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The Rise and Decline of the Iranian Hardliners: Why Ahmadinejad's Group Shifted from Power to Opposition

This paper analyses the political parabola of the Iranian hardliners behind the leadership of Mahmood Ahmadinejad with a historical approach. It will investigate the rise in power of Ahmadinejad's circle by identifying his electoral campaign, as well as his political narrative and relations with the other political factions. Moreover, the paper will analyse economic reforms and trace the guidelines of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy to provide a comprehensive insight into his political agenda. The paper aims to identify the path of hardliners from being the peak of the political power to the subsequent marginalization that led them to stand as the opposition. It will therefore examine the roots behind this shift and the legacy left by the hardliners' political experience in the factional competition.

The hardliners entered the Iranian political scene between 2003 and 2005. Domestic politics was experiencing an ongoing clash between conservatives and reformists, a heterogeneous front that had been able to intercept the demand for more openings from students' circles and the urban middle-class. The reformist president, Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), was in his last term and the *Dovvom-e Khordad* (as the reformist front is generally referred to in Iran)¹ was exhausted by the constant marginalization and repression of its members by unelected institutions². In Iran, these constitutional bodies, such as the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council, and the judiciary³, have always epitomised the most conservative expression of the system. They are linked to the office of the Supreme Leader, whose authority derives from the principle of *Velayat-e faqih*. Reformists had tried to change not only the social aspects, providing more openings to individual liberties, civil society, minorities, women and young people; they had also resumed the debate on political Islam initiated in the nineties by religious intellectuals⁴. However, the ambitious project

¹ *Dovvom-e khordad* (the second day of the Iranian month *Khordad*) named the reformist front by recalling the day in which Mohammad Khatami won the presidential elections in 1997.

² G. Abdo, *From Revolution to Revelations: Khatami's Iran Struggles for Reform*, "Middle East Report" 1999, Issue 211.

³ To have a general understanding of the functioning of Iranian institutions see: M. Kamrava, H. Houchang, *Suspended equilibrium in Iran's political system*, "The Muslim World" 2004, Vol. 94, Issue 4, p. 496.

⁴ F. Jahanbakhsh, *The emergence and development of religious intellectualism in Iran*, "Historical reflections/Réflexions historiques" 2004, Vol. 30, No. 3, pp. 469–489. A suggested reading is:

to implement gradual social reforms and soften pressures on dress-code and gender segregation did not find a real implementation. Also, regional circumstances influenced the setback of the reformist front, already weakened from within.

President Khatami presented himself as the advocate of the “dialogue among civilizations” (*goftogu-ye tamaddonha*), which implied a relationship of dialogue with other countries, hence the rejection of a confrontational approach. The growing regional instability following 9/11 has negatively affected Iranian relations with foreign powers and the reformists’ attempt to establish a positive engagement with the West. For instance, the United States under the presidency of George W. Bush located their troops along the Iranian borders. In 2001, the *Enduring freedom* operation led the American troops to step in in Afghanistan to eradicate the Taliban presence and the main leaders of Al Qaida, while after two years the *Iraqi freedom* operation saw the US invasion of Iraq⁵. The Islamic republic was therefore surrounded by troops from a hostile country, which perhaps was even committed to provoke a regime change in Iran through a domino effect. Moreover, in 2002, president Bush also declared Iran a part of the “Axis of evil”⁶, along with North Korea and Iraq, that is those rogue states accused of financing international terrorism. It is now evident how regional instability and US threats played in favour of reformist opponents. Border insecurity, a lack of trust towards Washington and a justified sense of siege, activated a progressive securitization of Iranian foreign policy that favoured conservative factions competing with reformists. In this internal and geopolitical context, the hardliners came to power.

The Islamic republic of Iran was entering a new phase that, eventually, would have transformed internal factional relations and reshaped political alliances. The first sign of this change was given by local elections in 2003. Due to a low turnout and the defeat of the reformist movement, a new group emerged as the winner of the capital’s council. 14 of the 15 seats were assigned to members of the Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran (*E’telaf-e Abagaran-e Iran-e Eslami*), a group formed by technocrats, non-clerics, war veterans and members of the Revolutionary Guards. The leader of the group was Mahmood Ahmadinejad, a generally unknown figure who in 2003 was eventually appointed mayor of Tehran. Before, Ahmadinejad served as governor of Ardabil between 1993 and 1997, but his presence in the revolutionary momentum and its aftermath is questioned. Coming from the poor neighbourhoods of the capital, he will

A. Soroush, *Reason, freedom, and democracy in Islam: Essential writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, New York 2002.

⁵ A. Ehteshami, *Iran’s international posture after the fall of Baghdad*, “The Middle East Journal” 2004, Vol. 58, No. 2, pp. 179–194.

⁶ D. Heradstveit, M.G. Bonham, *What the axis of evil metaphor did to Iran*, “The Middle East Journal” 2007, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 421–440.

always refer to his background and modest lifestyle to present himself as close to ordinary people and disadvantaged classes⁷. During his administration, Ahmadinejad carried forward theatrical proposals and projects, like the idea of burying war martyrs in city parks. His rhetoric involved constantly praising the war efforts, martyrs and war veterans, to underline the mobilization of people and commitment to the revolutionary-oriented ideology of resistance⁸. Tehran became a place to celebrate and remember the effort of the *sacred defence*⁹. At the same time, he was insisting on the righteousness of Islamic values. Within this rhetorical framework, he provided important donations to local mosques to finance public celebrations and religious activities. The progressive militarization and Islamization of space and political discourse had the objective of making alliances. The emerging faction led by Ahmadinejad could not count on consolidated support from other factions, nor from other centres of power. Thus, already during his administration of Tehran, Ahmadinejad tried to strengthen the alliance with conservative clerics and military figures.

In 2004, the elections for the renewal of the parliament (*majles*) assigned another important victory to the Alliance of Builders, who conquered all the 30 seats of the capital. The groups linked to the conservatives obtained the majority in the *majles* imposing a heavy defeat for the reformists who accused the system of electoral fraud¹⁰. But the real surprise occurred the following year, when in 2005 the still unknown mayor of Tehran was elected president of the Iranian republic. Ahmadinejad was not the first choice of the conservatives, who were instead supporting Ali Larijani and Mohammad Qalibaf, while reformists were divided behind two candidates, Mostafa Mo'in and Mohsen Mehr'alizadeh¹¹. Pragmatists supported Mehdi Karrubi and the former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1997). The low turnout brought the two most voted candidates to the ballot, which occurred for the first time in the history of the Islamic republic. On one side, Hashemi Rafsanjani, perceived by the people as among the most corrupt politicians in the system¹², and on the other, the unknown mayor of Tehran. Surprisingly, the latter won the ballot, representing a new personality among well-known and criticised

⁷ K. Naji, *Ahmadinejad: The secret history of Iran's radical leader*, Berkeley 2007, p. 11.

⁸ B. Rahimi, *Contentious Legacies of the Ayatollah*, [in:] *A Critical Introduction to Khomeini*, ed. by A. Moghaddam, New York 2014, p. 293.

⁹ K. Naji, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

¹⁰ 3,600 out of about 8,200 reformist candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council. Turnout was also very low (51%). *Seventh Parliamentary Election*, Iran Data Portal, <http://irandat-portal.syr.edu/2004-parliamentary-election>, retrieved 20.11.2018.

¹¹ A. Gheissari, K. Sanandaji, *New conservative politics and electoral behavior in Iran*, [in:] *Contemporary Iran: Economy, Society, Politics*, ed. by A. Gheissari, Oxford 2009, p. 276.

¹² S. Namazi, *The Iranian Presidential Elections: Who voted, why, how & does it matter?*, "Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center" 2005, p. 5.

politicians, and in June 2005 was elected president¹³. He presented himself as an outsider to the system (*gheyr-e khodi*), far from political circles which were perceived as imbued with corruption and detached from people's needs. He claimed to represent the poor, the urban subaltern and the rural population as they were dissatisfied with the current political system. Ahmadinejad wanted to attract precisely those classes that historically supported the conservative front. It is no coincidence that the new president often visited remote and rural areas of the country and allocated money for the reconstruction of schools and infrastructures. Despite the low turnout, specific sectors of the Iranian population preferred Ahmadinejad, who at the second round also enjoyed the endorsement of the conservatives¹⁴.

Ahmadinejad's electoral campaign presented the key themes of his political discourse. The new president aimed at attracting the poor strata of the population, low-income urban and rural classes dependent on social policies and welfare measures, but also families of war veterans. At that time, about 50% of the rural population and 20% of the urban population lived on the poverty line¹⁵. For these reasons, Ahmadinejad emphasized the Islamic discourse of social justice and economic equity, promising to empower people. His political rhetoric built on the concepts of development of justice (*tus'eh-ye 'edalat*), the eradication of poverty, the creation of jobs, the equitable distribution of wealth, and the fight against discrimination. This rhetoric placed him in strong contrast to the reformists' social liberalization project, focusing his political discourse more on the economic level¹⁶. For instance, he frequently insisted on bringing oil revenues to "the tables of Iranian families"¹⁷. Another key element of his political discourse was the struggle against corruption. For instance, he often referred to the "mafia linked to the oil industry"¹⁸ to undermine the bureaucrats who were dominating the national economy. As corruption was perceived by the people as the main cause of the malfunctioning of the system, Ahmadinejad claimed to be fighting against the forces of clientelism in the political and economic spheres. This simple and straightforward rhetoric aimed to address issues and problems concerning a wide stratum of the population yet

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ H. Esfandiari, *Iran after the June 2005 Presidential Election*, "Middle East Program, Woodrow Wilson Center" 2005, p. 3.

¹⁵ E. Rakel, *Power, Islam, and political elite in Iran: A study on the Iranian political elite from Khomeini to Ahmadinejad*, Leiden 2008, p. 100.

¹⁶ J. Amuzegar, *The Ahmadinejad Era: Preparing for the Apocalypse*, "Journal of International Affairs" 2000, Issue 60(2), p. 37.

¹⁷ دهن ن‌اشند ار دوخ دياب، ديابيد مدرم مرفس رس دياب نتغذ لوپه مكنيا (*Money of oil should be on people's table: it should be showed*), Aftab Paigah Khabari, <http://aftabnews.ir/fa/news/77056/س-سديابت-فئل-وي-مكنيا>، دهن-ن‌اشند-ار-دوخ-دياب-ديابيد-مدرم-مرفس، retrieved 2.12.2018.

¹⁸ N. Habibi, *Can Rouhani Revitalize Iran's Oil and Gas Industry?*, "Middle East Brief" 2014, Issue 80, p. 2.

neglected by the reformists¹⁹. However, it also implied an accusation to the old guard politicians and bureaucrats.

Despite the rhetoric, Ahmadinejad continued the privatization politics of his predecessors. The president implemented the “justice share” plan (*saham-e ‘edalat*), a privatization model that aimed to distribute 40 percent of the shares of privatized firms among low-income households at highly discounted prices²⁰. However, the plan failed to the extent that most of the privatized firms’ shares were acquired by semi-government enterprises or by personalities with strong ties to the government. Another controversial economic measure was removing price subsidies on gasoline in a five-year period. The over-consumption due to price subsidies caused the import of 40 percent of crude oil in the country. In 2010, after two years from the proposal draft, price subsidies have been removed and cash subsidies were introduced to low-income households²¹. Ahmadinejad could rely on the increasing oil price (in 2004 the average annual oil price per barrel was 36\$, while in 2008 was 94\$)²². Yet this measure also encountered difficulties. Firstly, while it was problematic to accurately estimate a family’s income, a lot of money had been donated even to families who were not in need. The actual cost of the plan ended up being even higher than the revenues exported from the energy sector²³. Secondly, inflation grew due to the massive liquidity inserted into the market. Lastly, prices on other basic goods like milk, rice, sugar, grew significantly. Instead of alleviating poverty, Ahmadinejad’s economic reforms increased social inequality and worsened people’s economic condition²⁴.

Ahmadinejad’s foreign policy has been highly controversial and discussed²⁵. The Iranian president often used provocative and belligerent rhetoric against the United States and the State of Israel, countries which, in the Iranian post-revolutionary narrative, have been considered as the main causers of injustice in the world. The condemnation of the Israeli occupation of Palestine had the aim of broadening Iranian regional allies. Ahmadinejad aimed to appear

¹⁹ M. Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A history of the Islamic Republic*, New York 2013, p. 373.

²⁰ N. Habaibi, *Economic Legacy of Mahmud Ahmadinejad*, “Middle East Brief, Crown Centre for Middle East Studies” 2014, p. 3.

²¹ S.N. Nikou, C. Glenn, *The subsidies conundrum*, “The Iran Primer” 2010, pp. 104–107.

²² *Average annual OPEC crude oil price from 1960 to 2018 (in U.S. dollars per barrel)*, Statista.com, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/262858/change-in-opec-crude-oil-prices-since-1960/>, retrieved 2.12.2018.

²³ D. Salehi-Isfahani, B. Wilson Stucki, J. Deutschmann, *The Reform of Energy Subsidies in Iran: The Role of Cash Transfers*, “Emerging Markets Finance and Trade” 2015, Vol. 51, No. 6, pp. 1144–1162.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ A. Ehteshami, M. Zweiri, *Iran under Ahmadinejad: When Crisis Becomes a Pattern*, [in:] *Iran’s Foreign Policy: From Khatami to Ahmadinejad*, eds A. Ehteshami, M. Zweiri, Ithaca Press 2008, pp. 148–149.

as the defender of the Palestinian people, and hence the injustices perpetrated to the detriment of the Muslim community in the world. What Ahmadinejad underestimated was that the theme of the Palestinians struggle against Israel is no longer a priority in the Arab states and that neighbouring countries have always suspected Iranian regional politics as a sort of expansion of the so-called Shia crescent²⁶. Another key element of the hardliners' rhetoric in foreign policy during Ahmadinejad's presidency has been the anti-imperialist struggle. Ahmadinejad turned to third world countries, such as African states, but also Indonesia, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua to create a transactional alliance against imperialism. Since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the United States has been viewed by the Iranian political elite as the imperialist power *par excellence*. Ahmadinejad aimed to exploit this narrative to establish relations with these developmental states with whom he shared the populist economic approach, the instrumental fight against imperialism, and the need to establish business relations bypassing US restrictions. "*Third Worldism*" has been a key element in Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and a crucial tool to avoid economic isolation and preserve trade with developmental states.

Moreover, the foreign policy of the hardliners has shown a seemingly intransigent approach in the international negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme. For Ahmadinejad, the nuclear programme represented a pillar of Iranian independence and therefore Tehran had the indisputable right to develop nuclear energy for civilian purposes²⁷. Compromising on the nuclear programme due to external pressures meant the renouncing of a right that was deemed undeniable, as well as a setback to the scientific development within the country. Ahmadinejad covered the nuclear programme with fervent nationalism to show a strong country abroad and, internally, to exhibit himself as a president faithful to the principles of the revolutions, like that of independence²⁸. For instance, in 2005 Iran restored the uranium enrichment programme that had been suspended the year before to ease tensions with the European states. Ahmadinejad's intransigence, together with his often belligerent and aggressive proclamations and rhetoric, interrupted the negotiations and brought the United States and the European Union to reintroduce sanctions to the country²⁹. Truthfully, Ahmadinejad aimed at solving the nuclear dispute with the international negotiators (the EU+3 and the following P5+1, that in-

²⁶ V. Nasr, *The Shia Revival*, New York 2006.

²⁷ A.M. Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad: the politics of confrontation*, Oxon 2017, p. 78.

²⁸ M. Khalaji, *The domestic logic behind Iran's foreign policy plots*, "Japan Times", <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/opinion/2011/11/05/commentary/world-commentary/the-domestic-logic-behind-irans-foreign-policy-plots/#.WyPAhaczblV>, retrieved 4.12.2018.

²⁹ *Security Council Imposes Additional Sanctions on Iran, Voting 12 in Favour to 2 Against, with 1 Abstention*, United Nations, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>, retrieved 4.12.2018; D. Brunnstrom, J. Pawlak, *EU significantly extends sanctions against Iran*, Reuters,

cludes the 5 permanent members of the UN security Council and Germany), according to his conditions and without causing a big loss for the country. However, the impasse over the Iranian nuclear programme continued during both his presidential mandates and was revealed to be a mirror of the internal political polarization. The international dispute increased animosity between conservatives and Ahmadinejad's hardliners.

To sum up, hardliners exploited the US military presence along the national borders to increase the securitization of the domestic politics: that is, a more repressive climate towards civil society and individual freedoms. These policies also empowered revolutionary guards and their presence into domestic political affairs. Despite the rhetoric of providing social equity and economic improvement, the measures implemented were unsuccessful and, combined with the restoration of international sanctions, family budgets were even more afflicted. During Ahmadinejad's presidencies, foreign relations deteriorated, partly because of his inexperience and often inappropriate rhetoric, but also due to changes in the region and the rise of new challenges³⁰. Also, the internal dissatisfaction was soon evident, both from conservative factions and the population. Ahmadinejad was able to emerge in the political competition thanks to his rhetoric that resumed the themes of the revolution, pillars of the Islamic republic's foundations. The rise of the hardliners was in fact labelled as a "revival of revolutionary radicalism", because the rhetoric of independence, nationalism, *third worldism* and anti-imperialism was restored and reinvigorated. Yet fractures emerged between the new group of hardliners and the old guard of conservatives, who are close to the Supreme Leader and non-elective institutions. Ahmadinejad presented himself not only as a figure breaking with the past but also as a critic of the status quo. Declaring to fight the widespread corruption was not just a tool for attracting people's support, but also a challenge to the political elite.

Rivalry between Ahmadinejad and the other institutions emerged since the very beginning of his presidency. The parliament often blocked Ahmadinejad's candidacies for key ministries, such as the minister of petroleum and welfare in 2005, showing a lack of confidence towards the president. Many names proposed by Ahmadinejad for ministries, foreign diplomatic offices and chief

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-iran/eu-significantly-extends-sanctions-against-iran-idUSTRE74M3PO20110523>, retrieved 4.12.2018.

³⁰ The fall of Saddam Husayn's regime in Iraq after 2003 caused the emergence of new threats and the intensification of the Qaedist presence in the Middle East. Also, it reshaped regional alliances and empowered the Iranian influence over Iraq, thanks to economic, cultural, political and military relations. In 2011, popular unrest shocked the Arab states and provoked the fall of long-lasting regimes in Tunisia, Libya and Egypt and paved the way for the Syrian civil war. These changes intensified population displacement, migratory flows and the presence of non-state actors that worsened regional stability.

nuclear negotiators were figures close to him but not experts³¹. In this way, Ahmadinejad not only alienated the conservative-led parliament, confirming the distinctive contrast between executive and legislative powers already observed during the aftermath of the revolution³², but also perpetrated patronage dynamics. In the local elections in 2006, pragmatists and moderate conservatives won over hardliner candidates, showing how the president's adventurism was highly contested and perceived as counterproductive for the country³³. Therefore, the friction between the parliament and the president epitomised the opposition between hardliners and conservatives. Gradually, prominent figures on the conservative front began to distance themselves from the president. His populist economic policy and the international isolation due to his inexperienced behaviour and aggressive rhetoric towards "the west" caused more moderate figures to detach themselves from the new political force³⁴. In 2008, for instance, Ali Larijani, Mohammad Qalibaf and Mohsen Rezai founded a new coalition for the parliamentary elections, which constituted an evident setback for groups close to the president.

The presidential election held in 2009 represented a remarkable turning point. Ahmadinejad ran for his second consecutive term, mainly challenged by two other candidates supported by the reformist front, Mir-Huseyn Moosavi (former prime minister during Khamenei's presidency) and Mehdi Karrubi. When Mahmood Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, the opposition accused the system of electoral fraud³⁵. Moosavi called his supporters to gather for a peaceful parade in the capital that took the name of "green wave" due to the green colour of his electoral campaign³⁶. Revolutionary guards and *Basij* volunteer militias stepped in to repress the demonstrators' unrest and controversially used brutal violence towards the unarmed crowd³⁷. The Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei intervened to declare Ahmadinejad the legitimate president rejecting accusations of fraud³⁸, but protests continued even beyond the

³¹ *Iran MPs consider new oil nominee*, BBC News, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/4498092.stm, retrieved 4.12.2018.

³² For instance, the Parliament accused the president of the Islamic Republic Abdolhassan Bani Sadr of impeachment in 1981 and forced him to resign.

³³ G. Esfandiari, *Iran: Election Results Show Anti-Ahmadinejad Vote*, Radio Free Europe – Radio Liberty, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1073557.html>, retrieved 5.12.2018.

³⁴ S. Maloney, *Iran's political economy since the revolution*, Cambridge 2015, p. 350.

³⁵ F. Farhi, *The Tenth Presidential Elections and Their Aftermath*, [in:] *Iran. From Theocracy to the Green Movement* ed. by N. Nabavi, New York 2012.

³⁶ K. Harris, *The brokered exuberance of the middle class: an ethnographic analysis of Iran's 2009 Green Movement*, "Mobilization: An International Quarterly" 2012, Vol. 17, No. 4, p. 436.

³⁷ R. Safshekan, F. Sabet, *The ayatollah's praetorians: The Islamic revolutionary guard corps and the 2009 election crisis*, "The Middle East Journal" 2010, Vol. 64, No. 4.

³⁸ *Leader's Friday Prayer Address*, Khamenei.ir, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1159/Leader-s-Friday-Prayer-Address>, retrieved 4.12.2018.

capital. Leaders of the “green wave” were placed under house arrest, while arbitrary arrests of protesters and political opponents continued to severely weaken the legitimacy of the political system. Ahmadinejad started his second mandate during this ongoing turmoil. Protests continued in the following months and attracted different demands and social groups, but their intensity gradually diminished, also due to the violent repression by the military. The Supreme Leader Khamenei explicitly endorsed Mahmood Ahmadinejad, an already divisive figure among the conservatives. In doing so, he sharply entered the internal political competition and put his political authority at risk. Moreover, the arbitrary actions of the Revolutionary guards endangered the stability of the Islamic republic.

During the second term, relations between Ahmadinejad and the conservative clergy significantly worsened. The messianic rhetoric employed by the president alluded to the forthcoming return of the twelfth imam³⁹. On several public occasions, the Iranian president had controversially declared to be in contact with the Mahdi and that he could foresee his imminent return to earth⁴⁰. This rhetoric was also used by Ahmadinejad during his speeches abroad, for instance at the headquarters of the United Nations. When he served as mayor of Tehran, Ahmadinejad asserted the need to use the economic resources to prepare for the arrival of the hidden imam, hence, to invest in infrastructure that facilitates his return. An example is the creation of the road connecting the Jamkaran mosque, where the return of the Mahdi is presumed, with the capital. Gradually, the Ahmadinejad’s messianic rhetoric seemed no longer to be a faithful belief of the Shiite Islamic principles, but a challenge to the politicized clergy⁴¹. By claiming the imminent return of the Mahdi, Ahmadinejad alluded to a different role for the Iranian clergy, because with the reappearance of the hidden imam, clerics will lose the authority to lead the society. Certainly, Ahmadinejad was not aiming for a secular state; rather, he favoured Islamic-driven rules, but contested the political role of the clergy. Indeed, the strategic use of the messianic rhetoric concealed precisely this criticism. Moreover, the return of the hidden imam was enunciated not by a cleric, but by

³⁹ According to Shiite Islam, the leader (or imam) of the community is a direct descendant of the Prophet’s family. The Twelver believe that the last imam, Mohammad al Mahdi, entered a state of occultation presumably in 874 and they are expecting his return to earth as a cathartic moment of justice.

⁴⁰ For instance, at the United Nations General Assembly in New York on September 2005 or at the Columbia University two years later. See more on: B. Sarfaraz, *The Hidden Imam and His Cult*, Frontline – Tehran Bureau, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/07/mahdi-slideshow.html>, retrieved 5.12.2018.

⁴¹ J. Filiu, *The return of political Mahdism*, “Current Trends in Islamist Ideology” 2009, Issue 8, pp. 29–31.

a lay-president⁴². The hardliner clerics who had supported Ahmadinejad and had appreciated his religious temperament, began to accuse the president of “deviance”. People close to the president were therefore called a “deviant current” (*jaryan-e enherafi*), with the charge of deviating from the founding principles of the Islamic republic. Some of Ahmadinejad’s allies were arrested, such as Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, ‘Abbas Ghafari, Mohammad Reza Rahimi, Ali Akbar Javanfekr and Hamid Baqaei. The Revolutionary guards distanced themselves from the president, even though they had increased their involvement in the economic and political sectors during his presidencies⁴³. In doing so, the guards confirmed their long-lasting loyalty to the Supreme Leader Khamenei.

After Ahmadinejad started his second mandate, tensions emerged between him and the Supreme Leader, who endangered the Islamic republic’s survival to keep him in power. One of the closest allies of the president, Rahim Mashaei, disseminated controversial statements about the so-called “Iranian School” (*Maktab-e Irani*), a sort of glorification of pre-Islamic history as a base for Iranian identity and nationalism. These comments infuriated the clergy who opposed the counter-narrative of the “Islamic school” to imply a national unity based on Islamic principles⁴⁴. Khamenei therefore refused the appointment of Mashaei as vice president. Thus, Ahmadinejad designated Mashaei as head of the president’s office, challenging the veiled warning of the Supreme Leader. However, two years later, Ali Khamenei and the president of the Iranian republic reached a fatal rift. The internal political debate was increasingly polarized and major disagreements emerged over the appointment of ministries⁴⁵. Having removed the foreign minister Manouchehr Mottaki without previous consultation with Khamenei (which also holds the last say in foreign policy), Ahmadinejad imposed forced resignation on the intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi. Both Mottaki and Moslehi were close to the Supreme Leader and the president’s moves seemed an obvious attempt to overcome the authority of Ali Khamenei. The latter refused Moslehi’s resignation and assigned him to the ministry. In protest against the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad did not participate in two meetings of the cabinet. Consequently, many allies of the pre-

⁴² M. Khalaji, *Apocalyptic Politics: On the Rationality of Iranian Policy*, “Washington Institute for Near East Policy (WINEP), Policy Focus” 2008, Issue 79.

⁴³ “جدید ترین اظهارات فرمانده سپاه پاسداران در خصوص ولایت پذیری احمدی نژاد و جریان انحرافی” (*New declaration of the commander of the Revolutionary guards about how Ahmadinejad and the deviant current accept the Velayat*), Khabar Online, <https://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/146238/Politics/military>, retrieved 5.12.2018.

⁴⁴ آیت الله مصباح یزدی بار دیگر از رحیم مشایبی انتقاد کرد (*The ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi criticised again Rahim Mashaei*), Radio Farda, https://www.radiofarda.com/a/f4_Mesbah_Yazdi_attack_to_Mashei_Iran/2148787.html, retrieved 5.12.2018.

⁴⁵ S.K. Dehghan, *Iran’s president and supreme leader in rift over minister’s reinstatement*, The Guardian, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/apr/27/iran-president-supreme-leader-rift>, retrieved 5.12.2018.

sident, including members of the clergy and revolutionary guards, sided with the Supreme Leader, still the highest political authority of the Islamic republic and contested Ahmadinejad's attitude of disobedience towards him.

Ahmadinejad had polarized the political debate and worsened the economic condition of the country. Moreover, his challenging behaviour and messianic rhetoric veiled an attempt to undermine the political authority of the clergy. Despite the explicit endorsement of Ali Khamenei in 2009, Ahmadinejad ruined the relation with the Supreme Leader and conservative ayatollahs. The president's adventurism not only caused Iranian international isolation, but also condemned him to internal political marginalization. People linked to the so-called "deviant current" have been arrested and the group, gradually weakened, disappeared from the political scene. While Iranian domestic factions reshaped for the 2013 elections, Ahmadinejad proved unable to heal the fracture opened in the conservative front. Pragmatists and moderate conservatives rallied together to restore a dialogue with foreign countries after the harsh embargo imposed during the Ahmadinejad's presidencies. Also, thanks to the endorsement of reformists, Hassan Rouhani, a technocrat who linked together pragmatists and conservatives, was elected president of the Islamic republic with the goal of rehabilitating the national economy⁴⁶. For some time, hardliners close to Ahmadinejad disappeared from the political scene. It seemed they had withdrawn from it and did not intend to re-emerge. Yet, in 2017 loyalists of Ahmadinejad re-emerged with the aim of running for the presidential elections. The Guardian Council disqualified him as the Supreme Leader and "did not recommend" Ahmadinejad to run for the presidency, aiming to avoid any kind of fracture or repetition of the 2009 experience. Suffering also from low popular consensus, Ahmadinejad endorsed Hamid Baqaei, the previous vice president for executive affairs (2011–2013), also disqualified by the Guardian Council.

When Hassan Rouhani started his second mandate in 2017, Ahmadinejad and his group initiated a campaign to discredit the president and other pillars of the political system, as well as specific personalities close to the judiciary. Ahmadinejad named his group as the "government of spring" (*dowlat-e bahar*)⁴⁷ and referred to the injustices of the system, the corruption in the judiciary and the persistent inequality among people. His anti-systemic message was so widespread, especially in the rural and poorest areas of the country, that the eruption of street protests in 2017–2018 has been associated with his anti-systemic political revival. Truthfully, these protests had a different genesis and it is unlikely that Ahmadinejad was able to guide them or even to trigger them.

⁴⁶ *The Domestic and Foreign Policy Challenges of the New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani*, Wilson Center, 2013, Issue 30.

⁴⁷ *Dolat-e Bahar*, Ghatreh, <http://www.ghatreh.com/news/nn30540749/سکندرکتکرشد-باباختنادهایدمحارنکد>, retrieved 23.04.2018.

The accusatory temperament of the “government of spring” led to the arrest of Hamid Baqaei, Ali Akbar Javanfeker and Rahim Mashaei, sentenced respectively for fifteen, four- and six-years prison with charge of corruption and threatening national security⁴⁸. Right now, Ahmadinejad is politically isolated and excluded from official competition.

After rising to the peak of political power, Ahmadinejad has been politically weakened and marginalized due to his controversial behaviour and capacity to polarize the internal balance of factions. Despite having held the second most important position in the Iranian system, Ahmadinejad always considered himself as an outsider and as such he has reactivated his political position by standing in opposition. He has continued to spread his anti-system rhetoric by praising the justice of Islam as an instrument of redemption for the people, accusing powerful centres of powers within the system, and also glorifying pre-Islamic heritage as a alternative sources of national identity. However, he has neither the necessary tools to spread his views, except Twitter and telegram accounts that are often blocked inside the country, nor the cohesion of his group, which has been decimated by the arrests of his faithful allies. Although his rhetoric speaks to the discontent of part of the Iranian population, Ahmadinejad is linked to a period of political turmoil and deep economic difficulties. Therefore, it is unlikely that he will be capable of building an official and recognized opposition and enter the political scene again.

⁴⁸ *Former Iranian Vice President Sentenced to Prison for Threatening National Security*, Radio Farda, <https://www.rferl.org/a/former-iranian-vice-president-sentenced-to-prison-for-threatening-national-security-/29486163.html>, retrieved 5.12.2018.