

## RAFSANJANI: A Portrait

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### **Introduction**

Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of Iran's most important political actors and a man who took on crucial roles at some of the most critical times from the 1979 Islamic revolution to the present day, has passed away from a heart attack at the age of 82. Despite his advanced years, Rafsanjani's death was not an expected development, and came as a shock to the Iranian public. One reason why it was so surprising was that there was no prior news or indication that he was ailing. Another reason was that it was believed that Rafsanjani could seek to intervene in critical developments in Iranian politics expected in the short term. Following Rafsanjani's death, it was announced that there would be three days of mourning and one day of official holiday; the only other figure to have received the same treatment was the Ayatollah Khomeini, the founding leader of the revolution. Indeed, Rafsanjani's death may be said to be the most important since Khomeini, since he was one of the revolution's most important actors, together with Beheshti and Khamenei. Rafsanjani was compared by his supporters to Amir Kabir, one of the most important figures in Iranian political history, and by an interesting coincidence, he died on the same day. To understand his importance, it is worth looking at his life and laying out future possibilities for Iran.



## Life

Rafsanjani was born the son of a rich family who owned a wide swathe of vineyards and land near the city of Rafsanjan in 1934. As a young boy, he chose a religious education, and he went to Qom to pursue it further aged 14. He was educated by the most important religious scholars of the era. The time when Rafsanjani went to Qom to receive his religious education was roughly the same time as the movement to nationalize Iran's petroleum reserves. Hence, it was at that time and that early age when Rafsanjani first encountered political discourse and began political activities. Following the overthrow of Mosaddegh in a coup, Rafsanjani and a group of friends began cultural activities, putting out a publication called *mekteb-i teşeyyü*. When the Ayatollah Khomeini movement began, Rafsanjani took his place in it and began overt anti-Shah activities. Rafsanjani took part in the Ayatollah Khomeini movement at every stage, and soon reached a position where he was crucial to the anti-Shah struggle. He was jailed in 1975, but began his activities again as soon as he was released from prison by the revolution, taking on some of the most critical duties within the system until the day of his death. As one of the closest people to the Ayatollah Khomeini, he was appointed to the Council of the Islamic Revolution and also to the Combatant Clergy Association. Within Iran's political structure, the Combatant Clergy Association was the most powerful religious-political group of clerics. For a long time, almost all clerics who supported the Islamic revolution were members. However, later on, the reformist wing left this group and began organizing on their own. Today, the association continues as an important form of representation for the conservative political line.

Rafsanjani was also one of the founders of the Islamic Republican Party, which took on the role of the locomotive driving the regime towards its present state. This

party, which functioned as the founding party of the Iranian Islamic Republic, was founded in 1981. Among the founders were other important names including Ayatollah Beheshti, former Prime Minister Bahuner, Ayatollah Khomeini, and Ayatollah Mousavi Ardebili. The party's first general secretary was Ayatollah Beheshti. The Islamic Republic newspaper, which is still in circulation, was the party's official mouthpiece. The aim, regulations and roadmap were prepared in accordance with Islamic fiqh (jurisprudence), but controversy over traditional versus dynamic (modern) fiqh caused the party to split into two. The "traditionalists", or right-wing bloc, supported the idea of a free-market economy and wanted the state to take less of a role in economic affairs. The "modernizers", or left-wing bloc, wanted a closed economic system. Rafsanjani took on the role of founding member and active actor the party, which meant taking on a fundamental role in the purging of many opposition groups and individuals, most significantly the Banisadr movement and Freedom Movement (*Nehzed-i Azadi*). Claims about purges and executions of opposition figures were regularly directed at Rafsanjani during his presidency. When the Mykonos restaurant attack<sup>1</sup> caused an international crisis, many more claims emerged on this subject. Rafsanjani had become general secretary of the Interior Ministry a few months after the revolution. As part of this role he had arranged elections for the constitution writing council (which would write the Constitution of the Iranian Islamic Republic), as well as the constitutional referendum and the presidential elections. When it came to parliamentary elections, he resigned from this position to become a parliamentary candidate and won, immediately being elected as parliamentary speaker. Moreover, he also entered the elections for the Assembly of Experts, which had the power to select, audit and, where necessary, remove religious leaders. When the Iran-Iraq war



began, he took on important roles in the war, and when the war became a sensitive matter within Iran, he was appointed as Joint Chief of Staff by Ayatollah Khomeini. He was the main actor on the Iranian side in the Iran Contra scandal which exploded in 1986. This political scandal, also known as Irangate, came to light in November 1986. According to reports, the U.S. had sold weapons to Iran and used the income to support the anti-communist movement trying to overthrow the communist government of Nicaragua at the time. Rafsanjani is seen as the person who convinced Khomeini to take one of the most critical decisions in the history of the Iranian Islamic Republic and end the war. After the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini, it was again Rafsanjani who ensured that Ali Khamenei would be chosen as the country's new religious leader.<sup>2</sup>

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In the presidential elections that took place immediately afterwards, Rafsanjani became president with a majority of the votes cast. In the next election, he was again a candidate and won again, remaining president for a total of eight years. His presidential terms were in the era of rebuilding the country, which had newly emerged a wreck from the war, and Rafsanjani exhibited an extremely successful performance in this area.

### **Rafsanjani's Presidencies**

One of the first actions that Rafsanjani took as president was to end the traditional leftist economic policies that had been in place throughout the war years and to begin a

new unifying political realist developmental movement under the term Technocratic Employers' Movement.

***While this process was in one sense intended for the creation of a new middle class within society, on the other hand, it led to a chasm in economic differences between the classes. These imbalances would prepare the ground for the emergence of Ahmedinejad, who would set back Rafsanjani's political life in later years.***

At the time he became president, the country had been turned into a ruin over the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, with petrol refineries, oil wells and, most importantly, hydroelectric dams left unusable by the war. The war had dealt Iran serious political, economic and social destruction. Almost every household had a dead or wounded soldier, thousands of citizens were still held hostage by Saddam Hussein, and in addition there was the seriousness of the material damage caused by the war. The Ayatollah Khomeini's death worsened the atmosphere of gloom that had overtaken the country for all these reasons, and the country became even more vulnerable to social and political crisis. Rafsanjani, who took on the presidency in this environment, succeeded in saving the country from this depression through coalition and coordination between its active social and political powers, and begun the development process.<sup>3</sup> Rafsanjani's success, supported by Religious Leader Khamenei, was achieved through putting the country's powerful technocratic administrators to work and developing good relations with the west despite radical traditionalist opposition. The radical traditionalists wedded to religious teachings about the spirit of jihad and protecting the values of the revolution came out against all kinds of dialogue with



the west and America, which they called the “great Satan”. Hence, Rafsanjani gradually drifted away from the traditional right. The technocrats in Hashemi Rafsanjani’s government adopted privatization, a liberal economy, and a micro-state model, developed politics in these directions and increased the speed of privatizations. Many of this intake would become well-known in the coming years. This group, which both sought to be faithful to Islamic teachings and to appear modern, became known as the “Modern Right Wing” in opposition to the “Traditional Right”. The Modern Right Wing used all the advantages of government to the full, developing production and distribution networks and becoming the avant garde of the establishment of up-to-date shopping centers and factories.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, in foreign policy they managed to develop good relations with the west without interrupting the support they gave to Islamic insurgency groups such as Hamas and Hizbullah.<sup>5</sup> One of the innovations of the Modern Right Wing was the establishment of “Islamic Free Universities” and the creation of new employment opportunities with the intention of putting the graduates of these universities to work in networks of production and distribution. Good relations with the west improved domestic and foreign trade, while the speed of privatizations increased with the introduction of a floating currency. However, while this process was in one sense intended for the creation of a new middle class within society, on the other hand, it led to a chasm in economic differences between the classes. These imbalances would prepare the ground for the emergence of Ahmedinejad, who would set back Rafsanjani’s political life in later years. Among the regrets that Rafsanjani would have from this era was his understanding and implementation of privatization: in this era, true privatization did not actually occur; instead, various official institutions founded private companies that ensured they would

remain in charge of the economy. The foremost of these institutions was the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. Rafsanjani supported the activities of the Guardians and provided them with serious economic opportunities. However, he failed to influence the Guardians, and left this field largely to the Religious Leader. In essence, Rafsanjani had abandoned many areas left outside the economy to Khamenei. As time went on, Khamenei’s power over this type of institution became progressively stronger, and the need he had felt for Rafsanjani correspondingly decreased. So much so, in fact, that when the two figures eventually clashed, Khamenei had a clear upper hand, because he was now at the center of power.

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After his presidency ended, Rafsanjani continued his duties as head of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Discernment Council (which had the role of final decision maker in disputes between the Parliament and Guardian Council), which were both among the most critical institutions in the system.

At this time, Khatemi became president, and Rafsanjani continued in various ways to wield influence over the executive. The first big dispute between Khamenei and Rafsanjani, who were two of the biggest names of the revolution, also happened in the arena of executive power. When Rafsanjani was standing again for president in the 2005 elections, a relatively unknown candidate whose main feature was his devotion to Khamenei named Ahmedinejad emerged. Ahmedinejad’s election gave Khamenei the



opportunity to take full control over the executive. This situation opened up the gulf between the two old friends so far that eventually Khamenei openly stated in a speech that Ahmedinejad's ideas were closer to his own than Rafsanjani's.<sup>6</sup> The second big problem between the pair came during protests following Ahmedinejad's victory in the 2009 elections. While Rafsanjani called for national calm, Khamenei insisted that opposition leaders should be forced out of politics.

***The Expediency Discernment Council, which Rafsanjani headed, was tasked with maintaining balance as an official institution. It is clear that the existence of someone like Rafsanjani both made it possible for the opposition to reach the centers of power and kept that opposition within the system. The lack of such a channel of communication might push opposition outside of the system, but this is the last thing the system wants.***

As the problems between the pair reached their zenith in 2005, Rafsanjani was clever enough to realize that those in positions of power had changed to the extent that it was impossible he should ever again regain his old power, but at the same time, was stubborn and determined enough not to give up the fight. Hence, he selected another means and method. His basic duty was to ensure that the system retained its balance, and this balance had begun to tip in favour of the conservatives. Rafsanjani went down a road that could allow him both reestablish this balance and to regain the power he had had in the past, and began to become closer to the reformist camp. This move was even somewhat successful. He managed to change his public image and become the only hope of those who had hated him just a

few years earlier. When the Guardian Council rejected his candidacy in the most recent presidential elections, in a master maneuver he supported Rouhani and played a big role in his election. Two years later, he stood for election in the Assembly of Experts and did not only succeed with a high vote, but began filling the assembly in Tehran with his own supporters. Of course, his own supporters alone did not yet have the majority to make him the assembly president. He had hoped that he would be able to use that influence when the time came, but before it arrived, Rafsanjani passed away.<sup>7</sup>

### **Now What Will Happen?**

One of the first things that come to mind when an important figure such as Rafsanjani dies is that there will be important consequences. This is even more true for countries such as Iran in which individuals are extremely important. However, we should also avoid exaggeration on this matter. Some comments make it appear as though the sole bridge between reformist and moderate power centers has been lost. It is true that Rafsanjani played that role, but this does not mean that other bridges will be built. It must not be forgotten that these power centers themselves and the system itself saw these types of communication as important and necessary. The Expediency Discernment Council, which Rafsanjani headed, was tasked with maintaining balance as an official institution. It is clear that the existence of someone like Rafsanjani both made it possible for the opposition to reach the centers of power and kept that opposition within the system. The lack of such a channel of communication might push opposition outside of the system, but this is the last thing the system wants.

Second, the idea that Rafsanjani's patronage of the reformists protected them from all threats from the centers of power is an exaggerated approach which comes more



from nostalgia for the power which Rafsanjani was once able to wield. In reality, Rafsanjani lost a large amount of his power in his later years. If he had been able to maintain his old power, opposition leaders Kerroubi and Mousavi should not still be under house arrest: in fact, Rafsanjani was not even able to prevent the jailing of his own children.

Of course, in saying this, I am not claiming that Rafsanjani's death will not change anything. On the contrary, it may change many things. But we must be unemotional in writing about the possibility of change. I will consider the issue of Rafsanjani's positions on the day he died and who and how these positions might be filled and how this might affect Iranian politics. In this case, it is worth considering Rafsanjani's roles and who the likely candidates may be to fill them.

### **Who Might Replace Rafsanjani?**

In order to answer this question, we need to look at what titles Rafsanjani held. There are three fundamental ones: his membership of the Assembly of Experts, his presidency of the Expediency Discernment Council and finally his roles as mentor and bridge between the moderates and reformists. As the first of these will be decided by a by-election according to the constitution, there is no need to dwell on it. But the possibilities relating to the other two positions need to be analyzed closely, because who becomes the president of the Expediency Discernment Council will give us an idea about what type of roadmap will be followed within the system in relation to the opposition, while who the new mentor of the opposition will be will give us an idea about the opposition's plans in relation to the system.

### **Probable Candidates for the Presidency of the Expediency Discernment Council**

Let us first say that the president of this council is appointed by the religious leader. Hence, who is appointed to lead this

institution, which plays a balancing role in the system, will contain extremely important clues as to the coming era. The candidates who have been mentioned are as follows:

**Hassan Rouhani:** President Hassan Rouhani is one of the most likely candidates for appointment by the religious leader to this position. Two state presidents have already held this position. One was Khamenei, who carried out the role of president before being appointed to the position of religious leader, and the other, immediately afterwards, was Rafsanjani. Both held this position at the same time as being president, though Rafsanjani remained in this position after his presidency ended and stayed in it until his death. From this perspective, that the president should be the head of the council is in fact a type of tradition. In addition, Rouhani being appointed to this role will mean that the state is happy with the maintenance of the dominance of the realist perspective over the council and at the same time that the balance in the system is to be maintained. Thus, the system will give the message that it wants no tensions.

**Muhammed Hashemi Shahroudi:** Shahroudi is among those prominent statesmen in Iran who could become the religious leader after Khamenei. He has experience carrying out many high-level roles, the most important of which is being the president of the judicial branch, one of the three great powers alongside the legislative and executive. After carrying out this duty for ten years, he was appointed by Khamenei to both the Guardian Council and the Expediency Discernment Council. One thing that increases the likelihood that Shahroudi will be selected as head of the council is the council he presently heads. This council, like the Expediency Discernment Council, is an institution that aims to solve conflicts between the legislative, executive and judiciary.



Haddad Adel: Adel is presently a member of the Expediency Discernment Council and the father-in-law of one of Khamenei's sons. The head of Iran's Persian language and literature cultural centers, he is also a member of the High Council for Cultural Revolution and the Iranian Education Council.

***This means that the age of legends for Iran is ending, and the country needs to move from individuals to institutions.***

Natigh Nouri: Nouri was a long-term colleague of Rafsanjani, being the parliamentary speaker of the fourth and fifth parliaments. He is presently an Expediency Discernment Council member. He is a former conservative who supported Rouhani at the presidential elections. His election means that Rafsanjani's approach will be maintained at the council.

In addition, names such as Mohsin Rezai, Ali Akbar Velayeti, Ali Larijani and Sayyid Jalali have also been talked about. In addition, should a radical cleric whose name has been mentioned, such as Sadeq Larijani, Muhammed Yazdi and Ahmad Jannati, be appointed, this will mean that the system's domestic politics will likely see tensions.

**Who Will the Reformists Gather Around?**

Even if it is possible to say that the limitations of various important reformist leaders leave few choices around whom reformists and moderates could gather, there are three names in particular that we encounter. These are former president Muhammed Khatemi, the grandson of founding leader of the revolution Khomeini, Hassan Khomeini, and the present president, Hassan Rouhani. It looks as though Rouhani is leading both lists as a common candidate. Should both groups side with Rouhani, the chances of their coming together will also improve. Finally, it

must be made clear that should Rouhani find himself in such a position, this will directly make him one of the most important actors in Iranian politics, and this will also affect the upcoming presidential elections. Although Rafsanjani's death will have deprived Rouhani of an important supporter, the emotional consequences will work in Rouhani's favor at the upcoming elections.

**Conclusion**

Hashemi Rafsanjani, one of the most important names in Iranian politics, has left us together with all his secrets at the age of 82. In fact, he has left us with a serious corpus of memoirs, which will continue to be published and currently stretch to 14 volumes. What is interesting, however, is that everybody appears to believe that despite publishing so many of his thoughts, he took many big secrets to the grave. This in itself is an indication of his importance in life. It is certain that no-one will be able to fill the gap he has left in Iranian politics, yet on the other hand, his death also means that of all the important actors of the first generation of the revolution, only Khamenei remains. This means that the age of legends for Iran is ending, and the country needs to move from individuals to institutions.

Rafsanjani was a figure who stood out through his pragmatist approach throughout his long and vigorous political life. He did not waver from changing his line to that required by the situation. The day came when yesterday's enemies came to see him as their sole hope. Again, the day came when he became known by some as the biggest rival of his 60-year friend Khamenei. Consequently, Khamenei seems to have been left without a rival, stronger than ever. Yet at the same time, he has been left lonely like never before.



## Endnotes

1- Leading names in the Iranian opposition Kurdish movement were killed in an armed attack in Mykonos restaurant in the German capital of Berlin on September 17, 1992. Those who lost their lives are as follows:

Iranian Kurdistan Democratic Party General Secretary Sadegh Sharafkandi, the party's German representative Homayoun Ardalan, the party's European representative Fattah Abdoli and Red Cross employee Nouri Dehkordi.

The German court case in relation to the incident caused Iran one of the biggest international crises it has been through. As a result of the case, Religious Leader Khomeini, President Rafsanjani, Foreign Minister Velayeti and Intelligence Minister Ali Fallahian were found guilty of this attack.

2- For visuals of the meeting where Khamenei was chosen as the new religious leader, see: [https://youtu.be/aWt\\_YRrNsOY](https://youtu.be/aWt_YRrNsOY)

3- Enuşirevan İhtişami, Gozer ez Bohran-ı Çanişini (Tahran, 1969), s. 37-76.

4- Ahmet Moseki, Nusazi ve İslahat der İran (Tahran: Komis, 1388), s. 383.

5- Seyit Muhammed Yakubi, Siyaset Hariciye Cumhuriye İslami-ye İran, s.195-225.

6- "انتخاب دهم "مقام معظم رهبری: تسلیم فشارها" <http://entekhabe10.parsiblog.com/Category/%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%AA+%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%8A+%D8%AF%D8%B1+%D9%86%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%B2+%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87+%D8%AA%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%AE%D9%8A+29+%D8%AE%D8%B1%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%AF/>>

7- For more information on Rafsanjani's life, see: Ahmed Sacidi, Meşahir-i Siyasi-i Karn-ı Bistom, (Tahran, 1374); Mesud Rezevi, Haşimi ve İnkılab, (Tahran, 1376).

In addition, his memoirs, published in 14 volumes, contain important further information on this topic.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Abdullah Yegin graduated with a B.A. in Art History from the Istanbul University. Between the years of 2000 and 2005, he conducted research on Shia theo-politics in Iran and the Middle East. He is currently completing his graduate work in Middle Eastern Political History and International Relations at the Middle East Research Institute in the Marmara University. Previously, he was a researcher at the foreign policy desk at the SETA Foundation. He has translated several works and published articles. He currently focuses his research on Iran and the Middle East region.

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