



~MIDDLE EAST MEDIA MONITOR~

AN ENEMY FROM WITHIN:
THE IRANIAN REGIME AND THE NEW POLITICAL CHALLENGE

By Raz Zimmt

Middle East Media Monitor is an FPRI E-Note series, designed to review once a month a current topic from the perspective of the foreign language press in such countries as Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, and Turkey. These articles will focus on providing FPRI's readership with an inside view on how some of the most important countries in the Middle East are covering issues of importance to the American foreign policy community.

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On May 11, 2011 hardliner cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, held a meeting with members of the conservative Islamic Coalition Party. Mesbah-Yazdi warned his audience against the strengthening of deviant religious thought in Iranian society. He claimed that it jeopardizes the concept of "the Guardianship of the Islamic jurist" (*Velayat-e Faqih*), upon which the Iranian regime has been based since the Islamic Revolution (1979). "If this current continues and one day we will see another Seyyed Ali Mohammad Bab¹...we should not be surprised."² A few days later, Ayatollah Seyyed Mohammad Sa'idi, the Friday prayer leader in Qom, warned the "deviant currents" to stop their conspiracies or the people will annihilate them, as they did to [Abolhassan] Banisadr,³ "the hypocrites" [a reference to Iranian opposition organization, the Mojahedin-e Khalq] and "the leaders of the sedition" [a reference to the reformist opposition].⁴

The demonstrations led by the reformist opposition following the 2009 presidential elections posed a serious threat to the Iranian regime's stability. The warnings made by the high-ranking clerics were not directed, however, at the reformists but at elements within the conservative faction associated with President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his controversial son-in-law and associate, Esfandiar Rahim Masha'i. This essay will discuss the growing influence of a new political current within the conservative faction in Iran and the internal political struggle between this current and the traditional-conservative ruling establishment. While this internal struggle does not directly affect Iran's foreign policy, it has significant implications for the regime's stability.

THE SUPREME LEADER VS. THE PRESIDENT

The unprecedented attack by senior conservative officials against the so-called "deviant current" was triggered by two recent developments: President Ahmadinejad's decision to dismiss his intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, and the distribution of a documentary film called: "The Reappearance [of the Twelfth Imam] is Imminent" (*Zohur besyar nazdik ast*). The causes for the escalating debate within the conservative faction are much broader, however, than these recent issues.

On April 17, 2011, Iran's media reported that Ahmadinejad had accepted his Intelligence Minister's resignation. Shortly afterwards, however, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, issued a statement supporting Moslehi and instructing that he should be reinstated. A few days later, Khamenei publicly rebuked the president and stated that he does not usually intervene in the government's decisions or day-to-day work unless national interests are disregarded. He considered Ahmadinejad's decision to dismiss Moslehi such a case.⁵

¹ The founder of Babism and one of the central figures of Baha'i faith.

² Fars News Agency, May 13, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9002230057>

³ Former Iranian president, Abolhassan Banisadr, who was impeached in June 1981.

⁴ Mehr News Agency, May 20, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1316275>

⁵ Fars News Agency, April 23, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=9002030860>

Protesting the Supreme Leader's instruction to revise his decision, Ahmadinejad did not show up to his office for several days. The disagreements between the two leaders soon turned into a major political crisis. Top conservative officials came forward in support of Khamenei, strongly criticizing the president for his misconduct and demanding that he obey the leader's instructions. Some of the president's critics went so far as to warn him that he could suffer the same fate as Abolhassan Banisadr.

IRAN'S POLITICAL ELITES

Disagreements among the Iranian political elite are nothing new. Since the Islamic Revolution, Iranian politics have been characterized by constant tension between various political institutions, as well as between the Supreme Leader and the elected president. Although Khamenei has emphasized his support for Ahmadinejad since his election in 2005, differences have emerged between them on several issues. In April 2006, for instance, Ahmadinejad's decision to allow women into football stadiums provoked outrage among hardline clerics, eventually forcing him to revoke his decision following Khamenei's ruling. In May 2009, tensions between the two leaders erupted again over the president's decision to merge the pilgrimage organization and the tourist and cultural heritage organization headed by Rahim Masha'i. Following a protest by the Supreme Leader's representative on pilgrimage affairs, Khamenei issued a statement ordering Ahmadinejad to reverse his decision.⁶

The major political crisis following the presidential elections, in the summer of 2009, temporarily forced the Iranian leadership to display public unity. The disagreements between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad did not fade away, however, and reached an unprecedented peak over Moslehi's dismissal. This controversy between the two has brought both the president and Masha'i under harsh criticism. The president's critics have claimed that Masha'i was behind the decision to remove Moslehi despite the Supreme Leader's position and was, therefore, responsible for the political crisis which followed. Mojtaba Zolnour, the Supreme Leader's deputy representative in the Revolutionary Guards, claimed that Masha'i was currently the "real president." In a speech given in the city of Mashhad, Zolnour criticized the president's close relationship with his advisor and urged Ahmadinejad to cut himself off from the influence of people like Masha'i.⁷

RAHIM MASHA'I, THE "DEVIANT CURRENT" AND THE "IRANIAN SCHOOL"

This is not the first time Masha'i sparked such an uproar. In the summer of 2008 he aroused a wave of protest by saying that Iran was a friend of all nations in the world, including the nation of Israel. In 2007, he caused another scandal after he took part in a tourism convention in Turkey which included a performance by female dancers dressed in revealing clothing. In July 2009, Ahmadinejad was forced to give in to Khamenei's demand and reverse his decision to appoint Masha'i as his first vice president. Shortly thereafter, however, he appointed Masha'i as his chief of staff. Masha'i continued to make controversial remarks that provoked the ire of the religious establishment. In August 2010, he declared that Iran should spread the "Iranian school of thought" in place of the "Islamic school of thought".⁸ His statement was strongly criticized by senior conservative officials, who accused him of promoting secular nationalist views. Masha'i's remarks were conceived as part of a comprehensive governmental policy to promote Iranian national pre-Islamic traditions. This policy was evidenced, for example, in governmental efforts to borrow the Cyrus cylinder⁹ from the British Museum for an exhibition in Tehran in September 2010¹⁰ and in an invitation sent by Ahmadinejad to several state leaders a few months later to celebrate the Persian New Year, *Nowrouz*, in Iran.¹¹

Iran's traditional-conservative wing understood the emphasis on the cultural-national component of the Iranian national identity as indicative of the threat represented by the "deviant current" to the Islamic Republic's religious values. In an interview given by Hojjat-ol-Islam Qassem Ravanbakhsh, a student of Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, to "*Ya Lesarat ol-Hosseini*" weekly magazine affiliated with the radical Iranian organization "*Ansar-e Hezbollah*," the conservative cleric asserted that insistence on nationalism is one of the basic principles of freemasonry which is evident in Masha'i's thought.¹²

⁶ <http://www.iranina.org/political/20-2009-05-04-07-29-30.html>

⁷ Farda, April 30, 2011, <http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/145923>

⁸ Jahan News, August 4, 2010, <http://www.jahannews.com/vdchzqzz23ni6d.tft2.html>

⁹ The Cyrus Cylinder is an ancient Persian clay cylinder dated from the 6th century BC, which was discovered in 1879. It was created following the Persian conquest of Babylon in 539 BC, when the Persian army under Cyrus the Great invaded and conquered the Neo-Babylonian Empire, bringing it under the control of the Persian Empire.

¹⁰ Fars News Agency, September 12, 2010, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=8906211447>

¹¹ Radio Zamaneh, 22 March, 2011, <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/english/content/irans-revolutionary-guards-condemn-norooz-celebrations-persepolis>

¹² Ya Lesarat, 18 May, 2011, <http://www.yalesarat.com/vdcb.gbaurhb0giupr.html>

THE “DEVIANT CURRENT” AND MESSIANIC THOUGHT

Another event which provoked an unprecedented assault against Ahmadinejad’s associates was the distribution of the documentary film “The Reappearance [of the Twelfth Imam] is Imminent.” This film suggested that recent events in the Middle East should be considered as proof that the Mahdi¹³ will make his reappearance in the near future.¹⁴ The film has provoked strong criticism within the Shi’ite religious establishment and among conservative officials. They have argued that any attempt to predict the Imam’s return based on actual events is tantamount to deviation from the principles of Shi’te religious law.¹⁵

The distribution of the documentary was considered by the traditional conservatives as another sign of the dangerous spread of messianic views encouraged by President Ahmadinejad and his associates. These views pose a danger by potentially threatening the status of Iran’s clerics and allowing religious commentary that does not rely on religious institutions. They are, therefore, considered a theological, ideological and political threat to the regime and the concept of “Guardianship of the Islamic jurist.” The regime has consequently increased its suppression of any expression of popular Islam and messianic beliefs.

The regime’s concerns regarding the potential implications of anti-clerical views on the clerical establishment were clearly evident in its criticism of the “deviant current.” Such criticism has recently expanded to include even hard-line clerics, who were previously considered staunch supporters of president Ahmadinejad. The most prominent among them was Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi. Speaking at a conference on Iran’s cultural policy, held in April 2011, the senior cleric, formerly considered the president’s spiritual mentor, warned about the influence of those ideological factions taking a hostile position toward clerics. Mesbah-Yazdi said that since the revolution, some Iranian officials have come under the influence of secular, liberal and anti-clerical factions. And alluding to the president’s coterie, added that the influence of anti-clerical views was no longer restricted to the leaders of the reformist opposition.¹⁶

TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES AND THE “DEVIANT CURRENT”: POLITICAL STRUGGLE IN ACTION

The traditional conservatives perceived the messianic and anti-clerical views associated with Ahmadinejad and Masha’i’s political camp, their emphasis on Iranian nationalism and their challenge the Supreme Leader as a growing threat to the Supreme Leader’s authority. As long as the reformist opposition was considered the primary challenge to the regime’s stability, the conservative establishment focused most of its efforts against it. Once the regime succeeded in suppressing the reformists, it was ready to deal with the growing political challenge within the conservative faction itself.

The upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for early next year and the presidential elections due in 2013 made it more urgent to deal with the “deviant current.” The possibility that this *current* might try to use the elections to increase its political power did not escape the attention of the Iranian political elite. In fact, Masha’i’s associates suggested this possibility themselves. In April 2011, Hojjat-ol-Islam Abbas Amiri-Far, the head of the Cultural Council in the president’s office, stated that if Masha’i decides to run for president in the next election, he will become the next president. Referring to the upcoming parliamentary elections, he predicted that the president’s supporters will run against the conservative candidates and defeat them.¹⁷ A few weeks later, several Iranian websites reported that Amiri-Far attempted suicide in the notorious Evin prison after being arrested for his alleged involvement in the distribution of “The Reappearance is Imminent” documentary film.¹⁸

In May 2011, the growing concerns over the increased power of Masha’i and his followers led to strong efforts to suppress them. In mid-May, more than 20 of Masha’i supporters were arrested.¹⁹ Just like reformist leaders a few months before, the leaders of the “deviant current” were also accused of collaborating with the United States and Israel, as well as being involved in economic corruption.²⁰

¹³ For Twelver Shia Muslims, the Mahdi is the Twelfth Imam, who has been in occultation and awaits God’s decree to return and prevail over evil.

¹⁴ The 75-minute Persian language documentary can be viewed at:

http://www.shiatv.net/view_video.php?viewkey=14974e7fd34f975ced5b

¹⁵ <http://mahdi313.org/page.php?page=showarticles&cat=1&id=292&office=markaz>

¹⁶ Sadegh News, April 22, 2011, <http://sadeghnews.blogfa.com/post-59.aspx>

¹⁷ Fars News Agency, April 22, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.net/newstext.php?nn=9002010196>

¹⁸ Jaras, May 22, 2011, <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/37279>

¹⁹ Alef, May 18, 2011, <http://alef.ir/1388/content/view/104496>

²⁰ Javan News, May 16, 2011, <http://www.javanonline.ir/Nsite/FullStory/?Id=352926>; Mehr News Agency, May 18, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1314814>; Mehr News Agency, May 11, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/newsdetail.aspx?NewsID=1309769>

Top Revolutionary Guards officials joined the campaign against Masha'i's associates, as well. Revolutionary Guards chief, Mohammad-Ali Ja'fari, said in a seminar attended by Basij student members that the "deviant current" was trying to gain political support through paying money and rent so that they could influence the upcoming elections.²¹

CONCLUSIONS

The political confrontation within the conservative faction could have far reaching implications for the future of Iran's political system. To a certain extent, conservatives' internal debates could be viewed as evidence of the regime's success in containing the popular protests and reformist opposition in 2009. One can assume that if the ruling political elite still regarded the reformists as a concrete threat it would continue—at least publicly—to demonstrate a greater degree of internal unity. This does not mean, of course, that the reform movement has ceased. The demonstrations held in early 2011 in major cities throughout Iran indicate that the reformist opposition is still capable of generating substantial support for its agenda. Nevertheless, the violent suppression it suffered, the continuous house arrest of its leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, and its internal weakness have turned the reformist opposition into an almost irrelevant player in the Iranian political arena. These circumstances enable the ruling elite to focus its efforts against the competing forces within the conservative faction itself. In this respect, the internal political debate might be considered as "good news" for the conservative elite, at least in the short run.

The internal political struggle's long-term implications, however, should cause the ruling establishment serious concern. For the first time, the conservative elite was forced to admit that challenging the Supreme Leader and the clerical establishment is no longer confined to the reformist opposition. Even if the clerics expected to overcome any challenge to their political status in the near term, the continuation of this popular religious trend may present a challenge to the concept of "the Guardianship of the Islamic jurist", especially in a major crisis, like the death of the present Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

In addition, the traditional conservatives' efforts to act against the president's associates and his advisor, Rahim Masha'i, signal another phase in the gradual exclusion of competing elements from the ruling political elite. As a result of the political crisis in 2009, the reformist leaders, once a part of the Iranian political elite themselves, were denounced as traitors and seditionists and excluded from the political consensus, defined by the regime. During the last year, the political status of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—one of the most senior and influential politicians in Iran since the Islamic revolution—has also been deteriorating. In March 2011, he was removed from his position as chairman of the Assembly of Experts following a widening gap with the traditional conservatives. They claimed that he had not expressed unequivocal support for the regime against the reformist opposition and that he even collaborated with reformist leaders.

It appears that the traditional-conservatives are now ready to deal with the president's followers. Since the late 1990s, a new generation of conservatives has entered the political arena. This younger generation, many of them veterans from the Iran-Iraq war, aspired to revive the values of the Islamic revolution. They believe those values were eroded during the presidencies of Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, while emphasizing the need for economic and social reform. They presented themselves as an alternative both to the old guard of conservatives, who were conceived as being irrelevant by the younger generation, as well as to the reformists, who were considered a threat to the revolutionary principles. Ahmadinejad, Masha'i and their supporters represent these new conservatives, who aim to reinvigorate the conservative faction. Their suppression by the traditional conservatives and their denunciation as a "deviant current" mean a further narrowing of the elite's political base. While excluding this new political and ideological current may enable the traditional conservatives to maintain their exclusive status within the political elite in the short term. In the long term, however, the traditional conservatives may discover that their intolerant suppression of political rivals has narrowed the Iranian elite to such an extent that it will not be able to cope with future challenges.

This essay has focused on the growing internal political struggle between the conservative-traditional religious establishment and the new political current affiliated with President Ahmadinejad and his associates. The internal disagreements among the conservatives in Iran do not directly affect its national foreign policy. This policy is decided almost exclusively by the Supreme Leader and rarely reflects major differences of opinion regarding important international and regional issues facing Iran. These major concerns would include the nuclear issue or the country's involvement in the region. However, the internal political struggle has major implications for the future stability of the regime. The United States should consider the growing tension within Iranian political elite, especially when considering its policy concerning regime change in Iran.

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²¹ Mehr News Agency, May 28, 2011, <http://www.mehrnews.com/fa/NewsDetail.aspx?NewsID=1322564>