

Iran elections: Rafsanjani's Gambit Backfires

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Iranian politics is never easy to decode. The maelstrom around Friday's presidential election intrigued most avid cryptographers scanning Iranian codes. So many false trails appeared that it became difficult to decipher who the real contenders were and what the political stakes were.

In the event, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei won a resounding victory. The grey cardinal of Iranian politics Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has been dealt a crushing defeat. Is the curtain finally ringing down on the tumultuous career of the "Shark", a nickname Rafsanjani acquired in the vicious well of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) where he used to swim dangerously as a political predator in the early years of the Iranian Revolution as the speaker? sperm whale of immense, premeditated ferocity and stamina in Herman Melville's epic novel Moby Dick, Rafsanjani is going down, deeply wounded by the harpoon, into the cold oblivion of the sea of Iranian politics. But you can never quite tell.

The administration of President Barack Obama in the United States could see through the allegorical mode of the Iranian election and probably anticipate the flood of destruction that would follow once vengeance is unleashed. It did just the right thing by staying aloof, studiously detached. Now comes the difficult part – engaging the house that Khamenei presides over as the monarch of all he surveys.

First, the ABC of the election. Who is Mir Hossein Mousavi, Ahmedinejad's main opponent in the election? He is an enigma wrapped in mystery. He impressed the Iranian youth and the urban middle class as a reformer and a modernist. Yet, as Iran's prime minister during 1981-89, Mousavi was an unvarnished hardliner. Evidently, what we have seen during his high-tech campaign is a vastly different Mousavi, as if he meticulously deconstructed and then reassembled himself.

This was what Mousavi had to say in a 1981 interview about the 444-day hostage crisis when young Iranian revolutionaries kept American diplomats in custody: "It was the beginning of the second stage of our revolution. It was after this that we discovered our true Islamic identity. After this we felt the sense that we could look Western policy in the eye and analyze it the way they had been evaluating us for many years."

Most likely, he had a hand in the creation of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Ali Akbar Mohtashami, Hezbollah's patron saint, served as his interior minister. He was involved in the Iran-Contra deal in 1985, which was a trade-off with the Ronald Reagan administration whereby the US would supply arms to Iran and as quid pro quo Tehran would facilitate the release of the Hezbollah-held American hostages in Beirut. The irony is, Mousavi was the very anti-thesis of Rafsanjani and one of the first things the latter did in 1989 after taking over as president was to show Mousavi the door. Rafsanjani had no time for Mousavi's anti-"Westernism" or

his visceral dislike of the market.

Mousavi's electoral platform has been a curious mix of contradictory political lines and vested interests but united in one maniacal mission, namely, to seize the presidential levers of power in Iran. It brought together so-called reformists who support former president Mohammad Khatami and ultra-conservatives of the regime. Rafsanjani is the only politician in Iran who could have brought together such dissimilar factions. He assiduously worked hand-in-glove with Khatami towards this end.

If we are to leave out the largely inconsequential "Gucci crowd" of north Tehran, who no doubt imparted a lot of color, verve and mirth to Mousavi's campaign, the hardcore of his political platform comprised powerful vested interests who were making a last-ditch attempt to grab power from the Khamenei-led regime. On the one hand, these interest groups were severely opposed to the economic policies under Ahmadinejad, which threatened their control of key sectors such as foreign trade, private education and agriculture.

For those who do not know Iran better, suffice to say that the Rafsanjani family clan owns vast financial empires in Iran, including foreign trade, vast landholdings and the largest network of private universities in Iran. Known as Azad there are 300 branches spread over the country, they are not only money-spinners but could also press into Mousavi's election campaign an active cadre of student activists numbering some 3 million.

The Azad campuses and auditoria provided the rallying point for Mousavi's campaign in the provinces. The attempt was to see that the campaign reached the rural poor in their multitudes who formed the bulk of voters and constituted Ahmadinejad's political base. Rafsanjani's political style is to build up extensive networking in virtually all the top echelons of the power structure, especially bodies such as the Guardian Council, Expediency Council, the Qom clergy, Majlis, judiciary, bureaucracy, Tehran bazaar and even elements within the circles close to Khamenei. He called into play these pockets of influence.

Rafsanjani's axis with Khatami was the basis of Mousavi's political platform of reformists and conservatives. The four-cornered contest was expected to give a split verdict that would force the election into a run-off on June 19. The candidature of the former Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) Commander Mohsen Rezai (who served under Rafsanjani when he was president) was expected to slice off a chunk of IRGC cadres and prominent conservatives.

Again, the fourth candidate, Mehdi Karrubi's "reformist" program was expected to siphon off support from Ahmedinejad, by virtue of his offer of economic policies based on social justice such as the immensely popular idea of distributing income from oil among the people rather than it accruing to the government's budget.

Rafsanjani's plot was to somehow extend the election to the run-off stage, where Mousavi was expected to garner the "anti-Ahmedinejad" votes. The estimation was that at the most Ahmedinejad would poll in the first round 10 to 12 million votes out of the 28 to 30 million who might actually vote (out of a total electorate of 46.2 million) and, therefore, if only the election extended to the run-off, Mousavi would be the net beneficiary as the votes polled by Rezai and Karrubi were essentially "anti-Ahmadinejad" votes.

The regime was already well into the election campaign when it realized that behind the clamor for a change of leadership in the presidency, Rafsanjani's challenge was in actuality

aimed at Khamenei's leadership and that the election was a proxy war. The roots of the Rafsanjani-Khamenei rift go back to the late 1980s when Khamenei assumed the leadership in 1989.

Rafsanjani was among Imam Khomeini's trusted appointees to the first Revolutionary Council, whereas Khamenei joined only at a later stage when the council expanded its membership. Thus, Rafsanjani always harbored a grouse that Khamenei pipped him to the post of Supreme Leader. The clerical establishment close to Rafsanjani spread the word that Khamenei lacked the requisite religious credentials, that he was indecisive as the executive president, and that the election process was questionable, which cast doubt on the legality of his appointment.

Powerful clerics, egged on by Rafsanjani, argued that the Supreme Leader was supposed to be not only a religious authority (mujtahid), but was also expected to be a source of emulation (marja or a mujtahid with religious followers) and that Khamenei didn't fulfill this requirement – unlike Rafsanjani himself. The debunking of Khamenei rested on the specious argument that his religious education was in question. The sniping by the clerics associated with Rafsanjani continued into the early 1990s. Thus, Khamenei began on a somewhat diffident note and during much of the period when Rafsanjani held power as president (1989-1997), he acted low key, aware of his circumstances.

The result was that Rafsanjani exercised more power as president than anyone holding that office anytime in Tehran. But Khamenei bided his time as he incrementally began expanding his authority. If he lacked standing among Iran's clerical establishment, he more than made up by attracting to his side the security establishment, especially the Ministry of Intelligence, the IRGC and the Basij militias.

While Rafsanjani hobnobbed with the clergy and the bazaar, Khamenei turned to a group of bright young politicians with intelligence or security backgrounds who were returning home from the battlefields of the Iran-Iraq war – such as Ali Larijani, the present speaker of the Majlis, Said Jalili, currently the secretary of the National Security Council, Ezzatollah Zarghami, head of the state radio and television and, indeed, Ahmadinejad himself.

Power inevitably accrued to Khamenei once he won over the loyalty of the IRGC and the Basij. By the time Rafsanjani's presidency ended, Khamenei had already become head of all three branches of the government and the state media, commander-in-chief of the armed forces, and even lucrative institutions such as Imam Reza Shrine or the Oppressed Foundation, which have almost unlimited capacity for extending political patronage.

All in all, therefore, the power structure today takes the form of a vast patriarchal apparatus of political leadership. Thus, perceptive analysts were spot on while concluding that Ahmadinejad would never on his own volition have gone public and directly taken on Rafsanjani during the controversial TV debate on June 4 in Tehran with Mousavi.

Ahmadinejad said, "Today it is not Mr Mousavi alone who is confronting me, since there are the three successive governments of Mr Mousavi, Mr Khatami and Mr Hashemi [Rafsanjani] arrayed against me." He took a pointed swipe at Rafsanjani for masterminding a plot to overthrow him. He said Rafsanjani promised the fall of his government to Saudi Arabia. Rafsanjani hit back within days by addressing a communication to Khamenei demanding that Ahmadinejad should retract "so that there would be no need of legal action".

"I am expecting you to resolve the situation in order to extinguish the fire, whose smoke can be seen in the atmosphere, and to take action to foil dangerous plots. Even if I were to tolerate this situation, there is no doubt that some people, parties and factions will not tolerate this situation," Rafsanjani angrily warned Khamenei.

Simultaneously, Rafsanjani also rallied his base in the clerical establishment. A clique of 14 senior clerics in Qom joined issue on his side. It was all an act of desperation by vested interests who have become desperate about the awesome rise of the IRGC in recent years. But, if Rafsanjani's calculation was that the "mutiny" within the clerical establishment would unnerve Khamenei, he misread the calculus of power in Tehran. Khamenei did the worst thing possible to Rafsanjani. He simply ignored the "Shark".

The IRGC and the Basij volunteers running into tens of millions swiftly mobilized. They coalesced with the millions of rural poor who adore Ahmadinejad as their leader. It has been a repeat of the 2005 election. The voter turnout has been an unprecedented 85%. Within hours of the announcement of Ahmadinejad's thumping victory, Khamenei gave the seal of approval by applauding that the high voter turnout called for "real celebration".

He said, "I congratulate ... the people on this massive success and urge everyone to be grateful for this divine blessing." He cautioned the youth and the "supporters of the elected candidate and the supporters of other candidates" to be "fully alert and avoid any provocative and suspicious actions and speech".

Khamenei's message to Rafsanjani is blunt: accept defeat gracefully and stay away from further mischief. Friday's election ensures that the house of Supreme Leader Khamenei will remain by far the focal point of power. It is the headquarters of the country's presidency, Iran's armed forces, especially the IRGC. It is the fountainhead of the three branches of government and the nodal point of foreign, security and economic policies.

Obama may contemplate a way to directly engage Khamenei. It is a difficult challenge.

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