

Iran's supreme leader sets stage for confrontation

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With an uncompromising speech at Friday's prayers, Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has set the stage for a potentially bloody confrontation with opposition leaders demanding a re-run of the June 12 presidential election.

Tens of thousands have joined daily opposition protests in Tehran and other cities over the past week after the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, defeated his principal rival, Mir Hossein Mousavi, by 63 percent to 34 percent. Both Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, the second "reform" candidate, have branded the outcome as rigged and rejected a proposal from the Guardian Council for a partial recount.

Immediately and virtually in unison, the US and Western media accepted uncritically the claims of massive electoral fraud by Mousavi, and continue to do so with scant evidence to back up their claims.

The American media has been particularly provocative in its coverage of the Iranian events. The Obama administration has largely relied on the media in its efforts to exploit the protests and the divisions within the clerical establishment, with the aim of destabilising Ahmadinejad, further isolating him internationally, and creating the conditions to replace him with a leader more amendable to US interests.

Iranian leader Khamenei, who rarely leads Friday prayers, used the opportunity to throw down the gauntlet to Mousavi and his chief backers—former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami. Speaking at Tehran University, he hailed the election turnout as "historic" and upheld the election result. Flatly rejecting accusations of rigging, he told his large audience that the opposition candidates should accept that "the Islamic Republic does not betray people's votes."

Khamenei called for an end to the opposition rallies, saying the election results should be decided at the ballot box, not in the streets. In a direct threat to Mousavi and his backers, he said, "Riots after an election put democracy at risk. If they don't stop they must face the consequences. If there is any bloodshed, leaders of the protests will be held directly responsible."

At the same time, Khamenei made an appeal to his opponents, noting that all candidates came from "within the system." He added, "This is not a dispute for or against the revolution." Khamenei also offered a small olive branch to Rafsanjani, mildly rebuking Ahmadinejad for branding the former president as corrupt during a television debate prior to the election.

Khamenei also appealed to his opponents' shared concern that the political crisis could

spiral out of control. They had to be careful not to act in an extremist manner, he warned. "The extremism will reach a level which they will not be able to contain. They will be responsible for the blood, violence and chaos."

At the same time, Khamenei sharply drew the battle lines, openly throwing his lot in with Ahmadinejad. "Ever since the last presidential election there existed differences of opinion between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani," he said, adding: "Of course, my outlook is closer to that of Ahmadinejad in domestic and foreign policy."

The comments point to the rift within the Islamic regime. Mousavi and his supporters have been bitterly critical of Ahmadinejad's more aggressive anti-US rhetoric, which has led to further sanctions, and what they contend is his profligate spending on handouts to the poor. They advocate using the opportunity of the Obama administration to seek a rapprochement with the US, implementing a pro-market agenda and opening up the Iranian economy to foreign investors. These tactical differences have only been sharpened by the country's deepening economic crisis.

The line-up was evident at yesterday's prayer service. Ahmadinejad sat in the front row, flanked by Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi, the head of the judiciary, and by Ali Larijani, speaker of the majlis, or parliament. Several rows back was Mohsen Rezaei, a conservative, who was the fourth candidate in the presidential contest. Notably absent were Mousavi and Karroubi, both of whom had been invited to attend, as well as Rafsanjani and Khatami.

Khamenei clearly used his nationally televised speech to gather support. According to Iranian state television, the service was attended by a million people—comparable to claims made by the opposition about the size of their largest rallies. Again, the social divide between the base of support for the opposition and that for Ahmadinejad was evident. As the Guardian noted, the audience comprised "ordinary men, many of them poorly dressed, with a sprinkling of clerics, military personnel and war veterans."

In the absence of a socialist alternative, Ahmadinejad's right-wing populism, combined with a modicum of subsidies and social welfare programs, has won him a certain following about the urban and rural poor, in contrast to the better-off urban middle classes on whom Mousavi is based.

Khamenei also accused Western countries of trying to influence the election outcome and instigating unrest after Ahmadinejad was announced the winner. Significantly, however, he did not direct his main attack on the US, saying only that President Obama had been contradictory, offering talks and then expressing concern about the election. Khamenei singled out Britain as "the most treacherous" of the Western countries, prompting the British Foreign Office to call in the Iranian ambassador to London.

Yesterday, both houses of the US Congress overwhelmingly passed a bipartisan resolution condemning the Iranian government for violence against opposition protesters and for its restrictions on the media and Internet. In a debate laden with hypocritical posturing, Republican Bob Inglis, one of the resolution's sponsors, declared that "rigged elections don't produce outcomes that people can believe in"—apparently having forgotten Bush's stolen presidential election in 2000.

Obama was more circumspect in his response. In an interview with CBS News, the US president declared that he was very concerned about the "tenor" and "tone" of some of the

statements by the Iranian government, adding that it should be aware that “the world is watching.”

While clearly supportive of the extraordinary international media campaign backing Iranian opposition leaders, Obama is aware that any overt US intervention would only inflame political tensions. As he declared on Tuesday, it would not be “productive, given the history of the US-Iranian relationship, to be seen as meddling.” In a clear division of labour, Obama has outsourced the job of berating the regime to Britain and other European allies.

Khamenei’s anti-Western rhetoric is also directed against the Mousavi camp. The ayatollah told his political opponents to “open their eyes” and see that behind the demonstrations were “the enemy hands working, the hungry wolves waiting in ambush.” The deaths and violence of the past week he blamed on “ill-wishers, mercenaries and elements working for the espionage machines of Zionism and Western powers.”

The obvious threat is that opposition leaders will be branded as traitors and treated accordingly.

Within hours of the speech, Karroubi responded with an open letter to the Guardian Council reiterating the demand for fresh elections. “Accept the Iranian nation’s will by cancelling the vote and guarantee the establishment’s survival,” he declared. The Guardian Council is due to meet today with all four presidential candidates to discuss election irregularities, but it is not clear that either Mousavi or Karroubi will attend.

At this stage, there is no indication that Mousavi intends to call off a mass rally scheduled for today in Tehran. The city’s governor, Morteza Tamadon, has reinforced Khamenei’s message by declaring the protest to be unauthorised and demanding its cancellation. However, as all factions of the regime recognise, any back-down by Mousavi runs the risk that the protests could take a new and more dangerous turn.

The crisis is being fuelled by deep divisions within the regime. While Khamenei and Ahmadinejad have strong support in the military and security apparatus, including the huge Basij volunteer militia, sections of the business and clerical establishment are backing Mousavi.

Rafsanjani, who has been instrumental in Mousavi’s campaign, is reportedly in Qom to marshal support among senior clerics. He is the head of the Assembly of Experts, the body which can constitutionally discipline or even remove Khamenei. As well as being one of Iran’s wealthiest men, Rafsanjani as a prominent ayatollah may also try to call into question Khamenei’s religious credentials.

However, such steps threaten to unleash broader political turmoil, which the opposing factions of the ruling elite are both desperate to prevent. An intervention by the working class, beginning to raise its own demands and drawing in layers of the rural poor, would see the two bourgeois groupings rapidly set aside their differences to present a common front in containing and suppressing social unrest. For all his rhetoric about democratic rights, Mousavi and his supporters would be just as ruthless as Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and their backers.

The only way in which the working class can defend its independent class interests is by mobilising against all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie. No credence should be placed in

either the right-wing populist demagoguery of Ahmadinejad or Mousavi's empty declarations about democratic rights.

The genuine allies of Iranian workers are not to be found in the ranks of the competing factions of the reactionary clerical regime, but among working people throughout the Middle East and internationally, who are oppressed by the same bankrupt capitalist order. A struggle for workers' power and a socialist Iran, as part of a global struggle for socialism, is the only road forward. That is the perspective advanced by the International Committee of the Fourth International.

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