

Ahmadinejad loses favor with Khamenei, Iran's top leader

Contributed by AP
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TEHRAN: A rift is emerging between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Iran's supreme religious leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, suggesting that the president no longer enjoys the full backing of Khamenei, as he did in the years after his election in 2005.

In the past, when Ahmadinejad was attacked by political opponents, the criticisms were usually silenced by Khamenei, who has the final word on state matters and who regularly endorsed the president in public speeches. But that public support has been conspicuously absent in recent months.

There are numerous possible reasons for Ahmadinejad's loss of support, but analysts here all point to one overriding factor: the U.S. National Intelligence Report last month, which said that Iran suspended its nuclear weapons program in 2003 in response to international pressure. The report sharply decreased the threat of a military strike against Iran, allowing the authorities to focus on domestic issues, with important parliamentary elections looming in March.

"Now that Iran is not under the threat of a military attack, all contradictions within the establishment are surfacing," said Saeed Leylaz, an economic and political analyst. "The biggest mistake that Americans have constantly made toward Iran was adopting radical approaches, which provided the ground for radicals in the country to take control."

Iran had been under increasing international pressure for its refusal to suspend its uranium enrichment program, which could be pursued for either peaceful or military purposes. In separate speeches last year, American and French officials did not rule out military attack against Iran if it continued its defiance. Those threats have stopped since the National Intelligence Report was released.

While the pressure was on, the leadership was reluctant to let any internal disagreements show. Senior officials, including Khamenei, constantly called for unity and warned that the enemy, a common reference to the United States, could take advantage of such differences.

The Iranian presidency is a largely ceremonial post. But Ahmadinejad used the office as a bully pulpit, espousing an economic populism that built a strong following among the middle and lower classes and made him a political force to be reckoned with. That popularity won him the strong backing of the supreme leader.

But the relationship began to sour even before the National Intelligence Report was released. A source close to Khamenei, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retribution, said Khamenei had been especially disappointed by Ahmadinejad's economic performance, which had led to steep inflation in basic necessities, from food to property values.

"Mr. Khamenei supported Mr. Ahmadinejad because he believed in his slogans of helping the poor," the source said. "But his economic performance has been disastrous. Their honeymoon is certainly over."

Economists have long criticized Ahmadinejad's economic policies, warning that his reliance on oil revenues to finance loans to the poor and to buy cheap imports would lead to inflation and cripple local industries. Inflation has risen from 12 percent in October 2006 to 19 percent this year, according to figures released by the Iranian Central Bank.

Khamenei said Thursday in a speech in the central city of Yazd that "the government has certain unique characteristics, but like any other government there are mistakes and shortcomings."

He added that continuous criticism could undermine the government, but he refrained from praising it as he had in the past.

Recently, the supreme leader appointed a hard-line military leader, Mohammad Zolghadr, as deputy head of the armed forces for Basij, which is a volunteer militia force.

Ahmadinejad dismissed Zolghadr last month as deputy interior minister for security affairs. Ahmadinejad appeared angered last week by interference from Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator, Ali Larijani, who visited Egypt as Khamenei's representative at the Supreme National Security Council. Ahmadinejad said Wednesday that his government had a Foreign Ministry that determined the country's foreign policy, and a ministry spokesman said that Larijani's trip had

been personal.

Larijani's trip was important because Tehran cut ties with Egypt, a major Sunni country, when Cairo signed a peace agreement with Israel in 1979 and provided asylum for the deposed Shah of Iran. Larijani, who is a close aide to Khamenei, announced that his talks with the Egyptian authorities had gone well.

In the face of rising criticism, Ahmadinejad has for the first time acknowledged that Iran was suffering from rising prices. Previously, he had called inflation a fiction invented by his political enemies.

But he blamed previous governments, Parliament and what he called a 36-percent increase in the prices of goods in international markets.

Mohammad Reza Katouzian, a conservative and onetime supporter of Ahmadinejad, said the president "should offer solutions instead of explaining past mistakes," the semi-official Mehr news agency reported.

Hassan Rassouli, head of Baran, a nongovernment organization created by the previous president, Mohammad Khatami after Khatami left office, said that Ahmadinejad tried only to justify inflation, not do anything about it.

"Either the president has no idea how inflation has affected people's lives or he prefers to talk unprofessionally, without referring to figures," he said, according to the Mehr press agency.

Alireza Mahjoub, a member of Parliament and the leader of a workers union, dismissed the government's claim that it had lowered the unemployment rate to 9.9 percent and said the real figure should be more than 16 percent, the Fars news agency reported.

"There are 4 million jobless in the country but a 9.9 percent unemployment rate suggests the figure is 2.2 million, out of the 21 million active population," he added. "The figure has only decreased on paper."

The coming parliamentary elections will provide a stark test for Ahmadinejad and his popularity among the poor. The conservative politicians who supported him in 2005 have, in many cases, turned into his fiercest critics and are now worried chiefly that they will be disqualified as candidates before the vote, a power that the government has exercised in the past.

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