

Iran's Parliamentary Speaker Election Is No Step Forward for Rouhani

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Brief Analysis

Ali Larijani's projected victory likely won't help Rouhani, who needs ample support from parliament in order to bolster his chances of winning next year's presidential election.

On May 28, Iran's incoming parliament will gather to choose a new speaker of the Majlis, and the results will likely turn President Hassan Rouhani's postelection mood from joy to disappointment. Analysts give the reformist camp's favored candidate, Mohammad Reza Aref, little chance of prevailing, and while the almost-certain winner -- Ali Larijani -- is more or less acceptable to Rouhani, the incumbent hardliner's loyalties will lie with the Supreme Leader on all issues that come before the parliament.

After the February elections, a group about a hundred pro-Rouhani parliamentarians (out of 290 total members in the new Majlis) hoped to form a coalition with less radical conservatives and thereby dominate the legislature. The first step in this plan was to replace the speaker, which seemed both feasible and appropriate given the many new faces joining the Majlis.

Yet Larijani's victory is all but assured -- in fact, Aref may even withdraw his name before the vote. Beside its symbolic value, this failure will cast a cloud over next year's presidential election and discourage the Rouhani camp. It also shows how easily the hardliners can disregard their internal differences and unite to prevent reformists from influencing decisionmaking in sensitive institutions.

AREF'S UNINSPIRING BACKGROUND

From the start, Aref was not a strong candidate for the reformists to throw their weight behind. Despite his past positions in former president Mohammad Khatami's government, Aref's statements and actions do not clearly fit

into the reformist camp (for a fuller discussion of the reformist camp itself, [see PolicyWatch 2583, "What Does It Mean To Be a Reformist in Iran?"](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-reformist-in-iran) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-reformist-in-iran>)). His university background and early positions in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance did not win him recognition as a significant political figure, but Khatami nevertheless appointed him to new positions because of their friendship and common birthplace.

As minister of information and communications technology and, later, head of the Management and Planning Organization of Iran, Aref compiled an unsuccessful management record that was criticized by internal colleagues and outside analysts alike. During Khatami's second term, he was appointed first deputy to the president (i.e., one of several vice presidents in the Iranian system), but he was considered among the weakest and most passive members of the cabinet. Later, during the lead-up to the 2008 Majlis election, Aref was considered among the top reformist candidates likely to be approved by the powerful Guardian Council, but he withdrew in protest when the council rejected other candidates.

After being out of government for several years, Aref ran as a reformist candidate in the 2013 presidential election, but other reformists soon realized that he would not be able to respond to their constituencies' demands. Consequently, Khatami asked him to withdraw in favor of Rouhani, whose reputation as a prominent diplomat and negotiator made him more appealing to the many voters who wanted a president capable of resolving the nuclear crisis through diplomacy. Finding himself with no support, Aref reluctantly withdrew a few days before the election, without mentioning Rouhani. And despite his expectation of receiving important offers from Rouhani after his victory, he was utterly ignored by the new president. Rouhani's priority was to hire outstanding managers and technocrats, so Aref's weak administrative background and murky political mindset made him an unattractive choice.

In the lead-up to this year's parliamentary elections, reformists and other Rouhani supporters were despondent because the Guardian Council was rejecting their favorite candidates en masse. Therefore, they created new lists of candidates with mixed political tendencies and affiliations and invited their constituents to vote for them, on the theory that siding with supposedly less hardline conservatives was the best way to block the most radical hardliners. In Iranian politics, candidates are not consulted in the creation of such lists, so they are sometimes surprised or even unhappy about being included on them. In any case, the reformists' hybrid list won all of the Majlis seats in Tehran province during the first round of voting, Aref among them. This outcome spurred Rouhani and his allies to fabricate a triumphalist narrative about the elections that did not match political reality or the hard data -- which in turn created unrealistic expectations about replacing Larijani. It was in this context that Aref decided to run for speaker.

LARIJANI'S LOYALTIES

Ali Larijani has been a confidant of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei for more than thirty years and is among the regime's most powerful politicians. His brother Sadeq is chief of the judiciary, and his other brothers have played important roles in diplomacy and government affairs. A veteran of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, Larijani is also the son of Grand Ayatollah Hashem Amoli and son-in-law to prominent Islamic ideologue Morteza Motahhari. Given this varied background, he has been able to establish strong, longstanding ties with both the military and the clergy, benefiting significantly from their support. He also has a reputation as a good manager, largely based on the ten years he spent as head of state television and radio.

As Majlis speaker during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term, Larijani had substantial and well-publicized differences with the president that led to explicit confrontation. Many observers took notice of his effectiveness at controlling the parliament and making it an obstacle to Ahmadinejad's plans. More recently, during the P5+1 nuclear negotiations, Larijani contained the legislature's anti-Rouhani atmosphere and did a spectacular job in getting the

final agreement approved by the Majlis in less than an hour. Yet he expended such energy not out of sympathy for Rouhani, but because Khamenei asked him to.

Generally, then, Larijani can be helpful to Rouhani in certain cases, but always within the framework of Khamenei's agenda, not beyond it. Even so, the speaker's role in legitimizing the nuclear agreement created or widened gaps between him and many conservatives, including hardline factions like the Paydari Front. As a result, he was not included in conservative lists during this year's elections. That was little obstacle to his political status, however -- Larijani ran as an independent candidate from Qom city, and his victory indicated that he still enjoys a strong power base among the clergy and the blessing of the Supreme Leader.

Given the speaker's long management record, his special relationship with Khamenei, and his powerful personal network, many conservatives and Rouhani supporters view him as someone who can do things that other politicians cannot -- in other words, as the polar opposite of the ineffective Aref. Larijani's recent initiative to meet with Khamenei and ask for his intervention on the Mino Khaleqi controversy is a good example. Khaleqi is a female reformist candidate who met the Guardian Council's qualifications and won enough votes in Isfahan to gain a Majlis seat. Later, however, after photos surfaced allegedly showing her out in public without her *hijab* (veil), the council disqualified her, sparking protests from the Interior Ministry. Although the matter remains unresolved, Larijani's intercession with Khamenei was certainly noticed.

Currently, Larijani enjoys overwhelming support from conservatives and even hardliners to retain his speaker's seat, despite their failure to back him in the February elections. Notwithstanding their personal views of Larijani, however, this support is most important as an indicator of how readily conservatives can come together and reach relative consensus on specific actions to prevent the president's camp from making significant gains. From that perspective, Rouhani's problems go well beyond the identity of the next Majlis speaker. If he hopes to convince voters to reelect him next year, he will need the parliament's support to prove that his economic agenda has been effective. But Larijani's apparent reelection suggests that conservatives will be able to mobilize against Rouhani quite readily, while the president's own supporters seem unable to establish a sustainable political identity that can form coalitions with other factions. As a result, the conservative majority under Larijani is poised to continue advancing the Supreme Leader's agenda in various fields without interruption, and without the need to compromise with pro-Rouhani parliamentarians.

Finally, it will be interesting to see how Larijani reacts to his reelection, since many reports characterize him as Rouhani's most serious competitor in next year's election. Rouhani presumably hopes that Larijani will settle for a safe, secure power base in the Majlis rather than throw his hat in the presidential ring, but the speaker may instead view his post as a good spot from which to undermine his rival ahead of a 2017 run.

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