connection to the impeachment of one of his government's ministers. Seemingly, Ahmadinejad's actions were intended to improve the public's view of him and his supporters either by avoiding the impeachment issue or by showing that Larijani is corrupt. Although the stakes were high, he obviously thought his gamble would pay off. When

it backfired, it worsened his already strained relationship with Khamenei. The Ayatollah does not like this kind of internal political strife to become public knowledge, as it can damage the people's trust in the establishment.

The second occasion was on February 10, the last day of Fajr. Ahmadinejad delivered a speech in honor of the revolution at Freedom square in Tehran, while his arch-enemy Ali Larijani spoke to his constituency in the holy city of Qom. When attendants faithful to Ahmadinejad started throwing shoes and prayer tablets at Larijani, he had to cut his speech short. The battle between the two had escalated to a new level. In his speech, Ahmadinejad delivered an astounding warning to Iranians of the risk that the coming presidential election could be rigged. The speech could definitely be interpreted as a challenge to Khamenei's authority as well as to the honor of his political rivals.

The political rivalry between Ahmadinejad and Larijani has deep roots. They are both members of the same conservative political alliance, the Abadgaran. Larijani was the Abadgaran's presidential candidate in the election in 2005, but Ahmadinejad also participated and won. Larijani has always been a harsh critic of Ahmadinejad's style of governing, and now media rumors suggest that Larijani aims for the presidential office. So far, Larijani has not addressed these rumors. Thus, Ahmadinejad's actions during Fajr could be viewed as attempts to discredit Larijani in order to sabotage his coming campaign. A plausible explanation for this is that Ahmadinejad wants his ally and friend Mashaei to represent the Abadgaran in the election. Ahmadinejad has given ambiguous messages on what he hopes to do after his term is finished. On the one hand he has said that he is leaving politics altogether, and on the other he has hinted at the opposite fuelling speculations that he hopes to run for office again in 2017. If Mashaei becomes president, it could enable Ahmadinejad to have a political role in the future.

However, by acting out in Parliament he has managed to discredit himself more than Larijani. Larijani's speech

to Ahmadinejad was very eloquent and pointed to a number of embarrassing mistakes made by Ahmadinejad during his presidency, therefore what could have been a catastrophe for Larijani ended up on a more positive note. Although Ahmadinejad's accusations of corruption against the Larijanis may not be far from the truth, the "proof" he put forward was questionable and did not achieve the intended goal. Ali Larijani's family is very powerful and is known to have Khamenei's ear. Besides the speaker himself, his brothers also occupy important positions within the political establishment. For example, Mohammad Javad Larijani is Khamenei's advisor, Sadegh Larijani is chief of the judiciary and the previously mentioned Fazel Larijani is a diplomat.

As the sun is setting on Ahmadinejad's presidential era and political career, he is pulling out all the stops to keep Larijani and his other enemies from succeeding him. Shortly after the Parliament fight, Khamenei scolded both men in a Friday sermon for acting inappropriately. He also said that they should put their issues aside and join forces against the outside enemy. Khamenei is obviously worried. Ahmadinejad's resolve to go after Larijani and his family in this public manner indicates that the presidential election in June is going to be challenging not only for the contenders, but also for Khamenei who wants the election to be held without disturbances. The public battle between Ahmadinejad and Larijani is a symptom of a greater power struggle within Iran's conservative elite which threatens Khamenei's ability to hide the regime's shortcomings. Thus, whether Khamenei likes it or not, the coming presidential election may turn into a challenge of the present order. Stay tuned!

Erika Holmquist

Swedish Defence Research Agency

Please visit www.foi.se/asia to find out more about FOI's Asia Security Studies Programme.