

Ahmadinezhad's Power Slipping in Iran

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Brief Analysis

Two intriguing developments have unfolded in Iran over the past week: the election of a new Assembly of Experts Speaker on September 4 and the appointment of a new Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander in chief on September 1. Both suggest the growing power of former president Ali Akbar Rafsanjani, a powerful politician who is openly critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad and his policies.

Assembly of Experts Election

On September 4, the Experts Assembly elected Rafsanjani as speaker to replace the recently deceased Ali Meshkini (see [PolicyWatch no. 1262 \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2638\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC05.php?CID=2638), "How Supreme is Iran's Supreme Leader?" July 23, 2007). This puts Rafsanjani in charge of the body that not only elects new Supreme Leaders but also has the power to remove them. Although previous speaker elections had been preordained (Meshkini received seventy-one votes out of eighty), this election was a display of competition among Iran's factions: Rafsanjani received forty-one votes, and Ahmad Jannati, the other candidate, thirty-three (ten members were absent, and one vote was voided).

Since Meshkini's death, Ahmadinezhad's camp has intensified its media campaign against Rafsanjani. Although the president's followers were able to stop the reprint of Toward Destiny, the latest volume of Rafsanjani's memoirs, they were unable to prevent his election. The failure of Jannati, a major supporter of Ahmadinezhad's 2005 election as a member of the Guardian Council, shows that many senior clerics are skeptical about the president's hardline approach.

Rafsanjani and current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei have had a long and delicate relationship, working together yet disliking each other intensely. In the past year, Rafsanjani has frequently noted the pragmatic foreign policy decisions made by the first Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini. Such comments are widely seen as a criticism of Ahmadinezhad's adventurist policies under Khamenei's watch.

In a speech before the election, Rafsanjani stated, "Since the legitimacy in the political regime of Iran relies on the Supreme Leader, naturally the Assembly of Experts is one of the most important institutions of the country because its job is to witness the continuity of the Supreme Leader's condition and eligibility." He added a pointed reminder that the assembly evaluates how well Khamenei is doing: "[T]he committees that investigate the Supreme Leader and his continuing eligibility are working well . . . but we do not want to publicize their reports." It will be interesting to see what Rafsanjani does with the Experts Assembly, given his history of enhancing the power of the institutions he heads.

New IRGC Leader and Other Changes

On September 1, Khamenei appointed Muhammad Ali Jafari (a.k.a. Aziz Jafari) to head the IRGC. He replaces Yahya Rahim Safavi, the commander since 1997. Jafari explained that this unexpected replacement took place mostly "due to the U.S. threats."

Jafari is not a moderate. He was one of the twenty-four IRGC generals who warned president Muhammad Khatami in 1999 that they would intervene if certain political reforms were enacted. However, he is closely linked to Mohsen Rezai, the IRGC commander from 1981 to 1997 and a close political ally of Rafsanjani. Jafari has a reputation for being more of a military professional than a politician, which is unlike many other IRGC generals. He is also known to be close to the Badr Corps, a Shiite militia in Iraq.

The outgoing IRGC commander was close to Ahmadinezhad. Both of them continually downplayed the seriousness of any U.S. military threat against Iran, most recently in the president's September 2 statement at a press conference that "there will not be any attack against Iran." In contrast, Rezai and Rafsanjani regularly insisted that the threat of war should be taken seriously. In an interview with Iranian state television on January 18, 2007, Rezai stated, "Bush will wage war with Iran and we have to be ready for it." One month later, Khamenei responded in a speech: "Which crisis? Which unusual situation? Don't feel weak in front of the enemy." Jafari's appointment may be a sign that the Supreme Leader has changed his views and now takes the military threat against Iran seriously. In his first press conference as commander in chief, Jafari explained that "an attack by the regime's enemies is possible and the IRGC is ready" to meet it with "asymmetric warfare."

In another interesting change, Alireza Afshar replaced Mojtaba Hashemi Samareh as political deputy of the Ministry of Interior. From this post, Afshar will control the organization and administration of the next election, including how ballots are validated and counted -- a source of electoral fraud in the past. Previously, he served as commander of the paramilitary Basij (which is linked to the IRGC) during Mohsen Rezai's leadership and developed a close relationship with him. Since Samareh was very close to Ahmadinezhad, his replacement could be another example of Rafsanjani's strengthened position -- and of the fact that the IRGC's growing influence in Iran does not necessarily strengthen Ahmadinezhad.

The Wild Card: Mismanaged Gasoline Rationing

These changes are occurring against a backdrop of considerable popular discontent. In recent months, a major issue for ordinary Iranians has been gasoline rationing. Statements by Iranian officials suggest that the rationing is to prepare for the possibility that the UN Security Council bans gasoline sales to Iran. After much delay, a peculiar rationing system using smart cards was introduced in June. The cards are loaded with the first six months ration, but many Iranians appear to be using more than their rationed monthly amount in the expectation that the government will add value to the cards before the six months expire in December.

Meanwhile, there is a rampant black market fed by taxi drivers who find it more profitable to sell their more generous ration than to drive taxis, and by those who use phony identification to obtain extra ration cards. If the government sticks to its announced intention of not adding more value to the cards until December, many people

will run through their six-month ration early and have to turn to the black market, where exorbitant prices will no doubt cause greater discontent. Any alternative, such as distributing larger rations, will require billions of dollars in subsidies to import gasoline at a time when Iran already has a growing budget deficit.

Time for Patience

The previous two Iranian presidents each came into office determined to change the country's direction (in 1989, Rafsanjani sought economic reform; in 1997, Khatami sought political reform). They each had about two years of free rein before their efforts were halted and the government reverted to its old ways. Iranian presidents are not particularly powerful compared to the entrenched class of political leaders. That leadership's priority has long been maintaining a hold on power. Thus, while they support revolutionary aims and hope to increase Iran's influence in the region, they are not prepared to take great risks for those goals.

Today, some Iranian leaders seem concerned that Ahmadinezhad is too confrontational. That augurs well for the current Western strategy: forcing hard choices on Tehran through various pressures while offering normalized relations if the Islamic Republic changes course. Vigorously linking Iran's gasoline problems to the nuclear situation would be a good step toward furthering this strategy.

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