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Iran: Where The Power Lies

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Since the days of the Islamic Revolution, and certainly since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's clerical elite has included a variety of factions – broadly classified as reformist, pragmatist, conservative and radical. For a long time, many in the West pinned their hopes for change on a shift in the balance of power in favour of the first two – the reformists and pragmatists. During the presidency of Mohammed Khatami, there was a palpable sense that a shift in emphasis from the theocratic towards the democratic aspects of the institutional structures of the Islamic Republic would be possible. However, any such hopes were soon dashed by the dominance of conservatives and radicals within the regime's theocratic arm.

The Supreme Leader Khamenei – himself considered a conservative – has over the past few years gradually moved from acting as a supreme arbiter over the different factions, towards openly wielding partisan political power himself, by overtly supporting Ahmadinejad in the aftermath of the 2009 election. With the increasingly brutal suppression of the Green Movement – including arrests of establishment figures and pressures on Rafsanjani, a pragmatic regime insider previously deemed 'untouchable' – it seems the limited pluralism that has marked Iran in the past few decades will become even more constrained. This could finally remove any pretence of democratic rule and dramatically reduce any realistic prospect for peaceful – or violent – change. In effect, the Supreme Leader has moved from being a power-broker to being a power-holder. With much of his legitimacy gone (at least in large parts of the urban middle class), he will have to rely much more on the raw power of cooptation and repression to realise his prime objective: the maintenance of the Islamic Republic and, of course, his own position within it.

During the past year, two elements have kept alive the hopes of those who are aiming for an overhaul of the country's political system. Firstly, there is the loss of legitimacy of the clergy – including Khamenei – among large parts of the urban, middle-class population. Its most blatant expression was, perhaps, the willingness of protestors to use slogans against the Supreme Leader similar to those used against the Shah in the run-up to the 1979 revolution. Secondly, the chairmanship of the pragmatic Rafsanjani on two crucial clerical bodies: the body overseeing the Supreme Leader's performance – the Assembly of Experts (with a theoretical constitutional authority to remove Khamenei), and the Expediency Council (an advisory body to the Supreme Leader). The hope here was, of course, that Rafsanjani could become the focus for change within the crucial theocratic arm of Khomeini's republic. Yet, in both cases, such hopes have been misplaced. Yes, the legitimacy of Iran's political system, which was up to now partially shored up by a democratic façade, seems to be withering away fast. However, rather than heralding the imminent collapse or fundamental transformation of the regime, this means stability will be increasingly based on the Supreme Leader's control of a modern-day Praetorian Guard – the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC or Pasdaran), and Iran's de-facto social-security network – the Islamic Foundations or Bonyads.

The loss of legitimacy of the Supreme Leader is partially offset by his (and Ahmadinejad's) continued authority in the more conservative countryside, and among the urban poor. But more importantly, Khamenei's authority over the IRGC remains largely unaffected; he has used his powers of appointment and promotion within the Pasdaran to staff its officers' corps with 'ideologically reliable' elements. And the commanders of the IGRC have duly made it clear that they would be prepared to use force to uphold the institutional integrity of the Islamic Republic. As the IRGC also controls strategically important sections of the Iranian economy, appointments within it have also given the Supreme Leader an opportunity for economic cooptation and elite patronage. Khamenei's economic cooptative power is furthermore enhanced through his control of the all-important Islamic Foundations – the Bonyads – that control up to 20% of the Iranian economy and that have in recent years supplanted the state as the primary purveyors of social security (and social mobility) for the Iranian poor, through a network of clientelism and corruption.

Control over the IRGC and the Bonyads has therefore given Khamenei the crucial sticks and carrots with which to control both the elite and wider society in the absence of more 'spontaneous' forms of authority and legitimacy. The recent 'suspension' of two major, previously legal opposition groups – the Mujahedin of the Islamic Revolution and the Islamic Iran Participation Front – indicates the regime is indeed moving towards more blatant repression of reformist factions now deemed a threat to national

security. Various pressures exerted on Rafsanjani, including the arrest of family members, seem designed to push and/or lure the (wealthy and allegedly corrupt) cleric back into the fold. Further economic sanctions by the outside world will certainly serve to enhance this consolidation of power among the hardliners. In any case, it seems Khamenei has both the ability and the willingness to employ the levers of power at his disposal in order to safeguard the system, and his position within it; the protestors' menacing chants will merely have served as a reminder of the Shah's fateful indecisiveness in 1978-79.

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Shifting Sands is the blog of the Middle East International Affairs Programme at LSE IDEAS, analysing current events in the Middle East and contributing to the ongoing deliberations over policy prescriptions.

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