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## **Powerful Iranian cleric barred from delivering Quds Day prayers**

**Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who supports the opposition movement, will be replaced by Ahmadinejad and an ally on the day of solidarity with Palestinians, reports say. Anti-government rallies are planned.**

By Borzou Daragahi

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Reporting from Beirut

A powerful cleric who supports Iran's opposition movement has been barred from delivering Friday prayers during Quds Day in Tehran, an annual day of solidarity with the Palestinian cause that is being turned into a protest against authorities in a move that suggests the declining influence of Iranian moderates within the political elite.

Instead of Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Friday's speakers will be President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his hard-line ally Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, the semi-official Iranian Labor News Agency reported, citing a spokesman for the prayers commission.

Protesters opposed to Ahmadinejad's reelection are planning to take to the streets Friday in an attempt to transform the annual rallies in favor of Palestinian rights into opposition marches. Presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who lost to Ahmadinejad in a June election marred by allegations of vote fraud, along with former President Mohammad Khatami have announced plans to join protesters.

Supporters of Mousavi's Green Path of Hope movement responded defiantly to the news that Rafsanjani had been pushed aside, calling on demonstrators to take to the streets anyway while boycotting the prayer sermon after the rally.

"They kept Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani from leading this week's Friday Prayers clearly out of fear," said a statement posted at the reformist website [Mowjcamp.com](http://Mowjcamp.com). "This badly thought-out gesture will certainly elicit an appropriate response from the understanding and green-thinking nation of Iran."

Rafsanjani has almost always led Friday prayers on Quds Day over the last 25 years. Decades ago he translated Arabic-language tracts in support of the Palestinian cause. Rafsanjani, who heads government bodies that oversee the office of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and mediate disputes between parliament and the presidency, has delivered Friday prayers only once since the upheaval that followed Iran's presidential elections. His July 17 sermon turned into a massive street protest in the capital.



The move to sideline Rafsanjani suggests his continuing marginalization from Iran's inner circle of power as a group of radical hard-liners and Revolutionary Guard leaders surrounding Ahmadinejad ascend to power. Ahmadinejad's supporters have called for the arrest of Rafsanjani's well-connected son, Mehdi Rafsanjani, after defendants at recent televised court proceedings, widely derided as show trials, accused him of undermining the Islamic Republic.

The declining influence and continued ostracism of relative moderates within the political establishment and the emergence of less palatable hard-liners may make it tougher for the West and Tehran to come to an agreement on Iran's controversial nuclear program.

But the blunt move to exclude a stalwart pillar of the Islamic Republic also suggests authorities' anxiety about rising opposition enthusiasm to turn public events into protest rallies. Walls in cities and towns have been plastered with posters calling on opposition supporters to take to the streets, photographs posted to the Internet show.

"I ask the understanding and intelligent nation of Iran to turn out massively in Friday's rally in a bid to negate any kind of oppression anywhere in the world," Ayatollah Yousef Sanei, a high-ranking reformist cleric, was quoted as saying on his website. "Be sure that God watches out for tyrants."

The post-election unrest, the Islamic republic's greatest domestic challenge since the 1979 revolution that established clerical rule, has sharply divided Iran's senior clergy.

Earlier this week Ayatollah Ali Hossein Montazeri delivered a blistering rebuke of the government, labeling it a "military regime" and calling on other clerics to speak out against authorities. Hours later officials arrested three of his grandchildren for allegedly taking part in nighttime political rallies outside the office of another reformist cleric. One of the young men was released Tuesday night.

A Sunni cleric loyal to Ahmadinejad was shot dead early Sunday morning in the city of Sanandaj, in western Iran, where he led Friday prayers. A prosecutor in Sanandaj was shot in the neck this morning in an apparent assassination attempt, the official Islamic Republic News Agency reported. Another prosecutor in the mostly Kurdish city escaped an assassination attempt a week ago.

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