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The Curious Case of Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani

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The events of the June 12, 2009, election in Iran and their aftermath have been characterized as “the most significant sequence of events in the Islamic Republic since the 1979 revolution itself.”¹ Those events have collectively been called a *coup d'état* by the opposition, and a “velvet (or “colored”) revolution” aimed at overthrowing the system by the declared victors of the elections.² Using the “confessions” of the more than 100 journalists, activists, and scholars who were put on trial in August 2009, the government has constructed a web of intrigue, implicating ordinary citizens, reformists, several senior clerics, and foreign news agencies in this alleged attempt at regime change.

To the astonishment of many both inside and outside Iran, a central role in the government’s narrative of regime subversion was attributed to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Iran’s president from 1989 to 1997. Rafsanjani had served as speaker of the parliament from 1980-1989, was appointed chairman of the Expediency Council, elected Speaker of the Assembly of Experts, and has long considered to be one of the most corrupt and yet most powerful men in the Islamic Republic. At the August 2009 trials of dissidents and in their public confessions, on semi-official news sites, and in statements by officials in power, Rafsanjani’s family was continually implicated in the supposed corruption and subversion of the system. Even his person was targeted in a schema of the “velvet revolution” published on a site believed to be close to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in which Rafsanjani is depicted as playing a central role in “the West’s” plot to overthrow the system by trying to change the nature of the office of the Supreme Leader.³

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In the face of this unprecedented barrage of attacks, Rafsanjani has mostly stood passively by, objecting only once, during the July 17th Friday prayers, when he stressed the necessity of maintaining both the Republic and the Islamic institutions of Iran. After the much anticipated September 22, 2009 meeting of the Assembly of Experts—which constitutionally has the power to choose, or change, the Supreme Leader—Rafsanjani absented himself as the Assembly, with the exception of one member, renewed its support for Ali Khamenei.⁴ Shortly thereafter, there were reports that Rafsanjani had stated that “some people think that I’ve said the system’s legitimacy is founded on the people’s vote. I [actually] see the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic [as based on] the *velayat-e faqih*.”⁵ This statement, with its emphasis on the office of the Supreme Leader as the source of the system’s legitimacy was thus read as Rafsanjani backtracking from his July 17th sermon that had precisely warned against emphasizing one aspect of the system’s dual nature over the other.

The scale of the recent attacks directed at Hashemi Rafsanjani and his inability or refusal to strike back have worked to undo the myth of potency and power that had attached itself to him since at least the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1989. This Brief takes a historical look at two developments that together account for the targeting of Rafsanjani by those currently in power: the rift between Rafsanjani and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, and the entry of the radical Right into mainstream politics in the context of its perceived and actual marginalization during the Rafsanjani presidency. The first development explains why Khamenei has not intervened as Rafsanjani has come under attack; the second identifies the roots of the radical Right’s resentment toward Rafsanjani and the process that brought the Right into power, enabling it to act on that hostility.

In order to highlight the uniqueness of Rafsanjani’s seeming acquiescence in the face of attack, it is necessary to first take a brief look at his responses to his critics over the past decade.

Targeting Rafsanjani

For the past decade, Rafsanjani has shown himself to be quite adept at responding to direct and indirect attacks. When the reformist journalist Akbar Ganji held him responsible for the murder of dissidents and intellectuals in 1998, Ganji was imprisoned for six years, as conservative newspapers sang the praises of Rafsanjani and touted his revolutionary credentials. In the immediate aftermath of the bloody 1999 student uprisings, Rafsanjani praised the government for its use of violence against the protestors.⁶ His plans to once again become of Speaker of Parliament were crushed when he barely squeezed in last among the thirty elected representatives of Tehran in the 2000 parliamentary elections. Rafsanjani resigned before being sworn in, though he retained some bitterness toward the reformists, who during the campaigns for Parliament had attacked him and his record in the 1990s. By the 2005 presidential elections, however, Rafsanjani and some of the reformists were united in their opposition to Ahmadinejad, allowing bygones to (somewhat) be bygones.

Ahmadinejad thereupon picked up the mantle of critiquing Rafsanjani from the reformists, turning it into a successful campaign tactic and continuing the criticism during his first term as president. In October 2006, without directly naming Rafsanjani, he called him “selfish and without piety.” Ahmadinejad’s unprecedented attack on Rafsanjani was seen at the time as a reflection of the former’s attempt to “fully eliminate from the political system Mr. Rafsanjani’s spectrum of supporters.”⁷ The reasons for this attempted purge were both practical and ideological. On the one hand, Rafsanjani was perceived to be one of Ahmadinejad’s most powerful enemies from within the ruling elite; but additionally, among Ahmadinejad’s supporters, there was general agreement that “Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani’s moderation [as president] had slowly given away the fruits of the Revolution.”⁸

Shortly after, Rafsanjani ran in the December 2006 Assembly of Experts election. Achieving a clear victory, he was subsequently chosen as Speaker of that body over Ayatollah Misbah-Yazdi, believed to be the senior cleric closest to Ahmadinejad. His ascension to the head of the body in charge of selecting Iran's Supreme Leader temporarily laid to rest the possibility of Rafsanjani's elimination by the radical Right.

In May and June of 2008, when Abbas Palizdar, allegedly an Ahmadinejad sympathizer, publically implicated Rafsanjani and more than forty other senior clerics and government officials in corruption and bribery schemes, he (Palizdar) was immediately arrested. Government spokespersons denied any connection between Palizdar and Ahmadinejad, instead condemning Palizdar for "degrading the fight against corruption."⁹

But on June 3, 2009, during the explosive debate between then candidates Mousavi and Ahmadinejad—the first of its kind in the history of the Islamic Republic—the latter launched into a series of open attacks on the two previous presidents' administrations, those of Khatami and Rafsanjani. To the surprise of many observers, he singled out Rafsanjani for scorn, accusing him of "wishing the collapse of his [Ahmadinejad's] government" and even hinting that Rafsanjani was supported by forces "outside [as well as] inside the country,"¹⁰ while raising once again the notion that Rafsanjani and his family members were corrupt. Ahmadinejad's supporters then took to the streets, holding signs with pictures of the Rafsanjani family under the words "The Hashemi family against Ahmadinejad."

A week later, in an open letter to Khamenei, Rafsanjani complained that the country's Supreme Leader had remained silent in the face of "insults, lies and false allegations" by Ahmadinejad,¹¹ questioning whether "[i]f the system cannot or does not want to confront such ugly and sin-infected phenomena as insults, lies and false allegations made in that debate, how can we consider ourselves followers of the sacred Islamic system?"¹² Rafsanjani's public complaint to Khamenei went unanswered until the latter's sermon on the first Friday prayers after the elections, on June 19, 2009. Khamenei seemingly rose to the defense of Rafsanjani as not corrupt (while leaving the question of his family's conduct open), recalling their history together before the Revolution and Rafsanjani's important role both in the pre-revolutionary days and thereafter. Nonetheless, he ended his defense by declaring, "Of course, since the 1384 [2005] elections, there have been differences between Mr. Hashemi and Mr. President [Ahmadinejad]. The differences still continue. They have differences of opinion on foreign issues, on how to implement social justice and on certain cultural issues. The viewpoints of the President are closer to those of mine."¹³

Once Friends, Now Foes

Only twenty years earlier the scales had been tipped in a different direction, when Rafsanjani played an instrumental role in Khamenei's selection as Iran's Supreme Leader. In 1987–88, Ayatollah Khomeini had rejected his heir apparent, Ayatollah

Montazeri, in a public dispute over the direction of the Islamic Republic, especially with regard to the bloody eight-year war with Iraq and the mass execution of political prisoners. With Khomeini's death, debates over whether the position of *velayat-e faqih* was designed specifically for Khomeini, and if not, then the process by which a new Supreme Leader should be chosen, became heated. At the time, by some accounts, the suggestion was raised that the position be filled, instead of by one figure, by either a three-person or a five-person council, the latter which would have included both Rafsanjani and Khamenei.¹⁴ The idea never received a majority of votes. Instead, what followed has had immense implications for today: Rafsanjani was successful in lobbying for Khamenei, who had been an ally and follower of Rafsanjani and Khomeini, respectively, since the 1960s.

Khamenei was a mid-ranking clergyman who, unlike Khomeini, did not have an imposing presence on the clerical body in Qum and thus initially, at least, was seen as someone who could not be the final arbiter of decision-making in Iran. But the argument advanced by his supporters, particularly Rafsanjani, was that Khomeini had had a fondness for Khamenei and that he had advocated the constitutional changes (formally approved in 1989) according to which it was possible for his successor to be a *mujtahid* (an Islamic scholar) who was not a source of emulation (*marja'*).¹⁵ Leading the Friday prayers on the heel of Khomeini's death, Rafsanjani "said Khamenei met the conditions Khomeini outlined for his successor."¹⁶

Additionally, Rafsanjani pushed for constitutional changes, already discussed during Khomeini's time, that shifted power to the republican institutions of the system by getting rid of the position of prime minister (held at the time by Mir Husayn Mousavi), effectively turning the presidency, a weak position by design when the constitution was written in 1979, into the second most powerful office in the country. In the summer of 1989, Rafsanjani ran in the presidential election and easily won.

When Khamenei was first elected Supreme Leader, his weakness lay in two areas. He was seen to have a weak religious position, arising from the fact that he was not a source of emulation; and this would, it was assumed, result in a shift of power from the office of the Supreme Leader to the seminaries in Qum, where religious figures, many independent from the state and with far more religious authority than Khamenei, resided. When in 1992, Khamenei issued his first *fatwa*, on organ transplantation, it was not challenged by the leading Ayatollahs, opening the door to a series of other *fatwas* that subsequently provided him with the religious authority he first lacked.¹⁷

Additionally, it was commonly believed that unlike Rafsanjani, for example, Khamenei lacked a clear base and support network. Khamenei immediately set out to remedy this weakness and thus break free from Rafsanjani's dominance of post-Khomeini politics in two ways: by building support among the political elite through the exploitation of factional politics, and by expanding control over the armed forces, particularly the Revolutionary Guards.

Broadly speaking, during the first decade of the Islamic Republic, political factions were divided along a straightforward line: one faction in favor of absolute state control over the economy versus another which believed in an economic policy that combined elements of an open market with an insistence on “Islamic values.” The death of Khomeini, along with the end of the war with Iraq, allowed differences among the political elite to surface as never before, leading to an intense power struggle between those called the “radicals,” who believed in both a statist economic policy and a revolutionary foreign policy, and who included some of the major figures of today’s reformist camp, such as Khatami and Mehdi Karrubi; and the “pragmatists,” who advocated a more-or-less free market economy and a more *realpolitik* foreign policy, and who at the time included Rafsanjani and the newly elected Supreme Leader, Khamenei.

Against this background, Rafsanjani began his presidency by advocating the “institutional and ideological de-revolutionization” of the Islamic Republic¹⁸ and by “giving precedence to worldly political matters over religious ones, which in turn called for setting in motion a process of ‘rationalization’ of the regime.”¹⁹ In a 1988 campaign speech, Rafsanjani had specifically stated that “our main concern is the economic situation. In the decade after the Revolution, we were unable to attend to the everyday lives of people because of the war. We have some problems in our society. I think that the achievement of a flourishing economy is one of the topics that heads the list of our programs.”²⁰ Rafsanjani’s push for the rationalization and de-revolutionization of the Iranian government was directly linked to his program of economic liberalization: foreign exchange realignment, the politics of wages, privatization, and structural adjustment.²¹

Disagreements over both Rafsanjani’s vision for post-Khomeini Iran and his implementation of that vision, along with Khamenei’s inability to be the final arbiter owing to his initial weak position, only splintered the factions even further, with one side advocating a statist economic program alongside liberal social and cultural policies, and the other promoting capitalist economics while maintaining conservative social and cultural positions. As the decade progressed, the conservative Right (conservative on social issues while favoring free-market economics) moved further away from pragmatists such as Rafsanjani (who advocated a more open social policy along with an open market), while by the mid-1990s the faction known as the radical Left (liberal on social issues and statist on economics) came to the conclusion that political and economic liberalism went hand in hand. As a result of these transformations, the group now known as the reformists slowly emerged to eventually become a political force and win the 1997 presidential elections.

Unlike Khomeini, who had used factional infighting as a means of ensuring that no one faction could gain the upper hand among the political elite, Khamenei seized the opportunity to build up a power base independent of Rafsanjani.²² As the decade unfolded, factional infighting crystallized around

the differences between Parliament and the presidency over Rafsanjani’s plans to centralize the state and its institutions as a necessary step toward the de-revolutionization of the government. Khamenei began siding with the factions opposed to Rafsanjani, often criticizing the cultural changes and openings required for economic liberalization to be successful.²³ From the perspective of the evolution of the office, Khamenei’s decision to align with Rafsanjani’s critics in the parliament over the 1994/95 budget was the turning point in Khamenei’s ascendancy and in the parting of ways between him and the president.²⁴ By May 1994, Khamenei even ordered a probe into “financial improprieties in government offices.”²⁵ And as Rafsanjani’s post-war reconstruction plans faltered amidst rumors of high inflation, massive corruption in the government, and popular resentment of his economic plans, Khamenei, seen initially as a weak pawn of Rafsanjani, consolidated his power by building a network of supporters, especially within the Revolutionary Guards.

Khamenei’s relationship to the Revolutionary Guards dated back to the early 1980s, when he had “helped organize it as a formidable force against the armed forces.”²⁶ What today is seen as a very close relationship between Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards, however, was born out of a longer process of consolidation. In 1988, Rafsanjani (then Speaker of Parliament) had been chosen by Khomeini as head of the armed forces. In his tenure as commander in chief, Rafsanjani, despite protests from the military, had consolidated the command of the Revolutionary Guards over the regular armed forces under the rubric of centralizing state institutions. (This move is now seen as the beginning of the Islamization of Iran’s military.)

In September 1989, Rafsanjani unexpectedly resigned as commander in chief, citing his busy schedule and his desire to focus on the economic reshaping of post-war Iran. Khamenei accepted his resignation and immediately took over command of the armed forces; as one of his first acts, he appointed a former Revolutionary Guard, Ali Saleh Shamkhani, as the head of Iran’s navy.²⁷ But it would be folly to see the Revolutionary Guards as unchanging, and as always strictly loyal to the Supreme Leader. As noted by Mehdi Moslem, the Guards in 1988 had many members from the “Left” who at the time had strenuously argued against the merger.²⁸ And in 1994, four thousand Guards were forced into retirement in what was seen as “the biggest purge among Iran’s ‘Praetorian Guard’ in the fifteen years of the Islamic regime,”²⁹ leading to speculation that those purged from the Guards were supporters of Rafsanjani and were thus the latest pawns in the power struggle between Khamenei and Rafsanjani.

Rafsanjani and the Rise of the Radical Right

As noted earlier, the post-war reconstruction period was marked by factional fighting between statist groups who nonetheless advocated for an open society, and various

conservative groups whose interests were tied to Iran's economic liberalization. By the middle of the 1990s, the faction advocating statist economics and cultural liberalism was no longer advocating pure statist policies. This meant that the only faction left arguing for the economic, social, and cultural policies of the 1980s was the "radical Right," who were effectively kept out of electoral politics in this decade. This faction saw the revolutionary and war period as the "golden era," when the economy was state-controlled, politics was ideological, and social freedoms were limited. It thus saw in Rafsanjani's post-war policies a direct assault on themselves and their beliefs.

A main characteristic of the Rafsanjani era was the explicit and implicit strengthening of the republican institutions of the state: explicitly through Rafsanjani's attempts to strengthen the executive branch, as seen in the constitutional changes in 1989, and implicitly through the dominance of the parliament in the struggle against his reconstruction policies. In other words, political change in post-Khomeini Iran was increasingly effected through electoral politics.³⁰

Against this background, the radical Right's presence in politics throughout the 1990s was evident mostly in appointed positions, such as governorships, and in its activity in the Revolutionary Guards. Ahmadinejad's entry into politics reflected a typical trajectory of a new generation of these radical Right politicians and activists into electoral politics. His success was the result of the astute managing of his political activity so as to break into the ruling circle by rallying precisely those marginalized from it during the reconstruction era, who saw in Ahmadinejad's presidency an opportunity for revenge for that marginalization.

Ahmadinejad himself had actually been appointed, in 1993 (by Rafsanjani's interior minister), governor of the province of Ardabil, from where he campaigned for the right-wing candidate Nateq Nouri against Khatami in 1997, the same man he would come to attack for having "an inappropriately lavish lifestyle" in 2009.³¹ Having left his appointed position in 1997, Ahmadinejad unsuccessfully ran both for the Tehran City Council on an ultra-right-wing list in 1999 and for Parliament in 2000. The pace and extent of social and cultural reform in the Khatami period enabled the radical Right to mobilize its supporters, and provided the fire in the belly that the Right needed to strategize its entry into electoral politics. But the Right's repeated electoral defeats in the post-Khatami period were seen as resulting from the inability of the Right to properly restructure its organization in the 1990s,³² leading to the split of a new radical Right group from the old guard and the creation of the new Right party Abadgaran (Developers) in 2002.

In the widely boycotted Tehran City Council elections in 2003, with participation at an all-time low of 12%, the Abadgaran party won, and chose Ahmadinejad as mayor.³³ The victory of Ahmadinejad in the two-man runoff election against Rafsanjani in 2005 meant more than the electorate's repudiation of Rafsanjani or the victory of an underdog over one of the most resilient politicians in the Islamic Republic; it also meant the

defeat of Rafsanjani's vision for post-war Iran by the group that his reconstruction-era policies sought to make irrelevant.

Part of the success of this new political force lay in their savvy mobilization of another marginalized group of the Rafsanjani era: the voluntary militia, or Basij. The war with Iraq had led to the creation of the Basij and the mobilization of young, ideologically motivated, and often barely trained troops to sacrifice life and limb for the survival of the Revolution. As such, the propaganda of the war was mainly aimed at the Basiji, focusing on their martyrdom and sacrifice for the greater good not of the Republic but of the Revolution.³⁴ The war ended with Iran's acceptance of UN Resolution 598, which was described by Khomeini as drinking from a chalice of poison—bitter but necessary. Nonetheless, the decision was not welcomed by many in the Basij, who in the absence of a clear "victory," saw their *raison d'être* nullified and their sacrifice as having been for naught.

Nowhere is this disenchantment better reflected than in the film by then revolutionary filmmaker Mohsen Makhmalbaf, *The Marriage of the Blessed* (1989). In this film, an injured war veteran returns to a city—Tehran—that has turned its back on the revolutionary promise of equality and social justice. In its stead, he finds a population obsessed with material goods and comforts, and a country with little respect or use for either its veterans or its downtrodden. In an interview, Makhmalbaf revealed that he had intended to end the film with the protagonist boarding a train that takes him back to the front, returning to a place where the ideals of the Revolution are the code of conduct. But before he could finish the film the UN resolution was accepted, and the war came to an end. As such, the film has an ambiguous ending: The protagonist flees the tainted city, but he does not go anywhere. His poignant figure, in between places and alienated from the mainstream of society, foreshadowed the place of the Basiji in Iranian politics for most of the 1990s.

For a revolution imbued with anti-imperialist, anti-West rhetoric, opening up the country economically, politically, and culturally to the outside world was an affront to the memory of the war itself. As noted by Moslem, "Rafsanjani believed, 'While keeping their belligerent spirits, the Basijis should be engaged in the phase of economic construction in Iran.' Fearing the continuation of the revolutionary milieu of the first decade, the conservative right supported such views and defended Rafsanjani's implicit call for law and order."³⁵

For the pragmatists of the Rafsanjani period, the Basiji were a group to be contained at best, but for the conservatives opposed to Rafsanjani's liberalizing policies, they were a force to be employed in the "culture wars" that were beginning to take shape. In November 1992, the parliament "passed the 'Law of Legal Protection for the Basijis' aimed at 'empowering the Basijis to assist the Law Enforcement Forces in fighting crimes in the country'"³⁶ As a result, the Basij gained legal rights to enforce what it saw as cultural and social deviations from "revolutionary" ideals. While the Basiji did not officially

constitute a political party, their power as the physical arm of the conservative Right³⁷ made them important players on Iran's political scene. In this, they were further helped by Khamenei, who, contrary to Rafsanjani, encouraged the Basij to be "present in all public spheres particularly to protect revolutionary-Islamic values."³⁸

This did not mean that the Basiji were a homogeneous group aligned with the Supreme Leader, nor did it mean that Rafsanjani ever formally declared his opposition to them. On the contrary, throughout the Khatami presidency, when tensions between the reformists and Rafsanjani were high, Rafsanjani at times seemed to be echoing the Supreme Leader by inviting the Basij to be present in all aspects of the country's affairs—stating, for example, in 2002, that "now, the Basij has an important mission, which is to have a presence in all political, social and cultural developments of the nation."³⁹ Nonetheless, throughout the reform period, the role carved out for the Basij as the enforcers of those in opposition to cultural and social liberalization continued. For his part, Khatami, while publically announcing support for the Basij, made clear that it needed to function within legal boundaries, and constantly warned against the militarization of cultural space, particularly the universities.

The Ahmadinejad presidency broke through this restriction limiting the Basiji not only by directly addressing them and successfully mobilizing them in his 2005 bid for the presidency, but also by bringing them as a group into the politics of the state. From the start and in one of his campaign films in 2005, Ahmadinejad directly addressed the veterans of the Iran-Iraq war of 1980–88, specifically members of the Basij with whom he had kept in contact since the 1980s, praying with them in military fatigues.⁴⁰ Their integration into politics was part of the general expansion of Iran's "Security Outlook" during the first term of Ahmadinejad's presidency, a development that in the aftermath of the June elections has moved closer to effecting the militarization of the political sphere in Iran.⁴¹

The payoff for Ahmadinejad was in the effective use of the Basij in clamping down on the post-election protests of 2009—regarded by Farnaz Fassihi as "the group's most significant mobilization since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s."⁴² While the current Basij's rank-and-file membership did not fight in the Iran-Iraq war themselves (although some were pressured to join by family members who did), and even though the growth of the Basij since 2005 can also be attributed to financial incentives accorded new recruits, it's clear that the leadership keeps the memory of the war alive—through field trips to war monuments and to the graves of the war's "martyrs," and by repeating the Basij's discourse from the 1980s, with its emphasis on the defense of Islam and the Revolution as opposed to the Republic.

Conclusion

In his only Friday sermon since the election, on July 17th, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, to the delight of the opposition, warned against the elimination of the republican aspects of the Islamic Republic:

"The title of Islamic Republic is not just a formality. This is a reality passed on to us on the basis of the Koran, as well as the religious sayings of the (Shiite) Imams and the prophet. We believe in them. We should have them [the Islamic and the Republic] at the same time. Rest assured, if one of those two aspects is damaged we will lose our Revolution. If it loses its Islamic aspect, we will go astray. If it loses its republican aspect, it [the Islamic Republic] will not be realized. Based on the reasons that I have offered, without people and their vote there would be no Islamic system."⁴³

Rafsanjani's anxiety over the weakening of the Republic was not just about the system; it was also personal. Since the death of Khomeini, Rafsanjani has played power politics in Iran almost exclusively through republican institutions. He pushed for constitutional changes that made the presidency stronger than ever before—and, moreover, his presidency was marked by an intense push and pull between the executive branch and the parliament, another republican institution. His presidency created the conditions that led to the rise and electoral success of the reform movement in the 1990s; when the reformists attempted to shut him out, he responded by trying to enter politics through the 2000 parliamentary elections. And when the radical Right, in turn, sought to purge him from the system, he ran for and won the election for the Assembly of Experts.

Yet since the June elections, Rafsanjani has remained silent despite appeals by the opposition to intervene on their behalf, and inactive in the face of assaults on himself and his family. Most recently, he even failed to exercise his power as head of the Assembly of Experts, thereby implicitly giving his stamp of approval to the assembly's praise of the Supreme Leader and its characterization of the June crisis as a *fitna* (loosely, an anarchic upheaval).

As argued in this Brief, the perfect storm of Rafsanjani's developing rift with Khamenei (despite his recent denial of any differences between the two men)⁴⁴ and the resentment of the radical Right toward him and the policies he pursued during his presidency, coupled with the current shift away from republican institutions of power in Iran toward authoritarian ones such as the Revolutionary Guard, have worked to weaken Rafsanjani's image as the omnipotent manager behind the scenes in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Endnotes

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