



Spotlight on Iran



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Is Rahim Masha'i's removal from office just a layoff or a launching pad for him to run in the elections?

President Ahmadinejad's decision to dismiss his controversial office chief Rahim Masha'i and name him the president's advisor and head of the secretariat of the Non-Aligned Movement is drawing considerable interest from Iran's political system and media. In a number of commentaries recently published in the media, the president's critics have speculated that the dismissal is intended to raise Masha'i's political clout, allow him to better prepare for possible participation in the coming elections, and pave the way for a coalition between government supporters and the right wing of the conservative camp ahead of the elections.

At the same time, the president's remarks praising Masha'i came under harsh criticism. The editor-in-chief of the daily Kayhan strongly condemned Ahmadinejad's praise of Masha'i, saying that the president is still under the influence of the "deviant faction" and that his decision serves the interests of Iran's enemies. The Alef website said that, instead of thanking the Supreme Leader for blocking the initiative to summon Ahmadinejad to a hearing before the Majles, the president chose to praise the person whose appointment as vice president was opposed by the Supreme Leader. A reformist blogger said that Ahmadinejad's decision to appoint Masha'i was a punch in Khamenei's face. The message that the president wanted to send to the people of Iran, the blogger said, is that he no longer has respect for the Supreme Leader.

President Ahmadinejad's surprising decision to dismiss his controversial office chief Rahim Masha'i and name him the president's advisor and head of the secretariat of the Non-Aligned Movement is drawing considerable interest from Iran's political system and media. In a number of commentaries recently published in the Iranian media, the

president's critics have speculated that the dismissal is intended to allow Masha'i to better prepare for possible participation in the coming elections, or at least pave the way for a coalition between government supporters and the right wing of the conservative camp ahead of the presidential elections, slated for June 2013. At the same time, the president's remarks praising Masha'i came under harsh criticism from his opponents.

The daily Tehran Emrooz, affiliated with Tehran's mayor and the president's political rival Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, offered two possible explanations for the president's decision. The first explanation is that the president wants to free up Masha'i's schedule, which will allow him to focus on preparations for the presidential elections and spend more time working inside and outside of Iran ahead of a possible run for office. A second explanation is that, as the elections approach, the president wants to bring in political personalities affiliated with the right wing of the conservative camp (members of the Steadfast Front), particularly Gholam-Hossein Elham, who has recently been reappointed as the government's spokesman. These politicians are opposed to Masha'i, and by removing him from office, the president stands a better chance of forming a coalition with the Steadfast Front ahead of the elections, having realized that the odds of Masha'i being approved as a presidential candidate by the Guardian Council are very slim.

Tehran Emrooz mentioned that Seyyed Hasan Mousavi, who has replaced Masha'i as the president's office chief, is considered one of Masha'i's friends and close allies, which is why Masha'i's dismissal will not diminish the influence of the "deviant faction" in the government (Tehran Emrooz, December 2).

The Farda website also speculated that the president's decision has to do with his desire to reinforce the status of his allies in his office to pave the way for Masha'i's future return to the president's office. According to Farda, Masha'i's dismissal will keep him away from the heat of media criticism and remove some legal restrictions he faced on his previous job. He will now be free to formulate his plans for the elections. In addition, he will not have to resign his position—as required by law—if he decides to run for president, and will be able to announce his candidacy at the last moment. Like other media outlets, Farda pointed out the possibility that a political coalition will be formed between government supporters and Steadfast Front supporters ahead of the elections, and that one of the high-ranking members of the front, such as Elham or

Baqer Lankarani, will run in the elections with the support of Ahmadinejad's allies (Farda, December 2).



According to the website, the reshuffle announced by the president lends credence to speculations it published this weekend about increasing efforts on the part of the “deviant faction” to pave the ground for Masha’i’s possible participation in the elections. As part of their efforts, the president’s supporters work to clear Masha’i’s name of the allegations and criticism he has come under in recent years to allow him to take part in the elections, or at least set the stage for another government-endorsed candidate to run in the elections and implement the “Putin-Medvedev” model in Iran after the elections. Pro-Ahmadinejad media are leading a campaign to promote Masha’i’s candidacy for president, and publishing public opinion poll results that allegedly indicate broad public support for Masha’i, the website said (Farda, December 1).

The editor-in-chief of the daily Kayhan strongly criticized the reshuffle announced by the president. In his editorial, Hossein Shariatmadari condemned the president’s decision, saying that it serves his enemies, the ones who criticized him during his presidential terms. The president would do better to concentrate on solving the economic problems facing the people of Iran, Shariatmadari said, rather than on a reshuffle of little significance.

The focus of Shariatmadari’s criticism was the praise lavished by the president on Masha’i in the decree naming him head of the secretariat of the Non-Aligned Movement. How is it, Kayhan’s editor-in-chief wondered, that the president has such kind words of praise concerning a person whose remarks have been offensive to Islam

and to Muslims, who says that the “Iranian school of thought” should be given precedence over the “Islamic school of thought”, and who defends those accused of involvement in economic corruption scandals? The president’s decision and his praise for Masha’i indicate that he is still under the influence of the “deviant faction”, which has ties to the reformist opposition. The president’s decision serves the enemies of Islam and Iran and hurts the president himself, Iran, and the Iranian people (Kayhan, December 3).

The Alef website also criticized the president for praising Masha’i. The president lavished more praise on his office chief this time than in 2009, when he wanted to appoint Masha’i as his first vice president after the presidential elections, an appointment that was revoked by the Supreme Leader. Even though Ahmadinejad knows how the Supreme Leader feels about Masha’i, he does not refrain from giving him high praise, which shows how close the two of them are. After Khamenei blocked the initiative to summon Ahmadinejad to a hearing before the Majles, public opinion in Iran expected the president to thank him for that. Instead of showing gratitude to the Supreme Leader, however, he praises the person who was removed from office by the Supreme Leader (Alef, December 2).

Masha’i’s dismissal also drew reactions on social networks. Mojtaba Vahedi, the former advisor of reformist opposition leader Mehdi Karoubi, said in a blog post that the president’s decision to appoint Masha’i as head of the secretariat of the Non-Aligned Movement is a punch in Khamenei’s face. Vahedi said that Masha’i’s appointment is intended to achieve two objectives: to fuel rumors about his possible participation in the forthcoming elections and boost his status by having him make more trips abroad, meet with foreign leaders, and use larger budgets in his new capacity.

Vahedi noted that, unlike the letter of appointment given by Ahmadinejad to Masha’i in 2009, the current letter of appointment does not mention Masha’i’s commitment to the Supreme Leader. By appointing Masha’i, Ahmadinejad wanted to let the Iranian people know that he no longer has any respect for his former master (Khamenei), and send a message to foreign governments saying that he is willing for his representatives to hold talks with them outside of the framework set by the Supreme Leader (<http://seyedmojtaba-vahedi.blogspot.com>, December 1).