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Iran's Ahmadinejad in growing rift with top cleric

By ALI AKBAR DAREINI,
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Iran's president on Wednesday shunned a Cabinet meeting for the second consecutive time this week, apparently showing his discontent over a recent government appointment by the country's supreme leader.

The no-show appears to be part of a growing rift between President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the country's supreme leader who has final say in all state matters in Iran. The split threatens to destabilize Iran at a time of tension with the West over Tehran's disputed nuclear program.

The confrontation, which has been simmering for months, seems to be part of a power struggle ahead of parliamentary elections next year. The most recent flare up stems from Ahmadinejad's dismissal last week of Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi. Khamenei then promptly reinstated Moslehi in a public slap to the president.

Khamenei has made clear he would defend his powers, including to name ministers, warning in a speech on Saturday that he will intervene in the government's affairs whenever necessary — a sharp rebuke to Ahmadinejad for challenging his authority.

Although Khamenei ordered Moslehi to remain in the Cabinet, the president reportedly didn't abide by the order and failed to officially invite Moslehi to last Wednesday's government session. Moslehi didn't attend that meeting but was a surprise show at Sunday's session. Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, skipped it.

The president and his Cabinet had been expected to meet again Wednesday in Qom, 130 kilometers south of the capital Tehran. But Ali Banaei, a lawmaker representing the holy city in the parliament, said the trip had been canceled. Instead, the Cabinet met without Ahmadinejad in Tehran.

Khamenei's decision to reinstate Moslehi has put Ahmadinejad in an awkward position: either openly snub Iran's top leader and risk more fallout or submit and lose a high stakes political fight.

Hard-liners, who consider Khamenei above the law and answerable only to God, say the supreme leader will not back down. And he has the backing of most of parliament.

A statement signed last week by 216 lawmakers — more than two-thirds of the 290-seat parliament — asked Ahmadinejad to obey Khamenei's order without question.

"The key decision-maker in Islamic government ... is the supreme leader. Disobeying him is tantamount to opposing God," hardline cleric Ali Saeedi was quoted as saying by the semiofficial Fars news agency.

Ahmadinejad's gamble appears to be aimed at setting up his close aide, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, or another loyalist, as the next president, analysts say. To achieve that, control of the Intelligence Ministry is crucial.

Hard-liners, however, sharply oppose Mashaei, and consider him the head of a "deviant current" seeking to shape the next government after Ahmadinejad steps down in 2013.

Khamenei, who strongly backed Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009, is believed to be intent on helping shape a new political team, absent of Ahmadinejad loyalists, to lead the next government.

He appears to have the support of Iran's elite Revolutionary Guard, the country's most powerful military force. The news website sobhesadegh.ir, which is closely affiliated with the Guard, said Wednesday that reinstating Moslehi to the top intelligence post is "the first step towards curtailing the dangerous influence of this band (Mashaei's team)."

Without meaningful political parties in Iran, unpredictable political factions and groups have emerged before elections. And Khamenei, analysts say, feels threatened by a single political faction remaining in office for more than eight years.

Some analysts believe Ahmadinejad is aware that he will lose should he openly challenge Khamenei's order, but the dispute has given him a good chance to demand concessions from the parliament in return for caving in to the supreme leader.

The growing rift comes at a time of already tense ties between Ahmadinejad and the conservative-dominated parliament that once supported him.

Parliament speaker Ali Larijani has filed a case against him for failing to enforce a binding law requiring his government to set up a new Sports Ministry. And the parliament seeks to amend the national budget proposed by Ahmadinejad.

Iranian lawmakers also have begun collecting signatures to summon Ahmadinejad for questioning, which could be the first step toward impeachment. If they do, Ahmadinejad would be the first president to be called to parliament to answer questions since the Islamic Revolution 32 years ago.

Conservative lawmaker Hasan Ghafourifard reminded Ahmadinejad Wednesday that he doesn't have much time left.

"He knows very well that a miserable result awaits anybody challenging the supreme leader," Ghafourifard said.

Morteza Agha Tehrani, a hardline lawmaker, is expected to meet Ahmadinejad later Wednesday to encourage him to return to the Cabinet, pro-government news website bornanews.ir reported.