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Iran Reformists Challenge Supreme Leader

An Open Letter to a Senior Clerical Assembly Demands an Inquiry into Whether Ayatollah Ali Khamenei Is Fit to Rule

By [FARNAZ FASSIHI](#)

BEIRUT -- In a daring move, a group of former reformist lawmakers, now supporters of the opposition, have challenged whether the Islamic Republic's top man in power is fit to rule.

The unprecedented complaint against Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei came in a letter to one of Iran's highest clerical bodies, the Assembly of Experts, which has the power to name people to the leadership post -- and to remove them. The letter marks the first time a political group has questioned the authority of the supreme leader.

The letter was addressed to Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president who now heads the assembly and is a critic of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Mr. Rafsanjani shunned the inauguration ceremony of the president on Aug. 5, as well as Mr. Khamenei's endorsement ceremony.

The letter states that according to Iran's constitution, the supreme leader isn't above the law and that the assembly has the right to review his performance as a religious and political leader.

"We demand a legal probe on the basis of Article 111 of the Constitution, which is a responsibility of the Experts Assembly," stated the letter, which was written by the head of the organization of former reformist lawmakers. Article 111 says if the supreme leader "becomes incapable of fulfilling his constitutional duties," he will be dismissed.

The letter likely won't result in any action from the Assembly because the hard-liners have marginalized the reformists. But it signals an important turning point for the reform movement. Analysts say the reform movement has become more radical and is placing itself squarely against the regime and its top authority.

Criticizing the supreme leader was once unthinkable, and had serious repercussions. Now, demonstrators regularly chant slurs against Mr. Khamenei and write insults about him in green spray paint on walls in the capital.

Letter writing also has surged. In Iran, political discourse, even the most serious, has long been in the form of an open letter. When behind-the-scenes negotiations hit a dead end, the issues are shared with the public in print.

These letters now are a crucial communication tool for opposition leaders banned from public speaking. Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mahdi Karroubi, along with former president Mohammad Khatami, all have written letters to the supreme leader and to various government bodies complaining about election turmoil.

The reform party, the brainchild of Mr. Khatami, who ruled Iran from 1997 to 2005, had always operated on the premise that it could change the system from within the existing framework. Members criticized the rank-and-file in government, even the president, but pledged loyalty to the system and to the supreme leader. That has now changed.

"When you have nothing more to lose, when even your most basic rights are not respected, then you question the foundations of the regime and that includes the supreme leader," said Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a former reformist lawmaker, reached by phone, who is now a visiting scholar at the University of Massachusetts in Boston.

Ms. Haghighatjoo and former lawmaker Ali Akbar Mousavi Khoeini once faced legal charges for speaking out against Mr. Khamenei in the parliament.

That taboo has been challenged in particular after Mr. Khamenei openly sided with Mr. Ahmadinejad in a Friday-prayer address to the nation one week after the disputed June 12 election, and declared that his personal views were reflected closely in Mr. Ahmadinejad's policies.

A number of high-profile open letters followed, including one Mr. Rafsanjani wrote to Mr. Khamenei asking him to order a recount of votes soon after. Mr. Rafsanjani's daughter took photos of him drafting the letter on the balcony of his residence and posted them online, to counter rumors that the letter was a fraud.

Perhaps the most controversial letter was one Mr. Karroubi wrote this week claiming detained protesters were raped in prison. It prompted a furious reaction from hard-liners, who denied the allegations. "The letter played with the Islamic Republic's dignity," said cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami in his Friday prayer address this week.

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