

Tehran leadership hit by claims of corruption

Ahmadinejad's deputy denies charges by judiciary setting stage for confrontation

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Tehran: Corruption charges against one of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's most trusted political advisers provided the latest evidence of deep rifts within the Iranian president's own conservative political camp.

The challenge by Ahmadinejad's rivals — one of them the head of the judiciary — could set the tone for a bitter fight leading up to the next big political moment in Iran, parliamentary elections less than a year away.

"This case isn't going to bring down Ahmadinejad, but it may get very ugly," said Abdul Khaleq Abdullah, a regional political analyst at Emirates University. "It's a commentary on the troubled state of Iranian politics at the moment."

Ahmadinejad has faced a growing internal backlash from conservative leaders — including influential parliament Speaker Ali Larijani. They are upset by the president's combative nature and deepening links with the vast military-economic network run by the Revolutionary Guard, Iran's most powerful force which led the crackdown on the reformist movement after Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election last year.

The political infighting escalated earlier this month when Ahmadinejad suddenly dismissed his longtime foreign minister, Manouchehr Mottaki, a close ally of Larijani. Many lawmakers and others denounced the move as further evidence of Ahmadinejad's steam-rolling style. He dumped Mottaki in apparent retaliation for disagreements that included control over foreign ministry posts.

Allegations

Shortly after Mottaki's firing, the judiciary headed by Larijani's brother announced the corruption allegations against First Vice-President Mohammad Reza Rahimi.

The charges could do more damage to Ahmadinejad and the reputation he has cultivated as aloof from Iran's powerful financial clans and foundations, many run by the Revolutionary Guard.

The developments revealed the increasingly complex political manoeuvring within the Islamic Republic as it struggles with economic sanctions and growing international pressure to curb its production of nuclear fuel.

The judiciary last week said Rahimi is facing corruption charges that need to be investigated and will have to stand trial. The details of the accusations against him have not been made public since. Rahimi quickly denied the charges and was expected to present his side at a news conference, possibly later this week.

On Monday, Ahmadinejad's office came to Rahimi's defence, saying that his complaints against the accusations should be investigated, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported.

But the rumblings have been coming for months against Rahimi, whose position as the top of 12 vice-presidents gives him authority to meet visiting prime ministers and other dignitaries and lead Cabinet meetings in Ahmadinejad's absence.

Some of Ahmadinejad's political foes have frequently taken pot shots at Rahimi with allegations of financial misdeeds since a major government-linked embezzlement probe opened in April. At the time, conservative lawmaker Elias Naderan calling Rahimi the "leader of the corruption circle."

Now, a full-scale investigation and possible trial could become a high-stakes proxy clash between Ahmadinejad and Larijani and his backers, who include his brother, judiciary chief Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani.

The immediate battles may be sporadic because all of Iran's political establishment is currently engrossed in painful steps to trim government subsidies, which has already pushed fuel prices up to 400 per cent higher.

Complaints

The economic shock has brought waves of complaints against the government from all sides. Reformists have claimed the billions saved on subsidies will be funnelled back to help boost Ahmadinejad and the Revolutionary Guard. Even some hard-liners — Ahmadinejad's political base — have said the price hikes are too fast and too steep.

The rifts point to the next big political test in Iran — parliamentary elections in early 2012. The races will mark the first major balloting since the accusations of vote-rigging after Ahmadinejad's June 2009 victory plunged Iran into its worst internal chaos since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

It's still uncertain whether the opposition movement can rebound in some form for the parliamentary campaign. But there's little doubt that Larijani and his allies will make a run.

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