

## ***DATELINE MEI***

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### **Supremacy of Supreme Leader**

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**W**hen maverick Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad cries foul, obviously things are awfully wrong with the forthcoming June presidential election in Iran. Under the Iranian Constitution the incumbent President could not seek a third consecutive term, and hence Ahmadinejad was hoping to emulate the example of the Putin-Medvedev combo. Rather brazenly in recent months, he was propping up his former senior aide Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei as his candidate.

The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, however, has other plans. The wily leader not only nipped Ahmadinejad's plans, he also banished the hopes of an aging Hashemi Rafsanjani from running for the elections. In a not-so-veiled criticism, the former President accused the Supreme Leader of being 'ignorant.'

However, under Khamenei's watchful eyes, the 12-member Guardian Council approved only eight out of 686 aspirants — of course, all are men. They are also conservatives of different hues and, above all, seen loyal to the Supreme Leader.

In his mid-70s, Khamenei is holding office since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. Despite periodic elections to the President and Parliament, the Supreme Leader continues to be the real power in Iran. He, and not the President, for example, is the Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces.

Indeed, both Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad were former allies of Khamenei. In the aftermath of Khomeini's death, the former played a crucial role in the appointment of Khamenei as the Supreme Leader. After Rafsanjani's two-term presidency ended in 1997, the relations between the two began to sour. Rafsanjani proved his influence in 2007 when he was elected head of the Council of Experts, the body responsible for the selection of the Supreme Leader. In 2005, he unsuccessfully contested against the then little-known Ahmadinejad. Four years later, he unsuccessfully backed Mir-Hossein Mousavi and his reformist Green Movement, only to lose again.

Likewise, ever since he sprang a surprise victory in June 2005, Ahmadinejad was the darling of the Supreme Leader. The bond was so close that four years later, Khamenei and not the Interior Ministry announced Ahmadinejad's re-election. Many inside Iran felt cheated by the duo who managed to defeat Mousavi, the independent reformer backed by former President Mohammed Khatami.

Since then, however, both have parted ways, especially due to what was seen as Ahmadinejad's attempts to act 'presidential' and independent of the Supreme Leader. The latter showed his power by browbeating various moves by the President, his Cabinet and policies. Last March, for example, the President had to face the ignominy of being summoned by the Iranian Majlis to explain his policies.

Thus, both Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani are potential troubles, and Khamenei is not prepared for an Iranian Spring. Among the eight candidates approved to contest include Saeed Jalili, Iran's former nuclear negotiator. The hardliner is considered very close to Khamenei who wields the final authority on national security issues. Another notable candidate is former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who has been an adviser to Khamenei since 2007. Somehow or the other, the rest are all closely tied to the Supreme Leader. In short, the June election would be a battle among Khamenei's protégés.

In recent months, Islamist parties have been gaining from elections that are recognized by the international community as free and fair. Yet, having prided itself of conducting free (of course in comparison to its Arab neighbours) elections, Iran is moving in the opposite direction. What was the need to stifle even the resemblance of a fair contest?

Like many other leaders in the Middle East, the Supreme Leader has been in office for long. Though not as long as some of the Arab leaders who were forced to leave office in the wake of the Arab Spring, Khamenei assumed office in June 1989, or almost 24 years ago. He became the Ayatollah not because of his scholarly acumen but because of his ex-officio capacity. Like the honorary doctorate touted by many Indian politicians, he is the Ayatollah because he became the Supreme Leader of Iran. Moreover, unlike the earlier presidency of Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, which required a resemblance of a periodic election, the Supreme Leader is a lifetime position and Khamenei has no plans to relinquish it early.

Second, Khamenei does not want a repeat of the 2009 election when he had to intervene directly and announce Ahmadinejad's victory. This unusual and constitutionally improper move only galvanized the Opposition, which took to the streets. Incarceration of leaders, mass arrest, brutal violence and other forms of repression did not dampen the protests. Though defeated by state power, the spirit lingers on and could be dangerous if the June contest is more open.

Third, Rafsanjani is more than Mashaei. Despite his age, Rafsanjani has overcome the corrupt image of the past and rehabilitated himself as a reformer. Through his personal ordeal and of his children at the hands of the regime, he has endeared himself among the Iranian middle-class. He has positioned himself as a pragmatic politician who can end Iran's international isolation and rehabilitate its sanction-driven economy. His victory would be a clear vote of no confidence against the Supreme Leader and his two-decade old policy.

Far more importantly, Khamenei has a larger fear: The Arab Spring. When Mubarak was overthrown, Iran and its officials claimed credit as it coincided with the 1979 Islamic revolution. More modest ones cited the 2009 Green Movement as the inspiration. One could argue over the Iranian influence in bringing about thousands of Arab masses to the streets in protest against prolonged authoritarianism, lack of good governance, unemployment among the educated youth and large-scale economic malice. However, it was obvious that many Arab rulers were living in ivory towers, far removed from reality. More than two decades in his office, is Khamenei different from the discredited Arab dictators?

Will this be an Iranian moment? The conditions which forced out unpopular Arab regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen are equally valid for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Will a level playing field be counter-productive for the regime? Therein lies Khamenei's mortal fears, and

hence the need to have only his protégés on the ballot paper. Will the Iranian masses take a leaf from Tahrir Square?

**Note:** This article was earlier published in The Pioneer on 3 June 2013. **Web Link:** <http://www.dailypioneer.com/columnists/oped/supremacy-of-supreme-leader.html>

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