

Iran: an elite at war

Written by Nasrin Alavi

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NASRIN ALAVI, MAY 31 2011

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's ideological patron Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi says of him: "I am more than 90% certain that he has been bewitched". He attributes this dark work to Ahmadinejad's former chief-of-staff and closest aide Esfandiar-Rahim Mashaei, whom he accuses of engaging "deviants, devils and evil spirits" to cast a spell over Iran's president.

Welcome to the strange, occult world of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

But what could be called Iran's "genie-gate" affair, in a twist on the signifier of every political scandal since Watergate, is – for all the talk of ghouls and *jinn*s – at its heart a classic elite political showdown. Its immediate background is the power-struggle between the Islamic Republic of Iran's two most senior figures that began in April 2011, now curdling into something more bizarre and perhaps more dangerous for the regime – and certainly for its embattled president.

The originating cause of the dispute – the sacking of Iran's intelligence minister by the president, followed by his swift reinstatement on the orders of the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – provoked Ahmadinejad into an eleven-day refusal to appear in public or undertake any public duties.

The president's unthinkable act in standing up to the supreme leader has in turn exposed deep intra-regime divisions over key issues of policy and doctrine: Iran's grave economic conditions, its position *vis-a-vis* the United States, and theological correctness in the Islamic Republic.

The deviant dispute

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, since he came to power in the election of June 2005, has secured consent largely by his ability to ensure a steady supply of handouts and subsidies to the country's growing millions. Now, in very tight economic circumstances, his team is intent on refuelling this populist strategy to guarantee him and his supporters victory in the coming round of elections.

The resources that have sustained the president's economic policy derive from Iran's record oil revenues in these six years: \$230 billion during Ahmadinejad's first term (2005-09) alone. The result has been record inflation and foreign imports, and damage to the struggling domestic manufacturing and farming sectors. The strains are also felt on Iran's foreign policy and its search for new allies, such as Brazil; a member of Iran's *majlis* (parliament) says that excessive meat imports "in particular from Brazil" has "broken the backs of cattle-farmers". No wonder that every week in 2011 has seen at least one protest by disgruntled or unpaid workers.

It is in the cities that the political pressures are felt most acutely. As many as 70% of Iranians live in large urban centres, and increasing numbers are young and educated. Their needs, and the dangers to power their ambitions for a normal life represent, are an urgent concern of the Iranian elite. Esfandiar-Rahim Mashaei, the president's principal ally inside the administration, has led the strategy for re-election via amelioration of a discontented population. Today, Ahmadinejad's team describe themselves as "real reformists" who can deliver.

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That has made Mashaei a notable target of the president's intra-regime enemies, who are using all the tools of denigration and insinuation to hand. Thus, Mojtaba Zolnour – the official envoy in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) of the supreme-leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – accuses Ahmadinejad's coterie of wanting an "Islam without the clergy" (a serious indictment that in 2002 was used to sentence the political reformist Hashem Aghajari to death for apostasy).

The hardliners also charge the president with seeking a rapprochement with Washington that would see Ahmadinejad "take credit for a deal that eases Iran's isolation and opens the way for greater contact and cooperation with the West". Another *majlis* representative, Hussein Fadayi, even voices the toxic accusation that Mashaei has "dealings with foreign secret services"; others that he (and by extension the president) seeks *rapprochement* with Israel. The arrest of thirty people, including senior figures, for alleged CIA links contributes to a fevered atmosphere in Tehran.

What makes the dispute more than routine is that some of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's former intimate political companions are raising the stakes with talk of "sorcery", "espionage", and – a key codeword in the anti-Ahmadinejad lexicon – "deviancy". Hossein Hamedani, the Revolutionary Guards commander of Tehran, for example, announces that the "entire *basij* forces are ready to take pre-emptive action against the enemies of the revolution and the leaders of the deviant current".

The inner doubts

The most striking aspect of this episode is the way members of the conservative elite have turned on the president. It is a long way from the aftermath of the stolen presidential election of June 2009, when Mahmoud Ahmadinejad could rely on the united support of the regime – supreme leader, the Revolutionary Guards, and *basij* militia – as its forces brutally regained control of the streets. So what has changed?

In part it seems to be that through successive purges, those who regard themselves as guardians of the revolution have become ever smaller in number and ever more exclusive in attitude. The result is an internecine dynamic which, in an atmosphere of constant suspicion and the absence of intelligent public dialogue, quickly becomes toxic.

It is in this lurid political scrum that, for example, the Islamic Republic's official news agency can be found suing the *Kayhan* daily newspaper – which the supreme leader controls; where the hardline weekly *Ya Lesarat*, which until recently published fawning pieces about the administration, published the blazing headline *Arrest Mashaei*; where the head of Iran's judiciary, Ayatollah Sadegh Amoli Larijani, says that "the elders" have instructed him to deal with "exorcists and soothsayers"; where, with almost comical timing, Fatemeh Rajabi – the wife of Gholam-Hossein Elham, Ahmadinejad's spokesman and justice minister during his first term, and author of a book entitled *Ahmadinejad: The Miracle of the Third Millennium* – now says that her book is "not at all about Ahmadinejad" but rather a "browse through the Islamic republic's elections, from the first to today".

This shifting political landscape is also forcing senior figures to defend their political record, and to acknowledge some buried truths. For example, the former presidential candidate and head of the *majlis*'s research centre, Ahmad Tavakoli, told the economics editor of the Fars news agency that "the key figures around [the president] are either deviant, or accused of financial corruption, or both."

Tavakoli defended his endorsement of Ahmadinejad's candidacy following his own withdrawal from the presidential race as a "forced, necessitated vote"; and declared that (on the basis of feedback from constituencies around the country) the main reformist candidate in 2009, Mir-Hossein Moussavi, possesses a "public base" and – in contrast to the president – a "power for social mobilisation against the supreme leader"

Tavakoli's implied admission that Ahmadinejad's victory in 2009 was hollow indicates the second reason for the change since that time: the fracturing beyond recognition of the establishment forces that had united against the green movement of which Moussavi was the main figurehead. This unified front enabled the regime to crush the huge street-protests against the fraudulent election. Then, Moussavi was accused of treason and (by setting up an election-

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monitoring committee) of tarnishing the revolution's integrity; today, prominent pro-Khamenei legislators such as Asadollah Badamchian done the very same thing in order to avoid "illegal" interference in the parliamentary elections.

The political civil war extends to allegations of corruption – shadowy dealings, missing funds, budgetary plunders – against the president's team, which dominate parliamentary debates. The targets include Iran's first vice-president Mohammad-Reza Rahimi, implicated in the notorious ("Fatemi") embezzlement case; and the vice-president for executive affairs Hamid Baghaei, convicted of several violations and banned from government service for four years.

The hidden fear

The elite implosion is occurring in the shadow of permanent social protest, albeit low-level compared to the spectacular demonstrations of 2009 (see "Iran's resilient rebellion", 18 February 2011). If you have the chance to talk to everyday people *inside Iran*, or read the defiant and confident statements by imprisoned activists *inside Iran*, or even access blog entries and online chat from *inside Iran* – then you may get a glimpse of the ardour felt on behalf of imprisoned activists or those under house arrest, including the reformist leaders of 2009 (Mehdi Karroubi as well as Mir-Hossein Moussavi). The protesters who then filled the streets in search of their votes and voices may have been silenced, but their demands and aspirations remain and are finding different channels of expression.

A small example is the funeral on 25 May 2011 of Nasser Hejazi, a legendary goalkeeper whose status in Iran is comparable to great sporting heroes such as Joe Di Maggio or Ferenc Puskas. Iranians mourned, and also used the opportunity to gather in relative safety to chant political slogans, demand freedom for political prisoners, and sing the student protest anthem about "overcoming injustice and tyranny". Some in the crowd wear the colours of Hejazi's *Esteghlal* football team. The chants include: "Mubarak, Ben Ali, now it's the turn of Seyyad Ali!"

Indeed, the dictators, the old, the ridiculous, the venial in Iran are still telling the free, the young, the educated, the expectant how to live their lives. But the democratic awakening that began in Iran and has since reverberated across the middle east is alive, and with its eyes open. *That* is what really scares the elite, and drives its bewitching confusions.

Nasrin Alavi is the author of *We Are Iran: The Persian Blogs* (Portobello Books, 2005), which was translated into several languages. She is a contributor to Nader Hashemi & Danny Postel eds., *The People Reloaded: The Green Movement and the Struggle for Freedom in Iran* (Melville House, 2011). Originally published on openDemocracy.