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How the 'Mugabe option' figures in Khamenei's strategy



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Every Iranian knows that no tyranny can survive, no matter how well armed, when it is confronted on the street by an unarmed but united and determined people – that's what their history books teach about the events in their own country in 1978 and 1979. And it's precisely that awareness that makes this current crisis so dangerous to the regime.

Senior figures in the regime have long warned the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, that the policies of the Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were endangering the Islamic Republic – and that his divisive style and the possibility of a stolen election could create a crisis of legitimacy. Instead of heeding their advice and allowing Iran's electoral system to play a corrective role, Mr. Khamenei made nonsense of his designated role as an above-the-fray spiritual guide. Not only did he break with convention by openly backing Mr. Ahmadinejad's campaign, he endorsed an improbable result with haste, proclaiming it a "divine victory" before the upsurge in protests prompted him to order the unelected Guardian Council to investigate voting irregularities.

But out on the streets, hundreds of thousands of ordinary Iranians expressed their outrage at the betrayal of their faith in the Islamic Republic's democratic process. Instead of repositioning himself as the leader of all the people and the arbiter of conflicts between the regime's factions – which is what the electoral contest between Mr. Ahmadinejad and pragmatic conservative Mir Hossein Mousavi amounted to – Mr. Khamenei used a rare appearance to lead Friday prayers at Tehran University to align himself even more directly with Mr Ahmadinejad. He insisted that opposition candidates confine their complaints to the Guardian Council, a clerical body loyal to the Supreme Leader. Further protests, he warned, would be deemed a challenge to the Republic and the work of its foreign foes, and would be dealt with harshly.

Mr. Khamenei warned Mr. Mousavi and others to stop the protest actions and accept another four years of Mr Ahmadinejad, or else be treated as enemies of the state, giving licence to the security forces to use violence to snuff out further demonstrations. Think of this as the Zimbabwe option: Robert Mugabe lost the election last March, but fudged the vote count, then bludgeoned the opposition into submission for almost a year, forcing it to settle for a junior role in Mr Mugabe's government.

The security forces in Iran had been restrained from unleashing a fraction of the violence of which they're capable – though reports out of Tehran yesterday were grim. The opposition candidates wanted to avoid a violent confrontation to protect the lives of their supporters and also because they're creatures of the regime, who would be swept aside if it collapsed in chaos. They also know that Mr. Ahmadinejad's support within the Revolutionary Guard and the Basij militia, and the loyalty he commands from at least a third of the population, means that no matter how brave the protesters, their actions are unlikely to win a showdown.

Mr. Khamenei's statements on Friday leave the regime no room to retreat and order a new ballot, and even if Mr. Khamenei were inclined to offer concessions to calm things down, his power today rests far more squarely on the Revolutionary Guards and Basij than on the clerical establishment, and the security forces appear to favour a hard line.

The Zimbabwe strategy would involve first escalating repression to get the opposition off the streets, drawing enough blood to make many Iranians think twice about putting themselves at great physical risk in pursuit of an objective that begins to look beyond reach. And once the opposition is intimidated and demoralised, Mr. Ahmadinejad might be prodded to offer concessions in the form of some kind of national unity government, albeit on his own terms. Right now, there's no sign that the opposition would accept such a deal, but Mr. Khamenei may be betting that suppressing the protest movement can split the opposition, isolating the more reformist elements from pragmatic conservatives like Mr. Mousavi who didn't back the previous reform presidency of Mohammed Khatami, but who have been alarmed by Mr. Ahmadinejad's militancy.

It's unlikely, in fact, that Mr. Mousavi had evolved a strategy for the situation as it has unfolded. Like Mr. Khamenei, he is improvising. The Supreme Leader has now forced him to choose between becoming an enemy of the state, or settling for a secondary role and perhaps, after the crisis has passed, a more moderate and inclusive Mr Ahmadinejad.

In the short term, there is no easy path to victory for the opposition. But Mr. Khamenei's behaviour over the past couple of weeks may have dealt a body blow to the regime's key sources of legitimacy – the clergy, and the democratic process which offers genuine political competition, even if the range of candidates is tightly limited. In the eyes of millions of Iranians, Mr. Khamenei has thrown his weight behind a lie, and their faith in the institutions of the Islamic Republic may have been fatally undermined. Much of the clergy, which has never been impressed by Mr. Khamenei – a theological lightweight elevated into the position only after Mr Khomeini's original designated successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri had begun to question the regime's murder of its political prisoners – has begun to openly challenge his decisions over the elections.

The cost of getting Mr. Ahmadinejad reelected may prove to squander the moral and political authority attached to Mr Khamenei's office. The 1979 revolution created two sources of authority; the electorate and the clergy, and it sought to balance those to some extent. Ayatollah Khamenei may have begun to irretrievably alienate himself from both, making the office of Supreme Leader less about offering the regime moral and spiritual guidance than about being an extension of one faction.

Whatever the outcome in the test of wills, Iran's next great political battle may, in fact, not be fought on the streets, but in the closed chambers where the various unelected clerical councils of the regime meet – sooner or later – to choose a successor to Mr. Khamenei himself.

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