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Electing a new head for the Assembly of Experts in Iran & the controversy between reformists & conservatives

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The recent election of Ayyatullah Muhammad-Reza Mahdavi Kani as head of the powerful Assembly of Experts (majles-e khobregan), replacing Ayyatullah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has drawn the attention inside and outside Iran, especially with regard to the struggle between the conservative and reformists. This development is viewed as victory of the conservative party at the expense of the reformists. Yet things are foggy than they seem to be.

Rafsanjani's decision not even to stand as a candidate in the election process for the position of the Head of the Assembly of Experts suggests a pragmatic approach on his part. After the demise of Grand Ayyatullah Meshkini two years ago, Rafsanjani, who was vice-president of the same body, became the head of the Assembly.

The Assembly consists of conservatives headed by Ayatullah Mesbah Yazdi and moderates under Rafsanjani's political esteem. Almost a month ago, conservatives secured the signatures of fifty members of the assembly in a petition to promote Kani as the new head of the assembly. Then Rafsanjani realized that he could not compete with Kani as the latter seemed to enjoy the support of the majority within the Assembly. Also Kani's nephew has married the Supreme Leader's daughter.

However, Kani was picked up by conservatives for his moderate profile. In fact Kani has been Rafsanjani's ally for years and the latter has openly supported Kani throughout this process. It is obvious that Rafsanjani attempts to minimize his political losses by neutralizing this move made by the conservatives. And he seems to have been successful so far, hoping to retain his influence in the Assembly.

Rafsanjani's communication policy is well-calculated. His decision not to stand for the candidacy results also from his concern about the detrimental results that a possible discord may have for the unity of the country and the safety of the political system. Ideologically Rafsanjani's statement and moderate stand corresponds to the Shiite tradition of Imams.

Politically this development shows that Rafsanjani has suffered a defeat in this aspect of Iranian politics. Yet this should be seen as the loss of a battle but not necessarily of the war. Heading the Assembly of Experts is more of a symbolic character. Its members make their decisions based on the overall approach of politics in Iran and their role is interconnected with alliances in the clergy as a whole. Besides Rafsanjani remains Head of the Expediency Council until 2012 and this position will enable him to live and fight for another day.

Rafsanjani is a soft spoken politician who knows the art of political self-preservation. Many time times in the past his opponents attempted unsuccessfully to eliminate his influence in Iranian politics. For now Rafsanjani is expected to keep a low profile and work quietly in the background of political life. Unlike western political life, there are frequent twists and turns in the Iranian political system which resembles the tradition, manners and knowhow of the Shiite clergy. Missing a position of prestige is not expected to have a serious impact on Rafsanjani's future efforts to influence developments in the clergy as a whole.

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