



Iran's Rafsanjani renews firestorm over election fraud

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Tehran, Iran, Jul. 19 – The losing candidate in Iran's recent presidential elections, Ayatollah Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, strongly condemned "the way ballots were swapped" and "the gross irregularities in the recent elections" in this week's meeting of a top arbitration body that he heads, according to Iranian officials.

Rafsanjani's comments first surfaced in an article by Mohammad-Ali Abtahi, a cleric who was outgoing President Mohammad Khatami's deputy for legislative affairs before he resigned in October. Another Iranian official, who was active in Rafsanjani's campaign, provided more information on the meeting to Iran Focus. Abtahi's article was posted on his weblog on Monday.

Rafsanjani's remarks came in reaction to comments made by Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Tavassoli, a former chief of staff of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in this week's session of the State Expediency Council.

Before the council began its formal deliberations on Saturday, the elderly Ayatollah Tavassoli delivered a blistering speech against the ultra-conservative faction. He attacked the "fraudulent and despicable" way the faction's leaders, who include Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, had crowned their own man as Iran's new president.

Rafsanjani did not interrupt Tavassoli's seemingly impromptu assault on the ultra-conservative faction, despite objections from several leading allies of the Supreme Leader who sit on the council, including Guardian Council Chairman Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati.

The former president said he agreed with much of Tavassoli's remarks.

"I have a lot to say about the way this election was conducted and ballots were swapped", Rafsanjani was reported to have said without further elaboration. "But if I speak out about these issues, some people will make reverse propaganda and things will get worse".

Much of Tavassoli's attack was focused on Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, a chief ideologue of the ultra-conservative camp and the mentor of President-elect Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

"Ayatollah Tavassoli was incensed at the statement by Mr. Mesbah, who said that Iran has not had a truly Islamic government since the 1979 Islamic Revolution", Abtahi wrote.

"Mr. Tavassoli voiced alarm that the leaders of Hojjatieh group were now practically in control of the executive branch and the Revolutionary Guards, and that the new President-elect was under their domination", the pro-Rafsanjani official, who requested anonymity for fear of retribution, said.

Hojjatieh was a semi-clandestine religious and political group that was set up in the early 1950s in Iran by Sheikh Mahmoud Tavallai, popularly known as Sheikh Halabi, an extremist Shiite cleric who founded the group to eradicate members of the Baha'i faith.

The group became prominent after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran, as many of its members

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rose to influential positions. Halabi nominally dissolved the group in 1983 to conform with Ayatollah Khomeini's decree against "partisan politics" in the Islamic Republic, but Hojjatieh members retained their network and the group remained a player within the theocratic regime.

The official told Iran Focus that Rafsanjani and his allies were worried by the strong influence that extremist clerics such as Mesbah Yazdi and Rasti Kashani exert on Abadgaran and Issargaran, two ultra-conservative groupings whose members are expected to make up the bulk of the new cabinet. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is a leading figure in Abadgaran and a member of the six-man central council of Issargaran.

Some analysts see the speech by Tavassoli and the subsequent remarks by Rafsanjani as a counter-attack on the Supreme Leader, engineered by the former president. In recent days, allies of Ayatollah Khamenei in the Majlis and among senior clerics have been pressing the authorities to investigate corruption charges against Rafsanjani's sons in a bid to further weaken the man once widely expected to regain the presidency.

"Khamenei has badly wounded Rafsanjani, but this will not end here", said Ahmad Gorbani, a Dubai-based financial analyst, in a telephone interview. "As we say in Persian, a wounded enemy is a far more dangerous foe. You will see that the power struggle in Tehran will get much more nasty".

Despite the growing acrimony within Iran's clerical leadership, Gorbani, like most other observers, believes that Khamenei's rivals stand little chance of mounting a serious challenge to his authority in the present circumstances.

"As long as Khamenei can count on the Revolutionary Guards' loyalty and the huge oil revenues, he will be able to deal with dissent within the theocracy", Gorbani said.