

Rafsanjani favored to win Iranian presidential election

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Presidential elections have been called in Iran for June 17 and campaigning has been under way for more than two weeks. The poll is taking place under conditions where the reformist wing of the government, under the leadership of the incumbent president, Mohammad Khatami, is thoroughly discredited. Khatami is barred by the constitution from standing again.

The reformists under Khatami, a mid-ranking cleric who was first elected president in 1997, linked promises of more political freedom with a market-oriented economic programme and a pro-Western orientation in foreign policy. However, the non-elected clerical institutions blocked most moves towards political liberalisation, while reformist politicians and journalists were jailed and some killed, their newspapers banned, and meetings of their supporters broken up by the police and religious militia.

Khatami and other reformist leaders made no serious attempt to mobilise popular resistance against their right-wing opponents. Representing as they do a faction of the Iranian bourgeois elite, they live in fear of a social movement from below that could threaten the existing order, and consequently retreated at every critical point before the attacks of the mullahs.

The Khatami faction is regarded as having little chance of succeeding in the present election. Last year's parliamentary elections ended in a victory for the conservatives, under conditions of a 50.6 percent turnout, the lowest since the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979. Observers predict an even lower turnout in this month's presidential election.

The reformists have, however, received some unexpected support. Conservative clerics dominating the Council of Guardians, a sort of constitutional court, had banned many candidates, including the reformist candidate, Mustafa Moin. But religious leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei intervened to ensure that Moin could stand.

Khamenei may have intervened in an effort to lend the regime a somewhat more democratic image at home and abroad. However, the last eight years have clearly revealed that the real power in the Islamic republic lies with the clerical institutions, and not with those representatives elected by the people.

The regime is under considerable pressure both domestically and internationally. The discrediting of the reformists has weakened the position of a loyal opposition whose essential role was to divert the resistance from below into harmless channels. In addition, ethnic and social conflicts have been on the rise.

In April, there was substantial unrest among the ethnic Arab population in southwest Iran, which, after the Afghans, counts among the most oppressed and poorest layers of the working class. Unrest in the city centre of Ahwaz was bloodily suppressed. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 50 people were killed and over 1,000 arrested, some of whom were tortured.

The trigger was apparently a plan said to emanate from circles close to the president—but repudiated by the government—to resettle Arabs and Azeris from the northwest border with Azerbaijan to the Arab-dominated

provinces.

Separatist tendencies are also said to have increased their influence among the Azeris.

The US has declared its solidarity with the protests. For some time, Washington has been openly supporting regime change. The Bush administration has troops occupying Iran's neighbours, Afghanistan and Iraq, and US military bases operate in neighbouring Turkey and Kuwait. Diplomatic pressure on Teheran has increased since the "EU-3" (Germany, France and Britain) began cooperating closely with the US over Iran's nuclear energy programme and demanded that Tehran halt its uranium enrichment programme.

As a result, the regime seems to favour a "Chinese" solution: deregulation and an opening up of the economy to international capital and cooperation with the West, accompanied by brutal suppression of political opposition, while allowing some limited liberties in the private affairs of citizens.

The front-runner among the presidential candidates is the embodiment of this programme: Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He is widely viewed as an opportunist and pragmatist, a sort of "Cardinal Richelieu" of the Islamic republic—unscrupulous, cunning and influential.

He was born in 1934 in Rafsanjani, the son of a pistachio plantation owner. In the 1950s he was a pupil of Khomeini in Quom. In 1963, he was arrested after the "white revolution" of Shah Pahlavi, who wanted to modernize Iran in the interests of native capital and the US. He was forced into military service, then arrested again in 1964 and detained for several years.

Unlike other Islamic fundamentalists, Rafsanjani is believed to have maintained contacts with the "People's Mujaheddin" (MKO), and also with the Stalinist Tudeh Party. After his release, he officially became a priest, while unofficially acting as a fundraiser for Khomeini, who was now living in exile. Rafsanjani was a founding member of Khomeini's Islamic-Republican Party (IRP) and became a member of the party's executive committee.

After the fall of the Shah in 1979, he became a member of the Revolutionary Council, and then was appointed interior minister, charged with building up the country's security forces and brutally suppressing left-wing groups. When Khomeini arrived in Iran, Rafsanjani was seen constantly at his side, appearing in the newspapers each day and thereby building up his public persona.

The Tudeh Party contributed much to his ascent, depicting Rafsanjani as the incarnation of the "Path of Imam Khomeini," whom the party was supporting at the time.

In 1980, Rafsanjani became president of the parliament, and continued to develop his influence during the 1980-88 war against Iraq. Until 1986, he was considered to be a "radical," calling for the extensive wealth of the Shah and other members of the elite who had fled to the West to be expropriated and placed under the control of the clergy and the state, which the clerics now dominated. There are reports that Rafsanjani and

his friends and relatives also benefited personally. His clan is one of the richest families in Iran today.

Rafsanjani was unpopular among the bazaar merchants, who regarded him as the “socialist mullah.” He delivered fierce speeches on behalf of the “disenfranchised,” i.e., the numerous slum dwellers in the cities and the poor rural youth, who shed their blood on the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war, and railed against “imperialism” and the “large and small Satan” (the US and Israel). At the same time, he concluded lucrative business deals with both countries, as was exposed in the “Iran-Contra” affair.

After six years of war with Iraq, Iran was literally bankrupt. Khomeini’s IRP was dissolved in 1987, following a violent internal conflict. Rafsanjani now became the spokesman for the “pragmatists,” i.e., a new bourgeois layer that had arisen during the war, and which no longer had any interest in the “disenfranchised” or the “fight against imperialism.”

In 1988, Khomeini appointed Rafsanjani as commander-in-chief, in which position he concluded a peace treaty with Iraq. He also partially disempowered the radicals in the religious militias who came from among the “disenfranchised,” without dissolving or disarming the militias themselves. This change in course did not signify any “moderation” by the regime. Just before end of the war, a massacre of political prisoners was organized.

According to a Berlin court verdict, Rafsanjani was implicated in the terrorist attacks abroad, including the murder of four Kurdish leaders in a Berlin restaurant. When announcing its verdict, the Berlin court declared that the murders had been conducted at the behest of state sources in Tehran and that Rafsanjani had had prior knowledge of the assassinations.

Elected president of the Islamic Republic in 1989, Rafsanjani pursued a domestic programme of market reforms. In 1989-91, he denationalized hundreds of state enterprises, made foreign investment easier, and brought a series of technocrats into the government in the place of clerics. His government looked favourably upon the first Gulf War against Iraq.

However, his economic and foreign policies threatened to undermine the social and ideological basis of the Islamic regime, which had always made appeals to anti-Americanism and claims of social justice central planks of its rule. He continually came into conflict with other parliamentary groupings of the clergy and the bourgeoisie.

Under his government, cuts in subsidies implemented in 1991 led to food riots, which in turn led to a temporary halt in the pro-market economic course. The parliamentary elections the following year resulted in a defeat for the pragmatists. However, Rafsanjani was again elected president in 1993.

The same year, the US launched an economic embargo against Iran. Rafsanjani now sought a policy of economic compromise: deregulation and privatisations were continued, but the beneficiaries were mainly religious foundations. These foundations served both to enrich the clergy and to offer some support to the members of the “disenfranchised,” who make up most of the members of the various religious militias.

In order to attract foreign capital, Rafsanjani established free trade zones. At the end of 1994, parliament adopted a new law governing demonstrations, which was used for the first time in the spring of 1995 against demonstrators who were protesting against a doubling of certain consumer prices. (The Rafsanjani government had been calling for prices to rise fivefold.) The regime employed combat helicopters against the protesters, and, according to a *New York Times* report, over 100 were killed.

The US intensified its embargo, and Rafsanjani seemed to be finished politically. In 2000, he was elected to parliament in a Tehran constituency, but his was the worst result of all 30 Teheran deputies—and he resigned his mandate before the first sitting of parliament.

Despite his unpopularity, Rafsanjani has not lost anything in wealth or power since his time as president. Quite the contrary. He is chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, which was established to resolve

conflicts between parliament and the Council of Guardians.

According to an article in the German newspaper *taz*: “The man of God, who once earned a meagre living preaching heavenly redemption for believers, now possesses a fortune estimated at more than a billion US dollars. He is Iran’s largest exporter of pistachios. Together with his family, he owns several tourist centres both at home and abroad. His oldest son Mohsen is constructing the Teheran underground; his second son Mehdi is in the natural gas and oil business; his youngest son owns vast swathes of agricultural land; his two daughters Faezeh and Fatima are active in real estate both in Iran and abroad. Rafsanjani’s cousins, nephews and nieces own a considerable portion of the domestic automobile industry, as well as controlling much of the export of pistachios and saffron, and the import of vehicles, paper and machines. A considerable part of Iran’s black market is controlled by the Rafsanjani clan.”

In his election statements, Rafsanjani appeals to nationalism and says it is important to combat unemployment and poverty. At the same time, he calls for Iran to engage in market reforms and open itself up to the global economy. He has sent many conciliatory signals to the US. He told *USA Today* that he was one of the political figures in Iran capable of resolving the problems with the US, and called for a dialogue between the two governments.

The “reformists” have already signalled their support for him on this question. During his term of office, Khatami has repeatedly sought a rapprochement with the US, to a large extent unsuccessfully.

The hard-line wing of the regime rejects making any concessions to the US. This parliamentary group is standing Rafsanjani’s main opponents from the conservative camp: Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Ali Larijani, Mahmud Ahmadi Nejad and Mohsen Rezai. All have past links with the “Revolutionary Guard” militia.

The interior ministry has already complained about interference by the military in the election, saying that soldiers have been instructed by their superiors as to the candidates who should receive their votes. Religious leader Ayatollah Khamenei, who is considered to be close to the hard-liners, felt compelled to state that he was not supporting any particular candidate.



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