

An ill Wind in Iran

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As the dogs of war ominously circle the Persian Gulf, regime change in Iran could become a distinct possibility – but not exactly according to the desires of US Vice President Dick “all options are on the table” Cheney, whose supreme obsessions are oil, war and their mutual intersection.

A leading Western energy consultant, who prefers to remain anonymous, went to Tehran in early February and personally met with President Mahmud Ahmadinejad. He tells Asia Times Online that according to his assessment, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei “has a couple of months at most – prostate cancer”.

On this extremely sensitive matter, he is contradicted by a Western-educated political analyst in Tehran, who for security reasons also prefers to remain anonymous: “There is no consistent proof that Khamenei’s cancer is serious and he is dying.” In Iranian state media, this topic is taboo.

The Western consultant’s top sources also told him the Supreme Leader “will not be replaced, but a triumvirate/council will replace him, consisting of Khatami, Rafsanjani and Kharroubi”. Former president Mohammad Khatami is a reformist. Mehdi Kharroubi – the Majlis (parliament) Speaker – is a moderate. And former president Hashemi Rafsanjani, a Machiavellian pragmatist, is in fact the next notable in the line of succession, according to the current rules (he would be chosen by the Council of Experts, of which he is the top member).

Were such a triumvirate to become a reality, it would represent a constitutional nightmare. According to the Iranian political analyst, “It would require an amendment to the constitution. The talk of a council replacing the leader is not new but it is chock full of legal and religious issues.”

The whole arrangement, nonetheless, is feasible. Khamenei rose to power basically because of an unconstitutional white coup after ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s death in 1989. The new “coup” would in fact extinguish fears among the Iranian elite that wily Rafsanjani – even though he is correctly positioned from a legal point of view – could be allowed the same overarching position as Khomeini, the father of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Rafsanjani is overwhelmingly regarded by the clerical establishment as not exactly a paragon of virtue.

The key merit of the triumvirate solution would be the isolation of Ahmadinejad. Khatami coined the “dialogue of civilizations” and Rafsanjani is in favor of normalization of relations with the United States. In the Western consultant’s assessment, “only a wave of populism caused by a US attack can rescue Ahmadinejad from being chucked out pretty soon”.

The Western consultant corroborates insistent speculation in sectors of the Iranian press, and already reported by Asia Times Online (see [Ahmadinejad be damned](#), January 19), according to which Ahmadinejad has fallen from favor among the ruling elites. The last straw was the US sanctions on operations involving Iranian banks and companies (Washington is pressing the European Union and the United Nations Security Council to adopt this escalation as punishment for Iran's nuclear program).

Tehran did not expect these sanctions, which have taken a toll. "The bottom line is that the elite are seriously worried about the flow of oil money into their accounts and the restricted uses to which they can now be put," said the consultant.

"They've made alternative arrangements for sure, by moving accounts into euros and opening new ones with Malaysian and Indonesian banks in particular, but being frozen out of the Western financial system is in fact the only sanction that works, and the elite is basically pissed off because of this."

At the same time, with an insider's knowledge of Iran's nuclear dossier since the Khatami presidency, the Western consultant said, "Iran's nuclear capability is to all intents and purposes non-existent due – as I am painfully aware – to a management deficiency of cosmic proportions." The Russians, as the builders of the Bushehr nuclear plant, are also aware of this "cosmic" deficiency. So much for Israeli assertions that Iran's bomb is just around the corner.

As to speculation that Ahmadinejad and his Republican Guard allies are betting on a US preemptive strike so the whole country will be united under his presidency, the Iranian political analyst insisted, "Neither the president nor the Republican Guards want an American attack. What Ahmadinejad wants is to come out of this as the man who stood up to the Americans and made them back down."

The bottom line in all this is that Iran will not suspend uranium enrichment under pressure – especially when totally encircled by US troops, military bases and aircraft-carrier battle groups as well as being infiltrated by US special forces east (Sistan-Balochistan) and west (Khuzestan). Respected former chief UN weapons inspector Hans Blix, at a recent conference on international security in New York, has laid down the law: "To sit down with them in a direct talk rather than saying to them, 'You do this, thereafter we will sit down at a table and tell you what you get for it.' That's getting away from a humiliating neo-colonial attitude to a more normal [one]."

But as the diplomatic neo-colonial ballet at the UN drags on, a deadly quartet, in parallel, develops a covert agenda. The quartet consists of Cheney; Deputy National Security Adviser Elliott Abrams; former ambassador to Kabul and Baghdad Zalmay Khalilzad; and Prince Bandar bin Sultan, Saudi national security adviser and ambassador to the US for 22 years. Their objective: the destabilization and fragmentation of Iran.

A new variable – the Supreme Leader's health – is now introduced. The next true deciders may be much more amenable to serious discussion. But will regime change in Iran – not provoked by bombs but by natural causes – be enough to quench the United States' war thirst?

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