

The New
REPUBLIC

Published on *The New Republic* (<http://www.tnr.com>)

Clerical Error

Ayatollah Khamenei's massive miscalculation about the extent of his power.

Author Info Needed June 17, 2009 | 12:00 am

The Iranian regime is currently facing one of the greatest challenges of its 30-year history. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei--whose rule has been absolute and whose words have been the law of the land--is facing the most public challenge to his authority. His two decades since succeeding Ayatollah Khomeini have been defined by a tendency to keep his options open, a verbal dexterity that allowed him to skirt tough political positions, and an appearance of impartiality in Iran's fierce factional feuds. His caution has been the key to his success and survival.

But Khamenei has thrown this caution to the wind by unabashedly favoring Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Four years ago, his support was instrumental in getting the little-known Ahmadinejad elected president. Even as criticism of the president has been on the rise in the country over the past year, Khamenei reportedly promised Ahmadinejad and his cabinet four more years at the helm.

The ayatollah failed to recognize the mounting tension over this month's presidential election--what former president Ali Akbar Hashemi

Rafsanjani described in a pre-election letter to him as a seething "volcano" of discontent. Even *Sobhe-Sadeq*, the political organ of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, warned in a lead editorial that the opposition's use of the color green had become dangerously similar to the kind of "color revolution" that dethroned governments in Ukraine, Lebanon, and Georgia. (Khamenei had even commissioned a group of scholars three years ago to investigate the evolution of these "color revolutions.")

Only hours after the polls closed, Khamenei issued a statement urging everyone to support the supposedly reelected president. Khamenei seems to have underestimated Ahmadinejad's opponent, Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has proved willing to defy, if not challenge, Khamenei's dictates. Following Mousavi's lead, angry demonstrators swiftly took to the streets, with protests erupting in major cities and universities across the country. On Monday, June 15, hundreds of thousands of Iranians flooded the streets of Tehran to protest the election results.

What makes this moment different from past incidents of confrontation between the regime and the people is that, this time, many pillars of the regime are part of the opposition. Aside from Mousavi, who was prime minister for eight years, Rafsanjani, former president Mohammad Khatami, former speaker of the parliament Mehdi Karubi, and many other past ministers and undersecretaries are now leading the movement demanding new elections. Moreover, since the demonstrators come from all walks of life, it is more difficult than in the past to accuse them of immaturity or youthful impertinence, or of falling prey to the designs of the "Great Satan."

Recognizing the growing tide of popular discontent, Khamenei blinked. He indirectly conceded that the election--which he had previously described as a divinely designed victory for the Islamic regime--might have been rigged. The twelve-man Guardian Council--which he appointed to "carefully" look into the allegations of fraud--will likely follow Khamenei's lead in their ruling. The question is how cowed the cleric will be in the face of powerful and persistent opposition.

The regime still has the capacity to contain the disgruntled demonstrators and maybe even co-opt their leadership. But the majestic power of large peaceful crowds, tasting the joys of victory embodied in acts of civil disobedience, and brought together by the power of technologies beyond the regime's control, is sure to beget larger, more confident, and more disciplined crowds. When people defied Khamenei's orders by gathering en masse on Monday, the regime's armor of invincibility--so central to the regime's authoritarian control--was cracked. Without it, the regime cannot survive, and reestablishing it can come only at the price of great bloodshed.

But if Khamenei wants a crackdown of this magnitude, he will have to turn to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)--a move that brings its own political costs. The IRGC was created by Khomeini shortly after the Islamic revolution as a more ideological and loyal alternative to the traditional military. The IRGC gradually became a force in its own right, developing its own air force, intelligence, officer academy, and think tank. Many commanders started companies that quickly dominated the economy by winning major government contracts. Today,

a substantial number of provincial governors, mayors, cabinet ministers, undersecretaries, ambassadors, and managers of major state companies are from the IRGC's ranks.

The IRGC has largely accepted the leadership of the clergy and Khamenei's role as commander in chief. But while Khomeini strictly kept them out of politics, Khamenei has encouraged them to get involved in his political battles. In his eight-year tug-of-war with the reformist movement led by Khatami, Khamenei used the IRGC more than once to suppress Iran's rapidly developing civil society and student movement. The most egregious example of this militarization of politics came in the 2005 presidential election, when Khamenei, worried about a possible Rafsanjani victory, reportedly ordered IRGC members to vote for Ahmadinejad and take members of their family with them to the polls. The rise of Ahmadinejad, himself once a member of the IRGC and reportedly an engineer in its infamous Al-Quds Brigade, has further encouraged the IRGC to seek an increasing share of political power.

It is difficult to imagine the IRGC quelling the current protests and then simply turning power over to the clergy. If a political compromise cannot be reached between the regime and the opposition, and the IRGC is used in suppressing the protests, its commanders would likely expect a bigger role in the government. It is even conceivable that faced with irresolution among the clergy, they will act on their own, and establish a military dictatorship that uses Islam as its ideological veneer--similar to Pakistan under Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq.

Khamenei thus finds himself in a difficult situation as a result of his incautious gambit with Ahmadinejad. Whether he gives more power to the IRGC or to the opposition, there is little chance that he will emerge from the current crisis with his supremacy intact.

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Source URL: <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/clerical-error>