

Rafsanjani's Day of Reckoning

Will the Iranian cleric save the Green revolution--and his own legacy?

Author Info Needed July 16, 2009 | 12:00 am

Tomorrow, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani will deliver the Friday sermon in Tehran--the most important pulpit for policy and polemic in Iran. The former president and speaker of the parliament has been a regular on the Friday circuit over the past 30 years, but has been eerily absent for more than two months. More crucially, though the reformist cleric has met with families of those arrested in recent weeks (an important symbolic act), his words since the controversial elections of June 12 have been characteristically ambiguous. This Friday is his hour of reckoning. Opposition leaders Mir Hossein Moussavi and Mohammad Khatami have both announced that they will also attend the prayer, and have invited their supporters to do the same. The day has the potential of becoming yet another massive show of force by the opposition.

For at least four years, Rafsanjani has been unhappy about Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's inordinate power, the direction of the country, and Ahmadinejad's demagoguery--particularly spurred by his sharp attacks against the Rafsanjani family. In the weeks before the election, Rafsanjani clearly sided with the reformists and put his considerable assets--financial and political--in the service of Moussavi. Rafsanjani

today must know what most Iranians know: Unless he stands up to this most recent power grab by the triumvirate of Khamenei, Ahmadinejad, and the Revolutionary Guards, he and his family will be next on the chopping block. Should he, on the other hand, be too defiant in his support for the opposition, he invites the wrath of the triumvirate. This Friday's sermon is thus shaping up as the most important in Rafsanjani's storied career.

Rafsanjani has been involved in Iranian politics for over 50 years, and at the center of power since the inception of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. He can rightly be credited--or criticized--for playing the determining role in anointing Khamenei the successor to Khomeini. His star seemed to have declined during the Khatami presidency, when the reformist media attacked him for all manner of perfidy, calling him the Godfather of Iranian politics. In spite of these attacks, Rafsanjani remained a powerful operator in the backrooms of clerical authority.

With the rise of Ahmadinejad's populism, Rafsanjani's became a coveted ally of the reformists. In the run-up to the June election, he wrote a remarkably candid letter to Khamenei, predicting that if the election is stolen, a seething "volcano" of discontent would erupt. But when the eruption came and Khamenei used brute force to suppress it, Rafsanjani chose silence.

The pressure on Rafsanjani to speak has been building from both sides of the divide. Rumors of his house arrest, the actual brief arrest of his daughter, open letters by Islamist zealots questioning his piety, demanding he "divorce" his activist children, and threatening him with criminal prosecution--all have been part of the public pressure

brought by Khamenei and his allies to break Rafsanjani's alliance with the reformist, and pave the way for a complete clampdown on dissent. On the other hand, reformists, liberals, opposition clerics, and even many of Rafsanjani's erstwhile critics have also been pressuring him to publicly challenge the rise of tyranny. This Friday's sermon will be a clear indication of where he stands and how he proposes to end the current stand-off.

Rafsanjani is nothing if not a survivor. In him, the line between the art of survival and the infamy of opportunism are often blurred. He has a knack for using creative, even invidious ambiguity to avoid taking positions that limit his ability to maneuver. If in the past these tactics enabled him to survive, this time, reliance on them is more likely to seal his reputation as a shrewd, selfish, and corrupt architect of a brutal and despotic regime. If, on the other hand, he uses the occasion to stand up to his shady past partners, he might well rehabilitate, even refashion, his reputation.

History sometimes affords individuals an occasion to redeem their legacy and have it defined not by their lapses and failures but by their accomplishments and valor. Though former Iranian prime minister Amir Kabir was infamous for executing many innocent Bahais during the 19th century, he is today remembered as a great reformer. In a strange coincidence, Rafsanjani's only foray into the world of scholarship is his biography of Amir Kabir. This Friday, we will learn whether he has learnt the lessons of that life.

Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford where he is the co-director of the Iran Democracy Project. His latest book is Eminent Persian: The Men and

Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979 (*Syracuse University Press*).

By Abbas Milani

Source URL: <http://www.tnr.com/article/politics/rafsanjani-day-reckoning>