The consequences of the outcomes of factional struggles in Tehran are nothing less than profound. It behooves U.S. policy makers to take note of them while developing effective policies that protect U.S. interests and advance U.S. goals, particularly where the center of gravity of U.S. policy that seeks to alter Tehran’s behavior is concerned.

This week witnessed two extraordinary developments in Iranian politics that underscore the importance of factional differences among the ruling elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The consequences of the outcomes of factional struggles in Tehran are nothing less than profound. It behooves U.S. policy makers to take note of them while developing effective policies that protect U.S. interests and advance U.S. goals, particularly when seeking to alter Tehran’s behavior.

First, on 12 November 2007 Iran’s increasingly embattled and unpopular president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, lashed out at unnamed officials in the Iranian regime that are opposed to his uncompromising stance on Iran’s nuclear activities and the related negotiations with the IAEA and Western powers. Echoing similar actions taken by his government against individual Iranian dissidents and scholars in recent months, Ahmadinejad dramatically upped the ante in the increasingly open confrontation with domestic adversaries by declaring elements among them to be “traitors” in cahoots with Western powers who sought to undermine Iran’s national security. What is significant about this episode is that his attacks were directed at important figures within Iran’s contemporary political system, not external enemies or anti-revolutionaries.

Second, immediately following this, on 13 November 2007 the government announced that Hossein Mousavian—a former Iranian nuclear negotiator until 2005—would be brought up on charges of espionage for delivering secret information to Iran’s European negotiating partners.

The bombshell is an effective declaration of war by Ahmadinejad against his political adversaries and shows the lengths to which he will go to squelch opposition. By these actions he has equated support for a more moderate stance on the nuclear negotiations—as advocated by the Khatami administration until 2005—with political treason, a crime punishable by death. If nothing else, such events should remind us that Iranian politics are not monolithic.

The Balance of Power

A crucial question in the midst of these developments is why now? Why would Iran’s president (who appeared to have wrested away the political initiative from his main adversaries after his meteoric and surprising rise) take these extraordinary steps of attacking his political opponents? The answer lies in the factional politics of the Iranian regime—which for all their complexity and opacity,
still dictate the course of Iranian policy.

Recent reports from Iran indicate that Ahmadinjad’s popularity has plummeted to unprecedented levels and that he has become the target of regular, scathing public criticism from multiple sources. Some argue that Iran has not been as isolated internationally as it is today since the late 1980s. The threat of war with the U.S. looms over all other foreign policy questions. Foreign investment has slowed due to U.S. efforts and Ahmadinejad’s bellicosity. Domestically, the social spaces created since the mid-1990s for greater personal freedoms are either being rolled back or under constant pressure.

The economy should be booming in a time of record oil prices but remains mired in high inflation and unemployment. The policies of the Ahmadinejad administration—as formally attested to by the head of Iran’s Central Bank, members of the Parliament, and groups of Iranian scholars in public over the past year—have exacerbated this situation. Ahmadinejad himself is widely seen in Iran to be a principal cause of these problems as well as a failure given that he campaigned on a platform of economic growth.

The upshot is a presidency under great pressure, growing vulnerability, and increasing attack by opponents. His recent comments reflect this context of growing pressure and dwindling political support. The president’s reliance on the national security argument recalls not only the ability of Iranian radicals to appeal to nationalism when required, but also their willingness to use it as a bludgeon against political opponents.

The opposition to Ahmadinejad within the Iranian regime has been coalescing over the past year. It encompasses the reformist movement of the Khatami era; supporters and political allies of former president and arch-pragmatist Hashemi Rafsanjani; Iran’s traditional clergy; and even conservatives who decry the radical president’s penchant for verbal bombast and mismanagement.

Opposition factions within the regime are accruing growing political power. For example, the reformists have re-established a base in Iran’s civil society since their unceremonious ejection from political power in 2005, and are becoming increasingly vocal. The pragmatists have remained powerful in business and government to this day. Rafsanjani—widely rumored to be the wealthiest man in Iran—heads two powerful unelected bodies in Iran’s political system, and rivals Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for standing as Iran’s most powerful political cleric.

Political conflicts among Iranian factions matter. They embody real differences among Iranian political leaders regarding a broad range of issues such as worldview, the interpretation of Islamic principles, role of religion in society, state-society relations, and Iran’s ties with the outside world—issues that have direct policy implications for the United States.

This is a key point that is under appreciated by outside observers, and is often derided by hawks in Washington—who assert that differences in Iran’s ruling elite matters little to ultimate policy outcomes since the entire Iranian political structure is driven by radical principles and pervaded by anti-Americanism. The flaw in this perspective is not only that it ignores the very real record of policy shifts tied to changes in Iran’s factional balance of power. It also erroneously justifies the abandonment of viable policy alternatives for U.S. decision makers when it comes to identifying the ways in which to address U.S.-Iran relations going forward.

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