

Iran's Political Super Bowl: Ahmadinezhad vs. Rafsanjani

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Brief Analysis

On February 24, 2011, the two leaders of the Iranian opposition Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, were arrested and taken initially to Heshmatiyeh prison in Tehran. Meanwhile, within the ruling circle of the Islamic Republic, hardliners are trying to further consolidate their position. At least as important a development as the isolation and harassment of the Green Movement leaders and their supporters is the posturing by the regime against one of its iconic figures, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

This power struggle within Iran's political elite will be on full display during the March 8-9 semiannual meeting of the Assembly of Experts, the body charged with selecting the country's Supreme Leader and, in the case of the imminent meeting, electing a head of the assembly for the coming year. The assembly is now led by Rafsanjani himself, who twenty-two years ago played the lead role in selecting Ali Khamenei to succeed Ruhollah Khomeini as the country's Supreme Leader. In the present predicament, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and other hardliners are trying to prevent Rafsanjani from maintaining his leadership of the assembly, yet removing him would further narrow the field of Iran's religious and political elite who support Khamenei.

Why Rafsanjani Matters

Rafsanjani is one of the founders and engineers behind the formation of the Islamic Republic. He had an intimate relationship with Ayatollah Khomeini. The two lived next door to each other and spent much time together during Rafsanjani's two four-year terms as speaker of the Majlis (Iranian parliament). Rafsanjani also served as effective commander in chief of the armed forces during the last years of the Iran-Iraq War, functioning as Khomeini's deputy. A further dynamic in that earlier government involved the role of Iran's current leader, Khamenei, then president with no executive power and a bitter adversary of then prime minister (and now Green Movement detainee) Mousavi, who held control of the government bureaucracy. With Khamenei and Mousavi at loggerheads, Rafsanjani was arguably the most important administrator of the country's domestic and foreign policy.

In 1989, the year Khomeini died, Rafsanjani arranged for the constitution to be revised to eliminate the position of prime minister, with the position's former powers being transferred to the presidency, a post into which Rafsanjani then moved. Rafsanjani had calculated that he would hold the real power, rather than the new Supreme Leader,

Khamenei, since the latter lacked religious and political credentials as well as the charisma of Khomeini.

When Khamenei became Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, he soon identified his power base within the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the broader military rather than the clerical establishment or political elite. By empowering the IRGC to become involved in Iran's economy and politics, Khamenei strengthened his own position and, in turn, thwarted Rafsanjani's plans to boost his political influence.

In reaction, Rafsanjani helped the reformist Muhammad Khatami win election as his successor, a move that challenged Khamenei's political ambitions. Khamenei fought back by using the IRGC, the Intelligence Ministry, and the Judiciary to seriously weaken Khatami and ultimately close the doors of government to the reformists. In 2005, all these forces combined to deal Rafsanjani a harsh defeat in his bid to retake the presidency against his foe and critic Ahmadinezhad. Rafsanjani, who then headed the influential Expediency Council (charged with resolving disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council), was shocked by Khamenei's clear support for Ahmadinezhad, who had publicly accused Rafsanjani of engaging in economic corruption.

Fast-forward to June 2009, when Rafsanjani wrote an open letter to Khamenei warning of fraudulence in the upcoming election. This missive followed a slew of retorts, including the accusation by Ahmadinezhad, during his televised debate with Mousavi, that Rafsanjani had engaged in further corruption. Ahmadinezhad's supporters joined in by throwing other charges at Rafsanjani, who protested against these public accusations while Khamenei kept silent.

After the rigged election, Khamenei announced during a widely watched sermon that his personal views were closer to those of Ahmadinezhad than Rafsanjani. Since then, Rafsanjani has been allowed to lead Friday prayer only once - a shocking change from his longtime role as prayer leader once a month. In that sole sermon, Rafsanjani asked the government to release political prisoners and reconcile with protesters.

In recent months, Khamenei has called Rafsanjani a *khavass-e bi basirat* (an ignorant member of the elite) based on the latter's refusal to condemn postelection protests and opposition leaders. Rafsanjani's family members have also come under attack. His son Mehdi Hashemi, who left Iran after the election, has been summoned to court for "his involvement in the *fitna*," or political heresy. Hashemi now lives in London and fears returning to Iran. In another slap against Rafsanjani's family, last week a video clip was posted on Facebook and other websites showing Faezeh Hashemi, Rafsanjani's courageous and feminist daughter, and other family members being attacked by Basij militia and humiliated by malicious insults. State TV also showed a hardline gathering in which participants shouted, "Death to Hashemi."

What Do Khamenei and the Opposition Want from Rafsanjani?

When, last September, Khamenei spoke at the Qom Association for Seminary Teachers and Researchers (a governmental body within the clerical establishment), he assured clerics that Ahmadinezhad was operating fully under his control. He elaborated that the country is unified today, whereas under the leadership of Rafsanjani and Khatami, control had been split. Such a statement may be taken to mean that Rafsanjani and Khatami did not acquiesce to Khamenei, whereas Ahmadinezhad -- who sometimes frightens clerics by making apocalyptic, anticlerical statements -- seems to be following Khamenei's agenda.

Notwithstanding the Supreme Leader's claim, Rafsanjani arguably enjoys broader and deeper support than Khamenei among large sections of the old political and religious elite. For this reason, Khamenei has not wanted to push Rafsanjani too far, preferring that that latter be in a weakened position, with little independence.

As for the opposition, it wants Rafsanjani's support, but Rafsanjani is reluctant to sign on, having played the part of

conciliator over the past three decades. Yet poor relations with the Supreme Leader and the president make his previous role impossible to sustain. For more than a year, Khamenei and Rafsanjani have not held their usual, weekly private meetings. And since June 2009, Ahmadinezhad has not attended sessions of the Expediency Council.

Symbolic Significance of the Assembly of Experts

The Assembly of Experts consists of eighty-nine ayatollahs supposedly tasked with supervising the tenure of the Supreme Leader and appointing a new leader in the case of his death or failure to fulfill duties. While in theory these members are elected, in practice they are appointed by the Supreme Leader himself and therefore lack the power to supervise his activities.

Since the institution itself is symbolic, functioning to provide legitimacy to the leader, its head also plays a symbolic role. Should the title go to someone other than Rafsanjani for the coming term, this would indicate (1) that Khamenei does not feel he needs Rafsanjani anymore and (2) that he does not fear Rafsanjani's migration to the opposition, which he would presumably view as unable to pose a serious threat to his hegemony.

Hardliners have been campaigning in support Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani to replace Rafsanjani, but the Supreme Leader has not sent a clear message that he wants Rafsanjani gone. For Rafsanjani's part, he has vowed to push forward with his candidacy, seeing reelection as assembly leader as a personal duty. In the end, Khamenei's decision will have the greatest influence on who is ultimately selected.

Fissures among the Elite Will Only Grow

Conflicts within the Iranian political elite will be on full display in a series of upcoming "moments." To begin with, the five-year term of the current Expediency Council, a seriously weakened body of which (as noted) Rafsanjani is head and Mousavi is a member, expires in February 2012, requiring the Supreme Leader to appoint new members. Ahmadinezhad, another member, has stopped attending meetings altogether. In March of the same year, parliamentary elections will be held, posing a challenge to the hardliners. Historically, these elections have involved real contests within the narrow circles of the elite, and increasingly unfriendly relations among various hardline factions will be difficult to contain. Furthermore, it will be difficult to elicit voting participation by a public skeptical that elections make much of a difference at all.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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