When the Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei placed his might behind President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2009 elections, few would have imagined that the two would get locked in a battle of wills that would threaten the stability of Iran. The face-off happened in April over the intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi, whom Ahmadinejad fired and Khamenei reinstated.

However, the makings of an inevitable power struggle were evident from Ahmadinejad’s first term in office. In 2005, Khamenei wanted a president who could help shift the political scene back to the conservative right and take an aggressive foreign policy posture in a bid to reverse the conciliatory approach of the previous two presidents – Khatami and Rafsanjani. Thus was born Ayatollah’s relationship of political expediency with Ahmadinejad. What he least expected was for Ahmadinejad to slowly but surely build a wider support base for himself with an
intention to restructure Iran’s power constitution by marginalizing the Old Guard.

This personal power struggle is actually a manifestation of two conflicting outlooks on Iran’s future – one supports the continuation of clerical rule, while the other is in favor of marginalizing it. Ahmadinejad falls in the latter category; an ultranationalist, he favored diluting the clerical grip on power. In his first term, Ahmadinejad had infuriated the clerics by filling several political and military posts with his supporters – many at the expense of clerical elite. Knowing that he could never compete with the clerics on Islamic grounds, he charted a course of Persian nationalism, which emphasized on the pre-Islamic Iranian identity. He also focused more on the messianic belief of imminent arrival of “Mahdi” – the 12th Imam – and Shi'ite Muslims’ connection with him; implicitly conveying that Iranian Shias do not need clerical guidance from Ayatollahs.

Ahmadinejad, who would be required to step down after two terms, was grooming his chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei – a person not favored by the clerics – to be the next President of Iran. The whole exercise of putting his loyalists in important ministries was done with an aim to tip the 2012 parliamentary and 2013 presidential elections in his favor. These elections are extremely important for the ultranationalists if they wanted to shape the post-Khamenei era by rendering the position of the supreme leader as symbolic.

Since April, Ahmadinejad has seen both his power and his loyalists, reduce. Many of his supporters have turned their backs on him, most significant being his spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi. Those close to him are getting arrested (more than 25 of his aides so far) on the charges of corruption, revolutionary deviancy, espionage and even sorcery. Ahmadinejad has illustrated that he has the courage to challenge the clerics' political and ideological domination, and in the past have successfully resisted powerful opponents. So it is unlikely that he will reconcile to being a lame duck president. He would want to hang on to his post till the 2012 elections, and if allowed to stay in power till then, he will use his authority to grab more power. If threatened, he may resort to leaking corruption details of his attackers, like how he recently issued a veiled threat to expose financial misdeeds in the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), if his opponents do not stop targeting his people.

For the Supreme Leader, this has been a no-win situation. His own protégé has turned against him, he has been co-accused of the crackdown on protestors in 2009, and worse of it all, he is now part of a publicly fought power tussle that has thrown him off his “holy pedestal” which he had carefully built and guarded all this while by maintaining a studied distance from the government’s functioning. Having understandably distanced himself from Ahmadinejad before the 2009 elections, political pragmatism forced Khamenei to put his might behind the president, to avert the prospect of a much more liberal Green Movement’s win.
Now again, political feasibility has prevented Ahmadinejad’s impeachment and arrest, and is likely to let him serve out his term, as his ouster will negatively impact Iran’s stability and badly reflect on Khamenei’s judgment in having backed him. Isolating Ahmadinejad, turning the heat of the Majlis and the Guardian Council on him, and initiating an inquiry into the 2009 elections, is all aimed at keeping the president quiet. Political expediency has kept Khamenei tethered to Ahmadinejad so far; but both have now reached a stage where they have outlived each other’s usefulness and the scale of expediency might tilt against Ahmadinejad if he refuses to stay shackled.

The ongoing tensions between the two Iranian factions could not have chosen a worse time to surface. Reeling under the international economic sanctions over Iran’s nuclear program, the government is forced to remove subsidies on various items of daily use. Unemployment, inflation and brain drain - all are on the rise and so is public dissent against the government. Khamenei too has lost favor with many political leaders and citizens alike due to his iron grip on power. The split at the top is only a small indicator of the fragmentation of the polity of Iran. But despite the political rifts, economic problems and the wave of anti-authoritarian protests in the region, the Arab Spring is not likely to find its way to Tehran. The Iranian clerical-military apparatus is highly vigilant and experienced to thwart any reform/protest movements. Also, the youth is tired of protesting and is taking “changing the nation” in an emigrational sense. The Green Movement has pledged its allegiance to the Ayatollah to avoid the “deviant” tag. Any major political upheaval in the next elections is unlikely as the IRGC has declared that it will not allow reformists who have crossed the bounds set by the clerics, to participate in elections. The most likely scenario is that of a compliant hardliner managing the nation on behalf of the Ayatollah, to undo the damage done by Ahmadinejad – something similar to Ahmadinejad’s case. However, this time around, Khamenei will pick his candidate more cautiously. But if the Supreme Leader dies, Iran will be rendered vulnerable to a more serious power struggle than observed in any other country in the region.

More than the Tehran Spring, the U.S. is more concerned about the future of the nuclear talks with Iran. Ahmadinejad and Mashaei were being viewed as possible candidates for a compromise on the nuclear issue. Now with Ahmadinejad’s wings clipped and Mashaei’s future prospects all but over, the U.S. administration is anxious that the nuclear negotiation may hit a dead end. What the current crisis pointed out is that till the time Iran’s political and guardian leaders are not in tandem, nuclear negotiations with one of them is just a futile exercise. In a situation where even the Iranian opposition is keen on pursuing the nuclear program, the U.S. should focus on maximizing economic and technological sanctions on Iran; and then wait for the moment when under mounting economic, social and political duress, Iran is forced to give important concessions on its nuclear program to get rid of the economic sanctions.

The Ahmadinejad-Khamenei rift has far-reaching implications for the nation’s political future.
A New Tug of War

Written by Semu Bhatt
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and stability. Khamenei has already spoken about how the infighting is giving out a wrong impression to the “enemy.” However, given that the two have fundamentally conflicting outlooks on Iran’s future, reconciliation between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei is not possible. And given that both are power-hungry, none of them is going to take it lying down. The U.S. has little to choose from a bag of rotten apples. But it could calibrate its diplomacy by emphasizing on human rights on the one hand to generate goodwill amongst the Iranians, and sanctions on the other hand to mount pressure on the ruling elite. In this tug of war between the Islamic and republican notions of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the only thing that is clear at the moment is that the fight for Iran’s future is far from over.