

The stalling of the reformist agenda in Iran

Iranian politics and the death of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani

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Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was one of the founding figures of the Islamic revolution in Iran. He remained a powerful and highly influential figure right up until his death at the age of 82 in January. One of the richest men in government, he was continually viewed by the Iranian people as corrupt, yet he managed to maintain an immense amount of influence and power. His death will have a major impact on the shape of the Iranian government in the upcoming elections in May, most notably for the reform-minded politicians.



Born in 1934 into a wealthy family, Rafsanjani went on to study theology with Ayatollah Khomeini in Qom. Throughout his political career, Rafsanjani remained a prominent figure. From 1980 to 1989, he held the position of speaker of the Iranian parliament. He is also accredited with persuading Khomeini to accept the UN resolution to end the Iran-Iraq war in 1988. Khomeini stated that accepting the resolution was deadlier than drinking poison, and would have preferred to continue to export his Islamic Revolution abroad through continued fighting (Hardy, 2005). Between 1989 and 1997 Rafsanjani served as President. During his presidency Rafsanjani advocated for less isolation, promoting free trade and opening ties with the Western world (Morady, 2011). Rafsanjani's popularity as president declined overtime, although he still proved to be an influential figure in Iranian politics. In 2002 he was appointed as head of the Expediency Council, the

body which resolves differences between the Iranian parliament and the Guardian Council. He was also elected into, and later appointed at the head of the Assembly of Experts in 2006 (the body which elects the Supreme Leader).

During the 2009 elections and the protests that followed, Rafsanjani expressed his support for the Reformists' cause and openly supported the reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi. Rafsanjani even went as far as stating that those who had been arrested should be released and restrictions on the media should be lifted (Sciolino, 2009). This came at a personal cost to Rafsanjani as he was later accused of sedition, and two of his children were also temporarily arrested (Torfeh, 2017). Even following such an attack on his position, Rafsanjani remained highly influential. He created a coalition consisting of conservative, moderate and reformist politicians. Led by the current President, Hassan Rouhani, this coalition helped to place a check on the power of the more hard-line conservatives (Soroush, 2017). Rouhani managed to secure the presidency in 2013 because of Rafsanjani's support and ability to create bridges between the differing factions in Iranian politics. (Soroush, 2017).

Unlike other moderate figures of the regime, such as Mohammad Khatami, Rafsanjani never faced political paralysis by the regime. Khatami, who served as President between 1997 and 2005, is now effectively silenced by the regime. The justice department has completely banned the media from publishing both his name and images (Deghan, 2015). It is even reported that Khatami was not even permitted to attend Rafsanjani's funeral (Torfeh, 2017). The two reformist presidential candidates from the 2009 elections, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, have been under house arrest since 2011 (Torfeh,

2017). It follows that Rafsanjani's death is a significant blow to the moderates. No other individual or political figure has the ability to promote the reformist agenda as freely and effectively as Rafsanjani could. His death means that the moderates and reformists within Iran have lost their biggest voice in pushing forward their political agenda.

With the moderates radically incapacitated, it looks likely that the hardliners, such as the clerics and the judiciary, will gain the upper hand. The hardliners will likely profit from the loss of Rafsanjani in the upcoming Presidential elections in May. President Rouhani's promise of greater economic prosperity has been slow to deliver any results to the people. Rouhani had promised that the signing of the nuclear deal in 2015 would provide a swift increase in the both the number of jobs and wages for the Iranian people (Nasseri, 2016). While the nuclear deal has reduced the number of sanctions on the country and enabled Tehran to negotiate some investment deals, progress has been slow. Some foreign investors have shied away from making any deals due to some of the US sanctions which still remain in place (Glenn, 2016). Ordinary Iranians have also not felt the effects of these new investments. According to a poll conducted by the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland 46% of Iranians believed the economy to be doing well in March 2016, compared to 54% in May 2015 (Glenn, 2016). This will work in favour of the conservatives as they have argued that President Rouhani was tricked into the nuclear deal by the US (Sengupta, 2017). Trump's presidency has also ushered in an era of uncertainty that the hardliners will use to their advantage, and they will likely invoke Khomeini's philosophy of continued resistance to Western influences (Sengupta, 2017).

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The hardliners are also affiliated with highly influential organisations such as the Bonyads and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The Bonyads are charitable organisations that exist to distribute money to the poorest of society. However, they also control a number of businesses and are also heavily involved in Iran's industrial sector (Jones, 2011). The IRGC enjoys close links to Khamenei and other members of the conservative political elite, and today it has its own air force, intelligence service, defence research programme and is also involved in the gas and oil industry (Sherrill, 2011). The loss of Rafsanjani, the political paralysis of the remaining influential moderates and the widespread support of the conservatives by influential organisations, such as the Bonyads and the IRGC, could therefore propel the conservatives to victory in the May elections.

Rafsanjani's death will likely affect the appointment of the next Supreme Leader. Finding the successor to Khamenei is not openly discussed, however, Iranian politicians are quietly deliberating about who could potentially be the next Supreme Leader

(Bozorgmehr, 2017). There is speculation that the moderates would prefer the position be granted to either President Rouhani or Hassan Khomeini who is the grandson of Khomeini (Bozorgmehr, 2016). Among the politicians who are more conservative it is rumoured that they would prefer Khamenei's son – Mojtaba Khamenei (Bozorgmehr, 2016). There is also speculation that a cleric by the name of Ebrahim Raisi may be a frontrunner for the position (Dehghan, 2017). Raisi shares close ties to Khamenei, the intelligence agencies and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Dehghan, 2017). There would be no doubt that Rafsanjani would have had an influence on the selection of the next Supreme Leader. His death may signal a shift away from the possibility of appointing a more moderate candidate for the position of Supreme Leader.

Without Rafsanjani, it appears that the reformist agenda in Iran is on hold for the near future as the coalition of conservatives, moderates and reformists that is led by President Rouhani has lost its figurehead. If the momentum of this coalition cannot be maintained without the influence of Rafsanjani, the reformist agenda will not stand against the hardliners of the regime both during the upcoming elections and the selection process for the Supreme Leader.

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