Conservatives Gain Strength in Tehran

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

Jul 23, 1996

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)
Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

Contrary to initial analyses of the April elections, it is now clear that conservative ideologues_not the reputedly more pro-Western supporters of President Rafsanjani_are the dominant force in the Iranian Majlis. That result, plus early Iranian presidential politicking, makes prospects for U.S.-Iranian dialogue as unlikely as ever and could foreshadow an increase in Iranian-sponsored terrorism.

Rafsanjani Supporters Weaker Than They Looked

At the time of the April Iranian elections, Western media reported that the "conservatives," reportedly more ideological than flexible in foreign policy matters, had lost their majority and that the supporters of President Hashemi Rafsanjani_who were suggested to be more pro-Western_had done well. The analysis was no straightforward matter, because there were not two clearly defined camps, and most candidates ran unaffiliated. Western reporters estimated that the conservatives won 110-120 seats and the Rafsanjani supporters 90-100 of the 270 total seats in the Majlis.

Now that the new Majlis has been meeting for a month, the picture is much clearer. The leader of the conservative faction, Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, has been elected Majlis speaker. Of the twelve Majlis leadership positions, eleven went to conservatives; the twelfth is an independent. Not a single one of the positions went to anyone remotely identifiable with the Rafsanjani faction.

The Rafsanjani camp was always much weaker than might appear at first glance. It is a loose coalition of differing views, while the conservatives are more united. More important, its enemies control the vital Council of Guardians, which must ratify all election returns and all legislation. The Council switched the victor in three districts, in each case from a Rafsanjani supporter to a conservative, and annulled the votes in twenty-three districts_sixteen of which were won by Rafsanjani followers, most of them women, and seven by candidates of unclear ideological tendency. That is a switch of nineteen votes away from Rafsanjani's camp, converting a narrow result into a solid conservative win. The Council's action was such blatant vote-rigging that it sparked disturbances in two major cities, Isfahan and Tabriz.

The conservatives' strength in the Majlis is reinforced by the tendency of independent Majlis members, more concerned about delivering goods to their constituencies than about high politics, to join the majority. For instance,

when the first vote of the new Majlis was held on electing a provisional speaker, the Rafsanjani candidate lost only 132 to 105; two weeks later, after the independents had discerned the Majlis balance of power, they helped elect a conservative permanent speaker, Nateq-Nuri, by 146 to 92.

Conservatives on the Offensive

Having won control of the Majlis, the conservatives are now on the offensive. Disturbed at criticism of clerics and clerical rule from Islamist intellectuals (such as the religious philosopher Abdul Karim Soroush), they are campaigning for ideological purity. In his remarks opening the new session, Supreme Guide Ayatollah Ali Hosein Khamenei said, "The duty of the Majlis is, in the first instance, to stand against the demands of deviant Western liberalism." He has called for Islamicizing the universities, complaining that they are not Islamic today. This theme has been picked up with gusto by Ayatollah Ahmed Janati, a vigorously conservative Council of Guardians member, who has called for firing impious professors. It is quite possible that there will soon be an end to the relatively open intellectual atmosphere of the last few years.

Janati is the inspirational leader of a violent conservative movement called the Ansar-e Hezbollah (Followers of the Party of God). Ansar uses a level of viciousness not seen in recent years. It has organized violent attacks on film patrons and women bicycling (even when wearing a chador!) to demonstrate its opposition to modern practices. Ansar activists have also invaded university campuses to beat up university professors, including Soroush, and disrupt meetings of mainstream student groups. While Janati is the most outspoken, many other conservative leaders hint they support Ansar's thuggish attacks.

Presidential Vote

The big prize the conservatives are aiming for is the May 1997 presidential elections. The president is much more powerful than the Majlis, which is largely confined to blocking presidential initiatives. Past practice has been for there to be only one candidate with a serious prospect of winning. That again is the most likely prosect: the Iranian elite is agreed that important decisions like who is to lead the country are too important to leave to the voters. Iran's democracy is primarily for show, to give Iranians a limited outlet to vent their frustrations. The candidate will be selected by Supreme Guide Ayatollah Khamenei, who is much more inclined toward the conservatives than toward Rafsanjani.

Having already served two terms since 1989, Rafsanjani is constitutionally barred from a third term. And, notwithstanding the fervent hopes of the Iranian business community, the constitution is not likely to be amended. The leading technocratic candidate is the mayor of Tehran, Gholam-Hossein Karbaschi. He has been efficient and relatively popular, but the conservatives hate him, in part because he has a modern orientation. He is unlikely to run and even less likely to win. There might be a compromise on a candidate like Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, who has generally endorsed the conservative position but works well with technocrats. However, the most likely prospect is that the next president will be the leader of the conservatives, Majlis Speaker Nateq-Nuri. Nateq-Nuri embodies the negative aspects of traditional clerical education: he is ignorant of the outside world, he is vain, and he is arrogant about himself and about the natural superiority of Iranian civilization.

Implications for the United States

Many European officials suggest that the West should support the technocrats against the conservatives (or the other hard-line group, the radicals). That is dubious advice, given that the technocrats have for a decade now refused to change Iran's hard-line foreign policy stance: the technocrats continue to act as if Iran's aggressive behavior is at worst a small obstacle to its economic objectives. Given its bitter experience, the United States has no interest in the search for the mythical Iranian moderates.

The real impact of the conservative-technocratic split is that it makes each camp reluctant to take bold initiatives.

The conservative Majlis majority makes the Rafsanjani government vulnerable to criticism any time it is seen as deviating from the strict Khamenei line. The big dispute will be about domestic issues, especially social matters like education. But in that atmosphere, it seems highly improbable that Rafsanjani would risk exposing himself to attacks by making a risky opening for dialogue with the United States. Such a move would be a golden opportunity for the conservatives to pounce on Rafsanjani for abandoning the principles of the Revolution, one of the most central of which was condemnation of the United States.

In their maneuvering for advantage, each of the major political camps would find useful a major terrorist attack on the United States. Were they to organize such an attack, the technocrats could claim that they are as faithful to the Revolution as the conservatives and more effective at advancing its goals. The conservatives, on the other hand, would like to show that they are the ones who can hurt the United States while the technocrats are too scared of Western reaction to do so. The prospect of U.S. retaliation does not particularly concern either side; the technocrats would have liked better commercial relations with the United States, but they realize that is not in the cards.

In other words, the conservative-technocratic maneuvering makes less likely any Iranian interest in dialogue with the United States before mid-1997, and it increases the risk of Iranian terrorism.

Patrick Clawson, an adjunct fellow of The Washington Institute, is a senior research professor at the National Defense University's Institute for National Strategic Studies and author of Iran's Strategic Intentions and Capabilities (National Defense University Press, 1994). The views expressed here are his own and not those of the U.S. government or any of its agencies. ❖

Policy #208

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism

Feb 11, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)

ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule

Feb 9, 2022

◆

Matthew Levitt

(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule)

TOPICS

Arab & Islamic Politics (/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran (/policy-analysis/iran)