

Outside View: Khamenei takes control

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LONDON, April 1 (UPI) -- As parliamentary elections in Iran confirm a vast majority for the hard-liners in Iran, jostling seems to have already gained pace for Iran's presidential elections in 2009. However, pressure on President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has grown more forceful from within his own camp rather than the so-called reformists whose campaign was crushed by the vast disqualification of their candidates in the March 14 parliamentary polls.

The divide between the hard-liners is now evident. Many from that camp are unhappy with much of the tactics used by Ahmadinejad and decided to run on a separate slate to that of the president. This group of candidates contained two heavyweights in Iranian politics, Ali Larijani, Iran's former nuclear negotiator, and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Tehran's mayor. Both Qalibaf and Larijani may well have ambitions of running for president in 2009. However, both know full well that any chance of success in those elections lies solely with Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei.

In fact, it is Khamenei whose control of Iran's political sphere has been considerably strengthened by this clear divide among Iran's hard-liners. The man who has spearheaded Iran's revolution since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 now finds himself in a position of undoubted control.

Throughout the years, the supreme leader has controlled much of Iranian life. He acts as commander in chief of Iran's armed forces. However, more significantly he controls Iran's infamous Basij force as well as the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps -- two groups specifically created to preserve the Islamic revolution in Iran. It is the IRGC in which Khamenei has placed great trust over recent years with the IRGC now controlling much of Iran's economy.

Khamenei is no longer the distant religious figure he once was, but the man now in control of Iran. This fact has not been lost on Iran's potential presidential candidates, with all now vying for Khamenei's support at next year's presidential polls.

One man who knows well the impact that Khamenei can have is former President Ali Akbar Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani in the run-up to Iran's last presidential elections was seen as the clear front-runner. He was a man with political as well as religious clout. However, it was Ahmadinejad who gained the backing of Iran's supreme leader, and it was Ahmadinejad who gained victory.

The so-called reformists in Iran have been left with very few options for next year's presidential elections. Their attempted rally for support in the face of more than 1,700 of its candidates being vetoed gave them an unexpected number of seats. However, the days of former President Mohammad Khatami and his so-called reformist colleagues seem to have come to an end. The Iranian people are likely to have a choice between two forms of hard-liners in next year's presidential elections.

However, it will not be a choice of substance. Larijani and Qalibaf could never be described as "moderates." They are about as hard-line as Iranian politicians come. However, a clear difference in style exists between them and Ahmadinejad. Larijani, described by some as the smiling assassin, clearly believes that success for Iran can be achieved through a more friendly international posture than that shown by Ahmadinejad.

With such a lack of choice in 2009, dissent among the Iranian people is likely to increase over the coming 18 months, increasing the pressure on Ahmadinejad. However, Khamenei's direct political involvement now leaves him in the clear firing line of the Iranian people.

With the so-called reformists now clearly an obsolete force in Iranian politics, many have begun a search for a viable opposition to this regime. There seems only one group worth mentioning, the National Council of Resistance of Iran. This parliament-in-exile has widespread support in Iran and across parliaments in Europe, and seems to have the required mechanisms and support to be seen as a practical force for change.

However, the group's work has been hindered by a terror tag on its largest member group, the People's Mojahedin Organisation of Iran. The PMOI, labeled as terrorist in an effort to please Tehran during the "reformist" period of Khatami, may well now offer the only true opposition to this current regime. This terror tag on Iran's largest opposition group may well soon end as the PMOI takes its case through the British and European courts. The group has already gained victory at the European Court of Justice and the United Kingdom's Proscribed Organisations Appeal Commission. The culmination of its legal proceedings is expected to occur in the coming weeks as the British Court of Appeal delivers its judgment.

