

Larijani's Resignation: Implications for Iranian Nuclear Policy and Internal Politics

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Brief Analysis

The October 20 announcement of Ali Larijani's resignation as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator and secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) has intensified pressure on President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. Faced with criticism over the resignation, Tehran ensured that Larijani attended the Iran-European Union (EU) nuclear talks in Rome on October 23. His continued presence in the negotiations raises serious questions about who is in charge of Iran's nuclear policy and other key issues, making the regime's intentions even more of an enigma to the Europeans. As EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana stated after the Rome meeting, "I found the same Larijani I had met before, and he had the role of chief negotiator."

Iranian Reaction to the Resignation

Larijani took over Iran's nuclear negotiations when Ahmadinezhad assumed office two years ago. At first, he advocated a rigid attitude toward the West and was an outspoken critic of the Khatami-era negotiating team. Yet, as reformist leader Mohsen Armin explained, over the past two years, Larijani realized the hard facts and came to understand the merits of the former policy. He began to keep an evident distance from Ahmadinezhad and his nuclear policies.

The open break between the two came during Russian president Vladimir Putin's visit to Tehran on October 15. After Putin's meeting with Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Larijani revealed to the press that Russia had offered the Supreme Leader a new nuclear deal, which Russian sources have since confirmed. Immediately afterward, however, Ahmadinezhad announced that there was no new offer and that the main purpose of Putin's visit was to enhance the relationship between the two countries. As Armin noted, this continues the pattern of Larijani being unable to move the president: "Larijani was hopeless about the results of his negotiations with the Europeans due to his differences with Ahmadinezhad."

State-run media organizations played down the importance of Larijani's resignation by offering no significant analysis or news coverage on its consequences. For instance, on October 22, Kayhan newspaper emphasized that major strategic decisions are made by the full SNSC, which includes the president -- in other words, not by the secretary alone -- and that nothing becomes official without the Supreme Leader's approval.

Nevertheless, the resignation increased tensions between Ahmadinezhad and mainstream conservatives who constitute the majority of the Majlis. Muhammad Reza Bahonar, the powerful first deputy speaker of the Majlis, stated that cooperation between Larijani and the president had become impossible. Ahmad Tavakkoli, a leading conservative, also expressed concern by questioning the qualifications of Larijani's replacement, Said Jalili: "The political and executive background of Larijani is not comparable with an inexperienced deputy of the foreign ministry [i.e., Jalili]." The Majlis national security committee plans to investigate the reasons behind resignation.

Perhaps the most significant criticism was expressed by Ali Akbar Velayati, foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader and former foreign minister. In an October 22 interview with ISNA news agency, he stated, "Amidst the existing negative climate against Iran, the country's officials have to be more circumspect; it would have been better if this resignation had not taken place." Velayati's blunt statement can be interpreted as an indication that even the Supreme Leader was reluctant about Larijani's resignation.

Ideologue Replaces Technocrat

Jalili, Larijani's replacement, is a forty-two-year-old former member of the Basij militia and a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War. He does not speak English well and apparently had never traveled to the West before Ahmadinezhad's presidential term. Jalili received a doctorate in political science from the University of Imam Sadeq, an institution headed by a prominent and strict conservative, Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani. Jalili's rigid ideological outlook is reflected in the titles of his two books: *The Model of Islamic Political Thought in the Quran* (his dissertation) and *The Foreign Policy of Islam's Prophet*. He is reportedly a member of the committee that helps draft the president's correspondence with world leaders, such as Ahmadinezhad's letter to President Bush calling on him to convert to Islam, among other things. Jalili also organized Ahmadinezhad's 2005 delegation to Cuba, where the president purportedly suggested Fidel Castro convert to Islam as well.

Jalili is known as a close friend and political confidant of Ahmadinezhad and is even described as the president's most trusted figure. He was Ahmadinezhad's first preference for foreign minister, but his inexperience made Majlis approval unlikely. Instead, he was appointed to the mid-rank position of deputy foreign minister for American and European affairs. In a March 2006 interview with Fars news agency, a correspondent asked, "Some people say that you are the direct representative of Ahmadinezhad in the foreign ministry and that many of his ideas on foreign policy parallel yours. To what extent is this true?" Jalili replied, "I have close personal and intellectual ties to the president, so what you said may come to people's minds." There are rumors that Ahmadinezhad is not satisfied with the current foreign minister, Manoucher Motaki, and that he plans to promote Jalili to be Motaki's first deputy.

On the nuclear issue, Jalili summarized his views in his March 2006 Fars interview: "The Iranian nuclear dossier is not complicated, but it is a technical and legal issue; Britain, France, and Germany are the ones who want to politicize it." This suggests he is unprepared to accept any compromise on uranium enrichment, much less on the suspension ordered by the UN Security Council. In summer 2007, when he made a trip to Europe to discuss the nuclear issue, European foreign ministers reportedly had an unfavorable impression of him.

Next Steps

Ahmadinezhad tends to blame the country's top ministers for his own policy failures. Larijani's resignation is not the first major change under Ahmadinezhad, and it will not be the last. The president has so far fired two ministers from the oil and heavy industries as well as the head of the central bank. He also shut down the very prominent Plan and Budget Organization. In Tehran's political circles, there are rumors about imminent changes throughout the government.

Ahmadinezhad's policy failures are also forcing him to break his alliances with other conservative factions. The president must overcome many obstacles if he hopes to form a united conservative front with his old supporters in

advance of the March 2008 Majlis elections. For instance, the leading clerics in Qom have switched their support from Ahmadinezhad to former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, electing him speaker of the Assembly of Experts. There are rumors that some conservatives have proposed to Ahmadinezhad that they will support his followers in the next Majlis elections on the condition that he not seek reelection in 2009. This, however, is unacceptable to Ahmadinezhad.

With a diminishing cadre of allies and supporters, Ahmadinezhad has become more isolated than ever. Although he has always had a wide range of critics, he will find his adversaries greatly multiplied in the wake of Larijani's resignation. Before long, it is quite possible that a crisis will emerge in Ahmadinezhad's government.

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