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TEHRAN — A growing confrontation between Iran's clerical rulers and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is spilling over to unusually direct criticism of the president's inner circle of advisers.

Hard-line ayatollahs and representatives of the Revolutionary Guard Corps who were instrumental in bringing Ahmadinejad to power in 2005 now accuse his top aides of plotting to push Shiite clerics from politics. Although Ahmadinejad, who has become increasingly isolated, has relied closely on his tightknit group, the critics are demanding that the president cut all ties with his team.

In an apparently orchestrated effort, official state media have started reporting that some members of Ahmadinejad's inner circle are relying on fortune-tellers; others are charged with embezzling government money. Official publications have begun referring to Ahmadinejad's four top aides as leaders of a "deviant" political current that is trying to gain absolute power in the country.

The power struggle took one of its apparent victims Tuesday when Iran's deputy foreign minister and ally of a top Ahmadinejad aide resigned. The Associated Press reported that Mohammed Sharif Malekzadeh faced corruption charges, but has denied the allegations.

The moves against the advisers follow a recent series of public clashes between the president and Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and signal a growing challenge to the president's grip on power. Ahmadinejad's advisers represent "the most dangerous current in the history of Shiite Islam," said Mojtaba Zolnour, a leading cleric in the Revolutionary Guard forces, the semiofficial Mehr News Agency reported last week. Another former supporter, hard-line ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, recently called those close to the president "garbage" and "trash."

There has often been competition among Iran's several power centers over the 32-year-old history of the Islamic republic. But the blunt personal attacks on Ahmadinejad and his team are extraordinary, and there are indications that the pressure might be mounting. Last week, semiofficial media in Iran reported that a planned state visit by Ahmadinejad to neighboring Armenia was canceled when two of his advisers were not allowed to leave the country.

Some Iranian politicians and analysts say that they believe the supreme leader has given the president a final chance to remove the aides, and that if Ahmadinejad does not do so, he could face impeachment.

Although a decision to remove the president could bring instability and political costs for Khamenei, Ahmadinejad "could be removed if the leadership would see that fitting," said Amir Mohebbian, a political analyst who in the past supported the government but is now critical of its policies.

Analysts say the attacks on the advisers are aimed at further isolating Ahmadinejad, who would be left more weakened and alone without his aides around him.

Iran's judiciary said this month that at least a dozen people connected to the president had been arrested since April. The group did not include any of Ahmadinejad's closest advisers.

Working from the presidential complex in central Tehran, where old sycamore trees line the avenues, Ahmadinejad's advisers have for years helped to draft the president's aggressive foreign and nuclear policies,

advised him to make a daring cut in state subsidies and shaped his image as a hardworking man of the people. Many members of his team met in the backward province where Ahmadinejad started his career as a deputy governor in the 1980s, and stuck together as he became mayor of Tehran in 2003 and was the surprise winner of the 2005 presidential elections.

After taking the helm of Iran's executive branch, they also called attention to a Shiite belief that the coming of Imam Mahdi, an apocalyptic figure, is near. Mashaei, a 51-year-old former intelligence official who heads the president's office, made a series of highly publicized remarks in the past few years advocating an unusual interpretation of Shiite Islam that does not rely on clerics as intermediates between people and god.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad waves to the media as he arrives to a press conference, in Tehran, Iran, Tuesday, June 7, 2011.

Ahmadinejad has called Mashaei an "inspiration"; Mashaei's son married the president's daughter in 2008. Persistent rumors that Mashaei claims to be in contact with the Messianic Imam, who according to Islamic teachings went into hiding in the year 874, have recently made it to the front pages of state media, following the arrest of several of his associates for "sorcery." Mashaei has never directly denied the accusations.

Mojtaba Samareh Hashemi, 52, a soft-spoken senior aide, acts as a shadow to Ahmadinejad, and is nearly always at his side during public appearances. Samareh Hashemi went to university with Ahmadinejad and has remained close to him since. Trained as an architect, he spent years at the foreign ministry deciding who would be posted to Iranian missions around the world. He is one of the few close to the president who has not been accused of wrongdoings.

Analysts say that old friends Mashaei and Samareh Hashemi both help boost Ahmadinejad's self-confidence. Mohebbian said Ahmadinejad could try to groom one of these two men as his successor, in order to remain influential after his term ends in 2013. "If Ahmadinejad is looking for people to continue his policies, these two men would be main candidates," he said.

Among a wider circle of other aides, the most controversial is Hamid Baghaei, 42, who for decades has worked as a mid-level government official. Baghaei is closely connected to Mashaei and has taken up a post he used to hold at Iran's cultural heritage organization, which is officially part of the government.

Baghaei was banned from holding public office following what Iran's judiciary has called "repeated offences," though his illegal acts were not detailed. He has appealed the ruling and, as he awaits retrial, is allowed to remain in his post.

Iranian media has connected him to land grabbing on the Persian Gulf holiday island of Kish. After pictures of him posing with the American flag and the Statue of Liberty were posted online, he was also accused of trying to improve relations with the United States.

Although Iran's supreme leader often stresses that it is essential for the Islamic Republic's survival to resist the United States on all fronts, many suspect that the president's team is politically interested in creating better relations with the U.S. in order to boost domestic popularity. The government has denied this.

Another aide, first vice president Mohammad Reza Rahimi, 62, is relatively new to Ahmadinejad's inner circle. In 2005 the former regional governor campaigned for Ahmadinejad's main opponent, ex-president Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani.

But Rahimi decided to side with the winner and recently said that Ahmadinejad could be a new "prophet." An influential parliamentarian said Tuesday that the judiciary is preparing to bring charges against Rahimi for his role in the embezzlement of more than \$1 billion, an allegation Rahimi denies.

Many former supporters of the government are now among its staunchest critics. "When he became a candidate in 2005, Ahmadinejad had surrounded himself with good people," said Reza Golpour, a Shiite activist and writer who at that time was a strong backer of the president. Since, then, he said a creeping takeover by Mashaei and his "agents" had occurred.

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