

Iran on the Eve of the Presidential Elections

Barbara Slavin

Senior Diplomatic Reporter, *USA Today*

The following text was written by Barbara Slavin and served as a basis for her presentation at the Wilson Center on May 23, 2005. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and in no way represent the views or opinions of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars.

His sparse beard and pointy moustache are white now, as is the hair under his turban. But Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is still the cagey, calculating figure he has been since the 1979 Iranian revolution and he is aiming for a comeback.

In an interview with *USA Today* on February 6, his first with a U.S. media outlet since he left the presidency in 1997, Rafsanjani, 70, effectively launched his candidacy to become president again. The old dealmaker is running as a pragmatic reformer who can salvage the Islamic republic and solve Iran's problems with the United States.

"The mere fact that I am sitting here talking to you is an indication that we have no differences with the American people," he said in the interview in the Marble Palace, an ornate building in a heavily guarded government complex in downtown Tehran.

"When I was elected president, several times I mentioned to the United States that if they show goodwill, we would enter a dialogue with them," he said. "I am one of those who can solve the problems with the United States."

Rafsanjani wants to remind apathetic voters, particularly Iran's younger generation, that he is the most successful post-revolutionary Iranian politician in reaching out to the United States. He is the man, after all, behind Iran-Contra, giving money that the Reagan administration channeled to anti-Communist Nicaraguan guerrillas in return for U.S. military spare parts during Iran's war with Iraq. He helped arrange the release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon, leading the first President Bush to remark famously that "goodwill begets goodwill."

Rafsanjani also steered a multimillion dollar oil deal to the U.S. firm, Conoco, which President Clinton blocked under pressure from the Republican-led Congress. It's interesting to speculate what might have happened in U.S.-Iran relations if the first President Bush had been re-elected and the Conoco deal had gone through. Would Rafsanjani's intelligence apparatus have backed Saudi Shiites believed to have bombed the Khobar Towers barracks, killing 19 U.S. airmen in 1996?

Whether Rafsanjani, if elected, can work his wiles on the current President Bush is questionable, given Rafsanjani's dark side (Khobar Towers, the murders of intellectuals) and this administration's avid pro-democracy campaign. But the stakes are bigger now and so is Iran's leverage as it moves toward becoming a nuclear power, flexes its influence in Iraq, Lebanon and the Palestinian territories, and oil stays stubbornly above \$50 a barrel.

Rafsanjani's deal-making character is underlined by the pistachio merchant family's internationalist character. More than most Iranian clerical families, the Rafsanjanis sent members abroad to study during the time of the Shah. Rafsanjani's brother, Mohammed Hashemi, spent nine years in the United States at Berkeley, organizing against the Shah and sopping up U.S. leftist politics. Rafsanjani himself visited the United States in 1974, driving across the country

through 20 states. He liked what he saw. "I found the States a large, developed and rich country," he said in the interview.

Rafsanjani's children also have considerable exposure to the West. His daughter, Faezeh, is getting her PhD in international politics at Cambridge University. His son, Mehdi, studied in Australia and visited New York a decade ago.

Mehdi, who is functioning as a sort of campaign manager for his father, holds views that are strongly reformist and presumably shared to some extent by Rafsanjani. Mehdi told me that his father would bring about constitutional changes in Iran and make the office of the Supreme Leader ceremonial, like "a king of England." The comment created a stir in Iran when *USA Today* published it and Mehdi's office tried—and failed—to get it retracted. In my opinion, the brouhaha helped the Rafsanjani camp by underlining the notion that only Rafsanjani has the power to counterbalance the leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

I spent about four hours with Mehdi in two meetings as part of a vetting process before I was granted the interview with his father. Mehdi, who is in his late 30s, very self-confident and laughs often, made a number of other provocative comments. He called the June presidential elections the most important in Iranian history and said it would be very dangerous if conservatives won, since the United States is also being run by radicals and that there would be the possibility of armed conflict. He also said that Iran runs the risk of becoming a religious dictatorship. "If my father doesn't run, all the country would be under one group and after that, there would not be any more free elections in Iran," Mehdi said.

He said his father was running to save the revolution by fixing the economy, counterbalancing the leader, and solving "the American problem. Because if he solves the American problem, he solves all of Iran's problems."

Mehdi was not specific about what his father would do about the nuclear issue, nor was Rafsanjani. (In an interview with *Reuters* on May 19, Rafsanjani said that nuclear power was Iran's right and, "I believe the main solution is to gain the trust of Europe and America and to remove their concerns over the peaceful nature of our nuclear industry and to assure them that there will never be a diversion" to military use.)

Both Mehdi and Mohammed Hashemi faulted Mohammed Khatami for, in their view, allowing the Supreme Leader to accumulate power that should have stayed with the presidency. Khatami is "not really an executive man," Mohammed Hashemi, who also granted me an interview, said. A president "must have the courage to make decisions and Rafsanjani can make decisions very easily."

Both Mehdi and Mohammed said that the reformers had made a big mistake in fighting Rafsanjani and trying to discredit him and that as a result, the country had lost eight years. If elected, Rafsanjani, they said, would return the focus to the economy and jobs. He understands, Mohammed Hashemi said, that Iran needs foreign markets and investment and must have peace and calm with the outside world in order to develop.

This theme is also being pushed by *Shargh* newspaper, a two-year-old quasi-reformist journal that has become Rafsanjani's organ in advancing his campaign. In an editorial January 25, it asserted that "Rafsanjani will stand against the new radicalism" of Khamenei's neoconservative proteges in the parliament and Tehran mayor's office. Following heavily boycotted elections, both bodies

are now dominated by Iraq war veterans from the Revolutionary Guards and are trying to attract support through populist economic measures and nationalistic support for the nuclear program.

"Rafsanjani is the most reformist figure in the modern history of Iran," *Shargh* asserted, and "the 2nd of Khordad (Khatami's election movement) was the child of Rafsanjani's government."

The Rafsanjani campaign is clearly hoping to peel off reformist support and there were indications, at least in February, that some influential Khatami supporters would back the former president as the lesser political evil.

Mohsen Kadivar, a reformist cleric who spent a year at Harvard, said that Rafsanjani "is better than the conservatives" and would provide more social freedom.

Nasser Hadian, a professor of political science at Tehran University who is also in the reformist camp, called Rafsanjani "an experienced captain in a time of turbulence." Iranians, Hadian predicted, would vote for Rafsanjani "not out of love for him but out of fear of the alternative."