



# National Iranian American Council

PROMOTING IRANIAN-AMERICAN PARTICIPATION IN AMERICAN CIVIC LIFE

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### ON THE HAZARDS OF OVER-INTERPRETING IRANIAN POLITICS

The relationship between Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, and various Iranian presidents of Iran has always been a fascinating topic particularly for those looking into Iran from the outside. Correctly seeing the office of the leader as the most powerful institution, many outsiders nevertheless end up over-emphasizing individual conflicts at the top of the Iranian political system as the sole explanation for why things happen the way they do, then extracting from them indications of long-term trends in Iranian politics.

The problem is that such an approach under-estimates the everyday politicking of other Iranian players and politicians interested in securing their position vis-à-vis other politicians. It is also an over-interpretation intended to fit Iran into a narrative that implicitly or explicitly posits its everyday political conflicts as different from elsewhere in so far as some fundamental change about power relationships are always about to happen.

A good example of such an over-

interpretation occurred last week when a call by the parliamentary speaker, Gholamali Haddad Adel, to Ayatollah Khomeini to intervene on behalf of the parliament was interpreted as a signal that the latter was losing patience with a president to whom he once he showed loyalty. A closer look at what happened suggests the possibility of a deft move on the part of Haddad Adel, trying to improve his standing among his conservative colleagues who have to decide who should lead their list of candidates for the next session of the parliament.

In understanding what happened, it is important to note that Haddad Adel's move came in reaction to a letter by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the speaker in which he complained about several parliamentary legislations. From Ahmadinejad's point of view, these mandated legislations clearly infringed upon the prerogatives of the executive branch. He asked the speaker to curtail these "evident" violations of the constitution. He also said that

he would not implement legislation to supply cheap gas to villages suffering power cuts in an unexpectedly harsh winter because the source of funding was not specified.

But in registering these complaints, Ahmadinejad was standing on shaky grounds as the Iranian constitution has a clear and peculiar institutional set-up for finding which legislative acts are unconstitutional. The Guardian Council has the task of validating both the Islamic and constitutional nature of legislations. Regarding the latter it often sends back legislations it deems unconstitutional on the basis of Article 75 of the constitution which requires specification of compensation or source of funding for any legislation that leads to the reduction of public revenues or increase in public expenditures.

By proclaiming the executive branch a constitutional authority and then using that authority to not implement laws that couldn't have become laws unless the Guardian Council had

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declared or assented to be constitutional, Ahmadinejad was walking on thin legal reasoning as far as the parameters of the Islamic republic are concerned.

Haddad Adel had an easy case on his hands and decided to handle it not by reiterating the constitutional process but by writing a letter to the leader who is endowed with the responsibility to resolve conflicts among the three branches of the government. Khamenei responded immediately in a short, terse note, stating "All legal legislation that has gone through [the required] procedures stipulated in the constitution is binding for all branches of power."

The issue was resolved decisively in favor of the parliament but the puzzle of why Haddad Adel had to publicize the exchanged letters before the upcoming parliamentary elections could not remain unnoticed. After all, as one current reformist deputy put it, Ahmadinejad has repeatedly violated legislative authority on financial matters by making promises of major projects in his numerous provincial trips without going through the required funding process in the parliament. But the parliamentary leadership in general and Haddad Adel in particular had said nothing despite repeated complaints by various deputies.

Even several conservative deputies pointed out that Ahmadinejad's unilateral moves had undermined the institution of the parliament which instead of

"being behind the government was more held in its fist." This is why to them the move seemed more like "propaganda" to hide the lowering of the status of the parliament that had occurred under Haddad Adel's own leadership.

Beyond an attempt to shape public opinion before elections, the move was also seen as part and parcel of an attempt to force the conservative coalition to place Haddad Adel on top of its list of candidates for the city of Tehran, enhancing his chance of re-election but also for becoming speaker again. In fact, according to one of Tehran's dailies, *Etemad*, this was more than anything else "a message about Haddad Adel's spiritual influence and current position in the Islamic republic and that because of this influence the conservative leadership has no other choice but to accept him as the list leader and probably his leadership again in the 8<sup>th</sup> parliament."

One deputy quoted in the *Etemad* piece even went so far as to suggest that Ahmadinejad will continue not to implement legislative mandates same in the future but his mistake this time around was simply to put his position in writing, giving Haddad Adel, increasingly a political foe despite being a conservative, an opportunity to capitalize and letting those making decisions about the candidate lists know about his clout and his ability to get the support of those who really matter in Iran.

Accepting *Etemad's* version of what happened essentially implies that, ironically, despite all the economic problems, external pressures, and even the reality of a president who has antagonized a whole of array of elites in Iran and is deemed both incompetent and rash by many of them, Iranian politics is pretty settled.

In any one day, the president can yell constitutional disaster; speaker of the parliament can make noises about parliamentary prerogatives; all powerful leader can intervene presumably for the good cause of parliamentary vigor; commentators detect manipulation and personal rivalries, note it and then move on to the next public drama, which at this particular moment entails the extensive disqualification of reformist and centrist candidates standing for parliamentary elections.

Haddad Adel was able to score a political point against Ahmadinejad that he may or may not be able to use in his attempt to assure that he will be selected as the speaker of the next parliament by his conservative colleagues or in his probable challenge of Ahmadinejad in the next presidential election. But any attempt to read anything more than this into this essentially political maneuver is an over-interpretation of the raucous and contentious nature of Iranian politics.

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