

Winners and Losers in Iran's Presidential Election

by [Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Mehdi Khalaji \(/experts/mehdi-khalaji\)](/experts/mehdi-khalaji)

Mehdi Khalaji, a Qom-trained Shiite theologian, is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

Ayatollah Khamenei is determined to push for a completely loyal president, but the decision to dismiss Rafsanjani could undermine the regime in the long run.

Although Iran will not hold its presidential election until June 14, the winners and losers are already clear. The biggest losers are Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and outgoing president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; the biggest winner is former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

RAFSANJANI WINNING BEFORE THE VOTE

Earlier this week, the Guardian Council -- with Khamenei's consent, and perhaps even at his request -- disqualified Rafsanjani from running in the election. However difficult the decision may have been, it was also essential for Khamenei's plans. Since 2009, Rafsanjani has become known as a vocal critic of the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad. In recent months, reformists began to support his candidacy because they knew that the Guardian Council would prevent their own prominent candidates from running. Rafsanjani rapidly became a symbol for change among his former critics, who concluded that only he could alter the power equation to limit the Supreme Leader's authority and keep the military and intelligence forces from further expanding their control over nonmilitary life. He also received wide support from technocrats and other figures who want a more competent leadership in Tehran -- two traits sorely lacking in the current government. Had Rafsanjani been permitted to run, he could have converted the election into a referendum on Khamenei's leadership, so the Supreme Leader decided to stop the tsunami before it began.

Yet the disqualification has put Rafsanjani in an excellent situation. He can now present himself as a leader who was ready to shoulder a heavy burden in order to save the system, without actually having to face the problems of governing. He can also portray himself as a populist figure despite a public image that has gone through ups and downs over the years (e.g., he could not even win election to the parliament in 2000). In addition, he made Khamenei look petty and dictatorial for rejecting his offer to help the Islamic Republic in an hour of need.

As a wily politician, Rafsanjani is already hitting these notes. On May 23, in his first speech after the Guardian Council announced his disqualification, he stated:

"I knew that I should not have come, and I said in private gatherings that I know these people better than anyone else...I do not want to enter the campaign environment, but their ignorance bothers me. Don't they know what they are doing? Even if they were my enemies, wisdom entails that they would let me enter, then scandalize me. You should have let people vote with hope, and if after six months they see prices go up [then they would blame me]. They don't know that there was one who was ready to sacrifice and pave the way for others...I ask people not to replace hope with despair, and to maintain their calmness. No solution [to the country's problems] has been given yet. [Those who disqualified me] do not need to talk of foreign enemies, because the problems come from within."

Rafsanjani went on to describe how difficult it would be to serve as president under the current circumstances because of ongoing mismanagement and corruption, along with increasing international sanctions. He seems happy to be excused from that responsibility while retaining a public pulpit from which to curb Khamenei's bid for absolute power.

Indeed, disqualifying Rafsanjani will likely impose a heavy cost on both Khamenei and the regime, comparable to the 1989 dismissal of Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, deputy of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Both Montazeri and Rafsanjani became critics of the Supreme Leader despite being considered founding fathers of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei's circle could have handled the matter in a much smoother way, perhaps praising Rafsanjani for offering to run while claiming that the nation could not ask so much of a seventy-nine-year-old man who had already sacrificed a great deal for the country. As usual, however, they opted for brute force instead.

For example, after Rafsanjani registered as a candidate earlier this month, Hossein Shariatmadari -- a close Khamenei confidant whose writings often lay "the foundations for state decisions," as the *New York Times* accurately put it -- ripped into him. In an editorial in the May 21 edition of *Kayhan*, Iran's largest-circulation newspaper, he called Rafsanjani a representative of the "American-Israeli sedition" of 2009, referring to the protests that erupted after that year's fraudulent presidential election.

Meanwhile, members of Ruhollah Khomeini's family, who have long played a significant role in bolstering the regime's legitimacy, are now separating themselves from Khamenei. On May 22, Zahra Mostafavi, Khomeini's daughter and the most conservative member of the family, wrote an open letter to the Supreme Leader asking him to veto the Guardian Council's decision, saying, "I urge you to intervene and prove that the ruling ayatollah wants to prevent dictatorship." She also claimed for the first time that her father viewed both Khamenei and Rafsanjani as qualified to be Supreme Leader. Similarly, Hasan Khomeini, the ayatollah's grandson and custodian of his shrine, called the decision "unbelievable." In a May 22 letter to Rafsanjani, he wrote "from now on, the name of Hashemi Rafsanjani will find a distinct place in the memory of the Iranian people, tied with hope for the future. This will make your name eternal. Hope is the essential capital of any nation."

DECLINE OF APOCALYPTIC POLITICS

The Guardian Council also barred members of Ahmadinejad's circle from running for office, including chief of staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashai. This was in contrast to its approval of minor figures close to the two previous presidents: Muhammad Reza Aref, former vice president under Muhammad Khatami, and Hasan Rouhani, former chief nuclear negotiator and a Rafsanjani confidant. The snubbing of Ahmadinejad's followers shows that Khamenei is determined to prevent them from having any significant role in future government.

Khamenei also appears to have come down firmly against apocalyptic clerics -- a faction that has used messianic discourse to mobilize public support for its radical ideology and revitalize revolutionary fervor, in apparent revolt

against the Islamic Republic's traditional political elite. A few months ago, Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi -- an apocalyptic cleric who supported Ahmadinejad eight years ago but eventually turned against him -- started a presidential campaign on behalf of Kamran Baqeri Lankarani. Yet Lankarani pulled out of the race right before the Guardian Council announced the list of qualified candidates; rumors indicate that the council privately asked him to step down so they would not have to disqualify him publicly. His withdrawal means that the election will not include a candidate sympathetic to the apocalyptic fundamentalists.

PREDICTABLE ELECTION, UNPREDICTABLE POLITICS

None of the remaining candidates appears capable of exciting the public, so voter turnout will likely plummet. The regime will no doubt ignore this, however, given its traditional sensitivity about turnout as a measure of its legitimacy and popularity. Instead, Khamenei will focus on manipulating the election to his benefit.

For their part, the clerical establishment fears the growing power of Khamenei's military and intelligence forces -- a power that will only increase under a weak president elected in a discredited manner. The dominant role of security actors not only threatens the clergy's ability to influence current decisionmaking, it also raises doubts about the future of the Islamic Republic after Khamenei. So far, he has indicated that he mistrusts reformists, technocrats, clerics, and bazaaris (merchants) -- in other words, all of the Islamic Republic's traditional political and social forces. In their place, Khamenei tends to run the country by using low-profile figures with security and military connections.

Now that the list of candidates is final, members of Khamenei's military/intelligence circle are working closely to identify the one who would be most loyal to the Supreme Leader. For now, they are focusing on four men: Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's advisor on international affairs; Saeed Jalili, Khamenei's representative on the Supreme Council for National Security; Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, mayor of Tehran; and Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, Khamenei's relative and former speaker of parliament. The Supreme Leader's priority is obedience more than qualifications and competence -- regardless of who becomes president, Khamenei is intent on avoiding the tensions he experienced with previous presidents.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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