

# CSS *Papers*

*The Politics of Iran's Assembly of Experts after Meshkini*

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## *The Politics of Iran's Assembly of Experts after Meshkini*

### *Abstract*

The recent death of Ayatollah Ali Meshkini effectively created a vacuum that was bound to lead to an ideological and political clash among Iran's power players. Meshkini was the first and only chairman of the Assembly of Experts, objectively Iran's most powerful institution. He has kept its inherent powers at bay to the desires of Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. But now that has changed and Meshkini's passing, with the recent victory of Hashemi Rafsanjani as his successor, has come at a time when the Islamic Republic is witnessing a socio-political redefinition in its conservative establishment. The ambitions of Iran's old and new elitists have led to a political confrontation in filling Meshkini's vacancy, a struggle that may have changed Iranian discourse, as we know it. Though this event is little known and hardly emphasized in media circles in the West, the politics leading up to Rafsanjani's victory over the ultra-conservatives should be of great interest to those in discussion with Iran over its nuclear program and involvement in Iraq, particularly the United States. This article analyzes the Assembly's role and significance within the Iranian institutional realm as well as depicts the candidates and politics that shaped this historic dilemma.

## *The Politics of Iran's Assembly of Experts after Meshkini*

The Islamic Republic of Iran has one of the most complex and elaborate institutional government systems in contemporary international politics. Its theocratic framework, unique history, and the diverse socio-political makeup of its society and government make Iran a difficult case study to analyze in black and white terms. Studying political parties in Iran does little to help us clarify and comprehend the domestic debate within the Islamic Republic. Here, when discussing the significance and issues of this article, Iranian domestic politics is best understood by studying the personalities of its political and religious elites and understanding their roles and alliances within the institutions they wield power.

The recent death of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Meshkini on 30 July 2007 was the source of yet another power struggle in Tehran among Iran's ideological camps<sup>1</sup>. Ali Meshkini was the first and only chairman of an organization called the Assembly of Experts, a potentially powerful institution that has been largely dormant under his leadership. Iran's elitists had closely watched this largely unknown institution during the selection process to fill Meshkini's vacant seat, which likely led to a struggle that pressured the supreme leader to manipulate the political scene once again. Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the pragmatic former president of Iran, was elected chairman of the Assembly on 4 September 2007, defeating his ultra-conservative counterpart Ahmad Jannati and securing the institution.<sup>2</sup> But what do we know of this mainly secretive organization and its significance? What does Meshkini's death and the corresponding politics of selecting a new chairman mean for the future of the Islamic Republic?

In this article we will discuss and analyze what the vacant seat of the late Meshkini meant for the power players and makers in Iranian politics. What is the Assembly of Experts and what role does it play in Iran's convoluted institutional enigma? Who were the potential candidates and what was the political struggle behind the selection process? What does Rafsanjani's victory mean and is it likely to change anything? These are the questions that need answering, but first we must understand the structural and procedural significance of the Assembly in its political relation with Iran's other powerful institutions, because doing so will provide a solid background and a better appreciation of the analytical elements depicted in the article.

<sup>1</sup> Sepehri, Vahid. "Iran: Senior Cleric's Death Sparks Search for New Assembly Chairman" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 1 Aug 2007.  
<sup>2</sup> Pouladi, Farhad. "Rafsanjani bounces back to head Iran clerical body". Middle East Times. 4 Sept 2007.

## *The Assembly And Institutional Politics*

The Assembly of Experts is an institutional body of 86 clerics that is elected by the people every 8 years.<sup>1</sup> According to Article 107 of the Iranian Constitution, the Assembly has the power to elect, dismiss, and supervise the supreme leader.<sup>2</sup> They meet at least once every six months to discuss the status of the supreme leader and what action needs to be taken. In the event of dismissal, resignation, or death of the supreme leader in which the Assembly of Experts cannot find adequate candidates, they will choose from their own.<sup>3</sup> If such an event were to take place, an attendance of at least two-thirds (2/3) of the Assembly's members is required to reach a quorum with decisions based on majority rule.<sup>4</sup>

Since members of the Assembly of Experts can hold other government and religious posts, and many of them do, it inherently forces the political playing field within the Assembly to consider the interests of other institutions and actors. Politics in Iran can be seen in a dualistic, parallel framework. One side of the parallel is like any ordinary democracy, with institutions such as the executive, legislative, and judiciary each providing checks and balances to one another. Here, the Iranian people elect the executive and legislative branches of government, while the supreme leader appoints the judiciary. The counterpart institution embodies the Islamic Republic's authority and is something unique to any form of government. This body is unelected and seated by mostly clerics, which includes the Supreme Leader, Expediency Discernment Council, half of the Council of Guardians, Supreme National Security Council, among others. The Assembly of Experts is unique in this circumstance. The organization, unlike other elected bodies, is absolutely clerical, where candidates must pass written and oral examinations testing their knowledge on the Shi'a religion before going through an interview process in order to run for election.<sup>5</sup> Unlike the Majlis (Iranian Parliament), the Assembly of Experts is a dominantly conservative organization. When and if discussion on political strategy or action occurs among the Experts, it is largely a discourse within the conservative establishment and not a debate constructed on reformers versus conservatives. To understand Iran's institutional politics and the Assembly of Experts' role within the larger struggle for influence, it is best to give a brief summary of the responsibilities and relationships of Iran's other institutions.

1 Sepehri, Vahid. "Iran: Secretive Assembly of Experts Begins Fourth Term". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 20 Feb 2007.

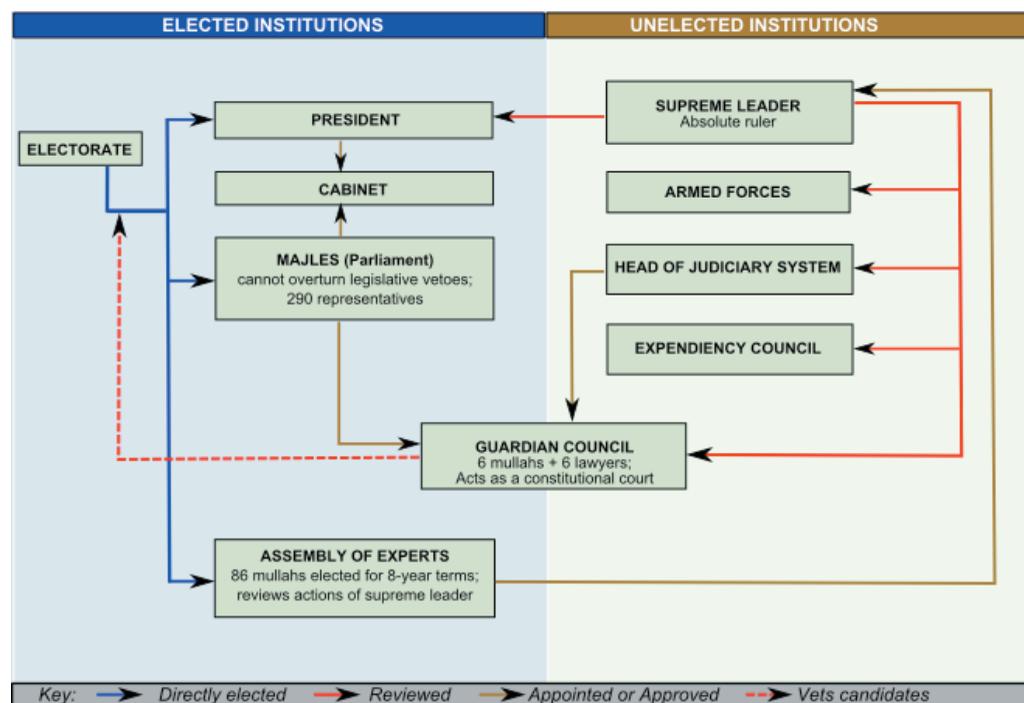
2 Ehteshami, Anoush and Zweiri, Mahjoob, Ed. "Understanding Iran's Assembly of Experts". Centre for Iranian Studies. Durham University. Nov 2006

3 "The Leader or Leadership Council". Iranian Constitution: Article 109. <http://www.iranonline.com/iran/iran-info/Government/constitution-8.html>

4 "Opening of the First Session". Official Website <http://www.khobregan.ir/persian/ashnaee/07.htm>

5 "The Requirements of Candidacy for the Assembly of Experts". Official Website. <http://www.khobregan.ir/persian/ashnaee/09.htm>

In the Iranian political scene, it is difficult for one to understand and articulate the roles of an institution without at the very least appreciating the political relationship it has with Iran's other institutions. Since the Assembly requires that all candidates running to be one of its Experts must master Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh), it therefore establishes a direct political relationship with Iran's Council of Guardians and indirect relationship to many other entities and institutions, including the supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The Council has the responsibility of vetting candidates, deciding whether or not they satisfy the requirements in order to run for political office, including the Assembly of Experts.<sup>1</sup> This Council consists of only twelve (12) members; six (6) clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six (6) jurists elected by the Majlis from a list nominated by the Head of the Judiciary System, who is again appointed by the supreme leader. So coincidentally, the supreme leader has both a structural and procedural influential relationship on which clerics he chooses to check his own authority. Even pending or potential bills introduced in the Majlis, for changing the rules and procedures in the Assembly of Experts, must receive the supreme leader's blessing through the Council of Guardians. Although bills start within the Majlis, the Council has veto power and reviews each and every bill, determining its compatibility with Islamic law and the Iranian constitution.



Source: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/middle\\_east/03/iran\\_power/html/assembly.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/middle_east/03/iran_power/html/assembly.stm)

<sup>1</sup> Mallat, Chibli. "The Iranian Constitution". The Daily Star. 27 March 1997. <http://www.soas.ac.uk/Centres/IslamicLaw/DS27-3-97IranConstit.html>

This back and forth process of reviewing the constitutionality of bills and laws and vetting candidates caused many deadlocks between the Majlis and the Council of Guardians during the 1980s, forcing the supreme leader Khomeini to step in at times to reconcile the two institutions.<sup>1</sup> In 1988, the Expediency Discernment Council was created with responsibility to arbitrate and mediate between parliament and the Council of Guardians. The Expediency Council is «over and above both the Council of Guardians and parliament».<sup>2</sup> One example in which the Expediency Council was used to politically curb the influence of another institution can be seen just months after the presidential elections of 2005 when Khamenei «amended Iran’s power structure by giving the Expediency Council... sweeping new authority to supervise parliament, the judiciary, and the executive, creating, in effect, a parallel supreme authority aimed at curbing» the newly elected Iranian president.<sup>3</sup>

### Domestic Politics And The Potential Candidates

The potential candidates varied, but only a few names had enough credibility to have a chance of being elected. Although members of the Assembly are vetted by the Council of Guardians and elected by the Iranian people, when it was time to select a chairman for their institution, it is the Assembly itself that wields this responsibility. Regardless of who were the potential candidates, there were two main alliances forming the conservative political spectrum within the Assembly and even Iranian domestic politics in general: Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the face of the ultra-conservative movement, Ayatollah Mohammed Taghi Mesbah Yazdi. These two hold tremendous influence in Iranian discourse within political, social, and religious aspects of everyday life. Though they were both considered the two main potential candidates within media circles; the political game for electing a chairman was being played between their alliances within the Assembly.

Both Iran’s municipal and Assembly of Experts elections in December 2006 were a survey of the socio-political status in Iranian domestic politics. To Ahmadinejad and the rise of the ultra-conservative base, it was the first electoral test of their ideology.<sup>4</sup> The sudden rise of this ideology in the highest levels of Iranian politics is similar to the rise of neo-conservatives within the Bush Administration.<sup>5</sup> But just like the 2006 mid-term elections in the United States, the Iranian people voted against the sitting administration. Candidates supported by Rafsanjani subjugated the candidates receiving the backing of the Iranian president. For the Assembly of Experts, Rafsanjani was at the top of the Tehran list with over a million and a half votes, while Mesbah Yazdi came in sixth place in the same list with a little over a half of the votes secured by Rafsanjani.<sup>6</sup>

It is very tempting for one to conclude that the aftermath of these December elections was the direct result of the public’s rejection to the ultra-conservative movement. But it should be noted that Ahmadinejad ran on a populist agenda in 2005, promising to improve the economic situation and fight corruption. Iran’s economy has worsened since his presidential election and the December electoral results may in fact represent a rejection of Ahmadinejad’s policy failures rather than a denunciation of his ideology.<sup>7</sup>

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1 Ibid.

2 Ibid.

3 Blanche, Ed. “The Shark, the Crocodile, and the Silent Coup”. The Middle East. February.

4 Esfandiari, Golnaz. “Iran: Election Results Show Anti-Ahmadinejad Vote”. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. 19 Dec 2006.

5 Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Zweiri, Mahjoob. Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. New York. 2007. p. 74.

6 Sarkohi, Faraj. “The Anti-Fundamentalist Coalition”. Qantara.de 2006.

7 Esfandiari, Golnaz. “Iran: Election Results Show Anti-Ahmadinejad Vote”. Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty. 19 Dec 2006.

But there is also evidence that suggests the elections were an issue of ideology. In direct causation of the fundamentalist threat and "for the very first time in the history of the Islamic Republic...the religious reformers, the traditionalist conservatives and the religious pragmatists – have united" in the election for the Assembly of Experts.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of whether the vote was anti-ideology or anti-policy, what is clear about the 2006 December elections is that Ali Khamenei supported Rafsanjani over Ahmadinejad, suggesting a change from Khamenei's prior acuity. In other words, Rafsanjani's victory may symbolize a modification in the supreme leader's threat perception.

Before his recent electoral victory for chairmanship, Hashemi Rafsanjani was the first deputy of the Assembly of Experts and currently heads the powerful Expediency Discernment Council, which is responsible for mediating between the Majlis and the Council of Guardians. He also served as acting commander-in-chief of armed forces in the last year of the Iran-Iraq War, was a close advisor to former supreme leader Khomeini, served as Interior Minister in 1979, Speaker of Parliament from 1980-1989, and Iranian President from 1989-1997.<sup>2</sup> Thought to be losing influence in Iran after his parliamentary and presidential defeats in 2004 and 2005, respectively, the former president has suffered politically because of his reputation of corruption, enormous wealth, and nepotism. Rafsanjani is even not liked in some conservative circles, especially the radical wing. But he has slowly, but surely been making a comeback since 2005 to become the key rival to the ultra-conservatives and the Iranian President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The former pragmatic president has come to «represent the forces of political moderation -- criticizing government policy and facing verbal onslaughts from the extreme right wing».<sup>3</sup> In the 2006 December elections, Rafsanjani and his allies dominated the candidates supported by the Iranian president, suggesting that the political momentum had altered and was now favoring the pragmatists and reformists.<sup>4</sup>

Ayatollah Mohammed Taghi Mesbah Yazdi is one of Iran's most influential ideological clerics. As Ahmadinejad's mentor and advisor, Mesbah Yazdi is largely responsible for his rapid rise in Iranian politics, from provincial governor to mayor of Tehran and finally to President in a relatively short period of time.<sup>5</sup> Mesbah Yazdi was not «a recognized personality in Iran's political arena, but in recent years he has acquired the most hap hazardous reputation».<sup>6</sup> An open Islamist, he advocates Iran's isolation from the West and is «known to be a hardliner of the most forceful and inflexible kind...one of the greatest antagonists of Hashemi Rafsanjani's moderation policies, along with [Mohammad] Khatami's reformist discourse».<sup>7</sup>

Ayatollah Seyyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi was another figure considered to be a candidate for chairman of the Assembly. Shahroudi, an Iraqi born of Iranian descent, was appointed by Khamenei to head Iran's judiciary system after students and reformists protested and demanded the former chief of the judiciary, Mohammad Yazdi, to step down in 1999.<sup>8</sup> Shahroudi is known in the West for his bold decision to establish a moratorium on the practice of stoning as capital punishment in 2002. In a recent interview, Shahroudi stated that Iran must treat its people better and improve the economy if it wants its revolution to be a model.<sup>9</sup> If Shahroudi had been announced as an official candidate, he would have surely received the support of his ally Rafsanjani.

<sup>1</sup> Sarkohi, Faraj. "The Anti-Fundamentalist Coalition". Qantara.de 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Ehteshami, Anoush and Zweise, Mahjoob, Ed. "Understanding Iran's Assembly of Experts". Centre for Iranian Studies. Durham University. Nov 2006

<sup>3</sup> Sepehri, Vahid. "Iran: Senior Cleric's Death Sparks Search for New Assembly Chairman". Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. 1 Aug 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Khalaji, Mehdi. "The Significance of Iran's December Elections". The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. 11 Dec 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Blanche, Ed. "The Shark, the Crocodile, and the Silent Coup". The Middle East. February.

<sup>6</sup> Ehteshami, Anoush and Zweise, Mahjoob, Ed. "Understanding Iran's Assembly of Experts". Centre for Iranian Studies. Durham University. Nov 2006

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> "World Middle East: Iran gets new justice chief". BBC News. 15 Aug 1999. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/420763.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/420763.stm)

<sup>9</sup> "Islamic Republic of Fear". The Economist (Print Edition). 23 Aug 2007. [http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story\\_id=9687617](http://www.economist.com/displaystory.cfm?story_id=9687617)

Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati is one of the most powerful individuals in Iranian politics. As the chairman of the Council of Guardians, he overlooks the vetting process of candidates and wields veto power over every bill within the Majlis. In addition to this role within the Council, Jannati is also a member of the Expediency Discernment Council with ties to the supreme leader. An ally of Ahmadinejad and Mesbah Yazdi, Jannati is affiliated with the hardliners representing the ultra-conservative base. He was backed by the ultra-conservatives within the Assembly as the main rival to Rafsanjani where he received 34 out of the 76 total votes cast.<sup>1</sup>

Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi was former head of Iran's judiciary system from 1989-1999.<sup>2</sup> He is currently a member of the Council of Guardians and was second deputy to the Assembly of Experts before Rafsanjani's recent promotion to chairmanship. As judiciary chief, he was a prominent opponent to the reformist trend and is considered a hardliner conservative. His positions were widely protested by reformers and students before he was succeeded by Hashemi Shahroudi.<sup>3</sup>

Ayatollah Mohammad Emami Kashani was a minor consideration for candidacy. He is the Friday Prayer Leader in Tehran and one of Iran's leading clerics. He is known for delivering strong anti-American and anti-Israeli sermons.

Hassan Rowhani is the former head of the Supreme National Security Council where he represented Ali Khamenei. As a student of theology and doctor of law, Khamenei selected Rowhani because of his conservative credentials.<sup>4</sup> Rowhani also served as Deputy Speaker of the Majlis and during his tenure as Secretary to the National Security Council, he was Iran's chief negotiator on nuclear policy with the EU-3 represented by the United Kingdom, France, and Germany.<sup>5</sup> He is noted for being a pragmatic and moderate conservative and for halting enrichment without conditions. Although Rowhani is a close associate of the supreme leader, he is also a staunch ally of Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>6</sup>

Ayatollah Seyyed Ahmad Khatami is an ultra-conservative cleric with reasonably close relationships to both supreme leader Khamenei and Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Other than being a member of the Assembly of Experts, Khatami is currently the Provisional Friday Prayer Leader of Tehran, a position appointed by Khamenei.

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1 Pouladi, Farhad. "Rafsanjani bounces back to head Iran clerical body". Middle East Times, 4 Sept 2007.

2 "World Middle East: Iran gets new justice chief". BBC News, 15 Aug 1999. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle\\_east/420763.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/420763.stm)

3 Ibid.

4 "Profile: Hassan Rowhani". BBC NEWS, 30 Nov 2003. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/middle\\_east/3240618.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/middle_east/3240618.stm)

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

## *The Dilemma And Politics Behind Rafsanjani's Selection*

On 4 September 2007, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani had been elected by the Assembly of Experts to be its next chairman, succeeding the long tenure of the late Ayatollah Ali Meshkini. Out of the 76 total votes cast, Rafsanjani secured 41 to Ahmad Jannati's 34, assuring the post from the ultra-conservatives and capitalizing on his continuing political comeback since his defeat to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005.<sup>1</sup> Rafsanjani's recent victory over the radical forces within the political-military infrastructure comes at a sensitive time for the Islamic Republic, but what does it all mean? What were the politics behind the selection process and how should the dilemma and prospects of the electoral decision be analyzed?

Aside from Rafsanjani and Mesbah Yazdi working their alliances within the Assembly of Experts to gain the chairmanship, there is one other major player that cannot be overlooked. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has long been suspicious of factions and individuals within Iranian politics who could pose challenges to his power. During the tenure of Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the first Assembly of Experts decided that Ayatollah Montazeri would become Khomeini's successor.<sup>2</sup> But Montazeri became out of touch with the supreme leader towards the end and after Khomeini's death in 1989, the Assembly reversed its prior decision and instead chose Ali Khamenei as supreme leader. Always aware that he was only a mid-level status Hojatoleslam before his promotion, Khamenei's main goal has long been to secure and defend his position as supreme leader.

Since the first Assembly of Experts, Ayatollah Meshkini ran the organization as if it were inactive, perhaps the result of Khamenei's influence over Assembly elections, including over Meshkini himself. Never once has the Assembly challenged the supreme leader to answer questions or submit reasoning behind decisions. Theoretically, the Assembly of Experts is Iran's most powerful institution, with responsibility of supervising and appointing the supreme leader.

The passing of Meshkini had undoubtedly perturbed the supreme leader. Over 15 years of being unchecked by the only institution having that legal mandate to do so, Khamenei was highly unlikely to resign his political influence over the selection process of the Assembly's next chairman. The death of Meshkini had inherently threatened Khamenei, regardless of who may have succeeded the chairmanship. Unfortunately for Khamenei, many of those that were the most likely to be selected had been at one time or another associated with his adversary. In Iranian politics, there are never permanent friends; only threats to interests define alliances.

The politics behind the election for chair of the Assembly of Experts had three main focus points: Rafsanjani, Mesbah Yazdi, and Khamenei. All other factors and variables need not be investigated separately, but within the context of these three power players. The interests of these players had affected which alliances formed in the selection process. Again, it is imperative we reiterate that though Rafsanjani and Mesbah Yazdi were the main candidates being discussed within the Assembly that did not necessarily imply that the selection of another candidate was separate from their tendencies and interests. The power struggle was in fact between these two individuals, but more broadly, a battle between their alliances within the conservative base.

<sup>1</sup> Pouladi, Farhad. "Rafsanjani bounces back to head Iran clerical body". Middle East Times. 4 Sept 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Sarkouhi, Faraj. "The Election of the Assembly of Experts". Gozaar. [http://www.gozaar.org/template.print\\_en.php?id=228](http://www.gozaar.org/template.print_en.php?id=228)

Notably, since his humiliating defeat to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 presidential elections, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, the highly influential pragmatist and former Iranian president, has moderately allied himself with the reformists. In more ways than one “Ahmadinejad’s victory reflects the transformation of the political struggle in Iran from being one between the conservatives and the reformists to one within the powerful conservative faction itself». <sup>1</sup> As the face of pragmatic conservatism, Rafsanjani is the main rival to the new and radical ideologues of Iran’s ultra-conservative base. Though many had speculated at one time that his influence was decreasing in Iran, Rafsanjani has been building an alliance with Iran’s moderate forces as a way of curbing the ultra-conservatives, led by Ahmadinejad and Mesbah Yazdi. <sup>2</sup>

Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi lacked revolutionary credibility and was not respectably known until the late 1990s, but that did not stop him from rapidly becoming one of Iran’s most influential clerics. <sup>3</sup> As Ahmadinejad’s mentor, he exerts great influence within the executive branch and his ideas greatly appeal to many commanders in the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and intelligence establishment. <sup>4</sup> Mesbah Yazdi represents revisionist political elite in Iran, those of the ultra-conservatives, who support Iran’s isolation from the West and are zealous advocates of Iran’s nuclear capability. <sup>5</sup> Some speculate that Mesbah Yazdi was after Khamenei’s post as supreme leader and would have used the Assembly’s chair to spring board towards that realization. His ultra-conservative allies within the Assembly of Experts aggressively attempted to block Rafsanjani from being selected the institution’s head. Had Mesbah Yazdi been the main candidate to represent the ultra-conservatives, it may have served him and his affiliates negatively, as it would have most likely made the supreme leader more vigilant and desperate in working against his efforts. His ambition and tenacity may have completely shifted and solidified Khamenei’s support for Rafsanjani. It is hardly conceivable to believe that the supreme leader would have allowed the likes of Mesbah Yazdi to head the only institution that has the ability of dismissing him from his post. In order to avoid a backlash from the supreme leader, the ultra-conservative base within the Assembly decided to support Ahmad Jannati for the vacant chair because of his reasonably close relationship with Khamenei. Backing Ahmad Jannati, the head of Iran’s Council of Guardians, instead of Mesbah Yazdi was a strategy in assuaging the supreme leader’s anxiety, hoping to ease pressure off Khamenei from yielding support to Rafsanjani.

Although the supreme leader was threatened by Mesbah Yazdi’s seemingly unlimited appetite for power, he was at the same time hesitant to yield too much political capital to Rafsanjani. Khamenei was presented a dilemma as the death of his longtime gatekeeper, Ayatollah Meshkini left a power vacuum. At one end of his tribulations was the Mesbah Yazdi – Ahmadinejad Axis, which has a majority in the Majlis and loyal allies throughout the Iranian intelligence and military apparatus. Khamenei has become skeptical of both individuals and felt that if Mesbah Yazdi had attained the chair of the Assembly of Experts at the same time Ahmadinejad was head of the executive, their ambition may have just targeted the post of the supreme leader. <sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ehteshami, Anoushiravan and Zweiri, Mahjoob. *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*. I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd. New York. 2007. p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> Sarkohi, Faraj. “The Anti-Fundamentalist Coalition”. *Qantara.de* 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Ehteshami, Anoush and Zweiri, Mahjoob, Ed. “Understanding Iran’s Assembly of Experts”. Centre for Iranian Studies. Durham University. Nov 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Blanche, Ed. “The Shark, the Crocodile, and the Silent Coup”. *The Middle East*. February.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Zimmt, Raz. “Election Results For The Assembly Of Experts And Local Councils: Preliminary Appraisal”. *The Center for Iranian Studies: Iran-Pulse*. 22 Dec 2007. No.7.

Khamenei may also be threatened by the fact that many of his political allies have close relationships with Ahmadinejad and Mesbah Yazdi. For example, although Ahmad Jannati and Ahmad Khatami have ties to Khamenei, they also have relations with the Iranian president and the ultra-conservative base. At the other end of Khamenei's dilemma was Rafsanjani. Although the supreme leader decided to support Rafsanjani during the 2006 December elections over Ahmadinejad, Khamenei was not at all enthusiastic about Rafsanjani consolidating more political power. The idea that Rafsanjani was to be the head of both the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts, not to mention his new allies within the reformist camp and his electoral victory in December 2006, was rather threatening to the supreme leader, regardless of the former president's agenda. Khamenei's goal here was for Rafsanjani to curb the ultra-conservatives, but also for neither side to become powerful enough to challenge him.

Long viewed as a master puppeteer, Khamenei has maintained a sensitive balance between Iran's diverse ideologues as a way to prevent one side from gaining too much clout. Impressing and even cunning, the once premature mid-level cleric turned supreme leader has expanded his power and influence throughout Iran's institutional system. He marginalized Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami during their presidential tenures; supported Ahmadinejad and the hardliners to end the reformist trend and prevented Rafsanjani from re-gaining the presidency.<sup>1</sup> Now that the emergence of the new right, whom Khamenei once politically supported, has threatened the supreme leader, he has begun to work with his former rivals to curb the influence of ultra-conservatives.<sup>2</sup>

Although Hashemi Rafsanjani has often been held responsible for replacing Meshkini before the election, there is little plausibility that he could have achieved the political support needed without the blessing of the supreme leader. Considering the dynamics of the ideological struggle within Iran and the newly reformist-pragmatist alliance formed around Rafsanjani, Khamenei could not politically afford to have this alliance fail in front of the ultra-conservatives, leaving the radicals politically unbalanced and unchecked. Rafsanjani's alliance is in some ways considered Khamenei's last plausible front against the ultra-conservatives. When conceptualizing the basis of Rafsanjani's coalition, its formation was largely a political backlash manifested from the rising threat of the New Right. Having the moderate coalition and Rafsanjani defeat the ultra-conservatives politically, the reformists and pragmatic conservatives are more likely to revert back to balancing themselves as their natural political inclination would lead them to. The victory of the ultra-conservatives over both the reformists and pragmatic conservatives would promote entrapment on the supreme leader, paralyzing Khamenei from challenging their radical agenda. The Mesbah Yazdi - Ahmadinejad alliance extends to places of concern for the supreme leader. Such areas of anxiety for Khamenei includes their shifting relations with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps and its former commander, but still highly influential Yahya Rahim Safavi, in addition to the Basij militia, the Iranian intelligence establishment, and powerful secret political societies such as the Hojjatieh.<sup>3</sup> Supporting Rafsanjani, in turn, provides Khamenei with more flexibility for political maneuvering afterward and therefore less of an immediate threat than those affiliated with Mesbah Yazdi's agenda, like the runner-up to the chair, Ahmad Jannati.

<sup>1</sup> Blanche, Ed. "The Shark, the Crocodile, and the Silent Coup". The Middle East. February.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

Before the official candidate list was announced, there was a strong possibility that Rafsanjani and/or Mesbah Yazdi would yield their support to other candidates who concurred with their agenda. Both Rafsanjani and Mesbah Yazdi are intrinsically polarizing figures that would have constructed the political struggle in zero-sum terms. Supporting a less controversial ally would allow for a better chance of selection by the Assembly members, not to mention the added benefit of a less vigilant Khamenei, and avoidance of a complete galvanization of their rivals and the supreme leader. Rafsanjani's allies, like Hashemi Shahroudi or Hassan Rowhani, may have been less threatening to Khamenei than by the face of pragmatic conservatism himself. But Rafsanjani may have come to believe that the supreme leader still needed him to curb the ultra-conservatives, and therefore he had consolidated enough support for his own ticket instead of supporting a less polarizing ally. This may entail a compromise between Rafsanjani and Khamenei, that the supreme leader would throw his support behind Rafsanjani in exchange for the new chairman to maintain an indolent Assembly of Experts and continue the Meshkini tradition. This would promote a positive-sum consequence for both Rafsanjani and Khamenei's largely near term interests. Both would have secured the chairmanship from the ultra-conservatives, achieving their first priority. Rafsanjani would have capitalized on the December 2006 elections and secured his momentum towards the Majlis election in 2008, while at the same time attaining for his political security a symbolic position in Iranian politics. Khamenei, in addition to having limited the more threatening issue of Mesbah Yazdi and the ultra-conservatives, reserves a safeguard on the future aggressiveness of the chairmanship by providing a check on Rafsanjani a propos his allies within the Assembly, and still secured his political flexibility in maintaining the ideological balance within Iranian politics.

On the other end of the power struggle is Mesbah Yazdi, who was already aware that Khamenei would work directly against him if he were to be a main candidate. Instead, the ultra-conservatives from within the Assembly backed Ahmad Jannati, hoping to ease Khamenei's anxiety and concern. If such distress was assuaged and Khamenei was less pressured in supporting the pragmatic former president, then it would be exceptionally significant to suggest that Rafsanjani had consolidated the political support himself, providing a basis and practicality for assuming his potential ambitions as chairman. Here, it is imperative to note that when considering the politics prior to the election for the Assembly's chair, Rafsanjani, Mesbah Yazdi, and Khamenei perceived the situation in terms of risk analysis, each limiting his own interests from a maximum framework to a satisfactory one, in which the pragmatist Hashemi Rafsanjani had come out on top.

The multifaceted dimensions of the Iranian system, along with its dynamical politics of alliance formation make the Islamic Republic a difficult case for forecasting outcomes. Although many analysts predicted that Rafsanjani's victory would change very little or nothing at all of the Assembly's role in Iranian politics, we do not need to make such a premature analysis of the event within a socially and politically irregular environment. Rafsanjani could very well be another Meshkini with respect to not challenging the supreme leader. But given Khamenei's posture against the ultra-conservatives, dependency to some degree on the moderate coalition, and Rafsanjani's gaining electoral popularity for advancing Western relations, the supreme leader may very well be pressured and entrapped to gradually integrate with a new moderate agenda. The key to understanding the Assembly's new role under the pragmatic former president is reliant on the dependency variable between Khamenei and Rafsanjani, which is what we want to emphasize here. In other words, how dependent is the supreme leader on Rafsanjani in curbing Ahmadinejad, Mesbah Yazdi, and their radical affiliates throughout the military and political establishments? How dependent was Rafsanjani on Khamenei in securing his newly elected post? These two aspects, including Rafsanjani's own expectations for his new role,

are must be the focal points in analyzing the future of the Assembly of Experts in Iranian politics. If the Experts with Khamenei's blessing selected Rafsanjani, then it is more likely that the Assembly's role will yield to the supreme leader's interests. But if Rafsanjani was able to secure his electoral status within the Assembly without the espousal from Khamenei, then there is an analytical basis for arguing the contrary, in that Rafsanjani might use his new position in changing Iranian discourse when and if the opportunity arises. Again, predictions on what might fallout need not be made here. We are simply taking the dimensions of the issue and providing a brief analysis of the political game in order to understand the significance of Meshkini's passing on the Iranian political scene.

## Conclusion

The death of Ayatollah Ali Meshkini on 30 July 2007 created a vacant seat for the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts, which inherently formed a power vacuum leading to an ideological clash between the factions within the conservative base. Since its establishment in 1982, the Assembly has never challenged the supreme leader over his decision. Meshkini has, to Ayatollah Khamenei's comfort and interest, kept the potential powers of the institution inactive, but now that may all have changed. With much public speculation about Khamenei's health and the next Assembly elections scheduled for 2014, this particular Assembly class may be the one to appoint Iran's third supreme leader.

The Assembly of Experts, according to the Iranian Constitution, is given the responsibility to supervise, review, appoint, and dismiss the supreme leader if found he is incapable of carrying out his duties. Given that if the Fourth Assembly utilizes its potential power toward at the very least, reviewing the supreme leader's decisions, it will most likely change the nature of Iranian politics. The very presence of an active Assembly of Experts will limit the aggressiveness of the supreme leader to intervene in the politics and procedures of Iran's institutions.

The United States and international community should consider the initial politics and outcome of the Assembly's selection process for its chair as a unique glance into the political and ideological status of Iranian politics. Although many in the West and media circles know very little about this secret community of clerics, the possibility of once a dormant and shy organization to become objectively Iran's most powerful institution is certainly something worth considering. If Rafsanjani, who supports relations with the United States and the West, decides to reflect his expanded constituency's interests with hopes of securing his electoral momentum, Khamenei is likely to adhere to the pragmatist-reformist agenda for the time being because of his current dependency on Rafsanjani in defeating the ultra-conservatives.

The politics and general tendencies of the selection process were the direct causation of the political discourse between Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mesbah Yazdi, and Ali Khamenei. Both sides of the ideologue spectrum within the conservative establishment were set to prevent the other side from achieving the chairmanship. Khamenei, with respect to his particular history, had most likely manipulated the selection process based on his threat perception and risk analysis, which suggests that he had backed Rafsanjani instead of Ahmad Jannati.

Khamenei's main goal in the end was to secure his position as supreme leader, and with the proportionality and gravity of the situation, the ends had justified the means. The key question that analysts should be discussing now is the dependency variable expressed between Khamenei and Rafsanjani. With respect to what many analysts are predicting as a traditional Meshkini Assembly under the new chairman, Rafsanjani has made bold signals suggesting the contrary. After his victory, Iran's news agency quoted him saying "if the experts assembly wants to play a more active role in the country's affairs, it has the religious and legal justification to do that" and adding "perhaps the assembly will do so in its upcoming term".<sup>1</sup> This suggests that Rafsanjani may have leverage over Khamenei when it comes to the dependency factor.

In the Iranian framework, political actors often find themselves in political entrapments. Former president and face of the reformist movement, Mohammad Khatami experienced this unfortunate situation when he became politically paralyzed by the overwhelming pressure from his own constituency, unable to satisfy them or strategically battle the conservatives. The dilemma handed to Khamenei after Meshkini's death has now shifted to Rafsanjani's court. The recent elections in December 2006 suggested a change in momentum from the ultra-conservatives to Rafsanjani's coalition of pragmatic conservatives and reformers mainly because of Ahmadinejad's polarizing tendencies. But in Iranian politics, an election victory does not signify a general trend or political realities within Iranian society. If the new Assembly chairman would like to keep his political momentum and moderate coalition intact for taking control of the Majlis in 2008, he needs to express and reflect an economically ambitious and Western friendly agenda, including to his benefit, a more open and tolerant social policy. But if Rafsanjani and his moderate coalition become too tenacious, it may serve a backlash from the supreme leader, shifting Khamenei's threat perception away from the ultra-conservatives to targeting the moderates and reformists once again. Rafsanjani's main challenge now is somehow balancing these two aspects of promotion and prevention. He would have to promote a moderate agenda to complement a respectable electoral base while at the same time prevent that agenda from threatening the supreme leader. It will be very interesting to see how Iran's most experienced politician will use his new position as the Assembly's head to maintain this promotion-prevention balance, while curbing Ahmadinejad. It is now up to Rafsanjani to defeat the ultra-conservatives—a political reality that Khamenei is beginning to realize.

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<sup>1</sup> Slackman, Michael. "Rafsanjani wins key Iranian election". International Herald Tribune 4 September 2007. <http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/09/04/news/iran.php>.