



“Election of the Chair of Assembly of Experts in Iran”

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On March 10, 2015 Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi was elected as the new Chair of Iran’s Assembly of Experts, a very important constitutional body consisting of 86 senior clerics that is responsible for the election of the Supreme Leader of Iran. This election was conducted due to the passing away of the former Chair of the Assembly, Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi Kani, who died on October 21, 2014 at the age of 83 after prolonged illness. Kani was the Chair of the Assembly of Experts since March 2011, and he was preceded by Ayatollah Rafsanjani.

The election of Ayatollah Yazdi is surprising since his candidature was not talked about much in the Iranian politics. It was widely anticipated that the acting Chair of the Assembly, Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahrودي would retain the position. However, immediately before the election, Ayatollah Shahrودي withdrew his candidature, effectively leaving a direct contest between Ayatollah Yazdi and Ayatollah Rafsanjani. While the election of Ayatollah Yazdi has not only curtailed the ambitions of Ayatollah Rafsanjani, it is also seen as a clear defeat of the relatively moderate faction of Iran represented by Ayatollah Rafsanjani.

Indeed, Ayatollah Rafsanjani had shown his initial reluctance to contest the election of the Chair of the Assembly of Experts. He has argued that his responsibilities as the Chair of the Expediency Council did not leave him much time for additional responsibilities. However, he had also indicated that he would fight the elections if he did not find the contestants suitable for the position. Consequently, the election turned out to be a close contest one between Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, who had served in Iran's Judiciary during 1989 and 1999 and is currently a member of the Guardian Council, and Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who is the current Chair of Iran's Expediency Council. In this election, Ayatollah Yazdi got 47 out of 73 votes while Ayatollah Rafsanjani got 24 votes.

Like many other members of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Yazdi is also considered a hard-liner. The Guardian Council is arguably the most important conservative body of the Iranian political system which is responsible for vetting the candidates during Iran's parliament and presidential elections. The body also supervises these elections and scrutinises the bills passed by the Iranian parliament to see if these confirm with the Islamic principles.

On the other hand, Ayatollah Rafsanjani is relatively moderate. He had previously held the Chair of the Assembly of Experts. However, in recent years, he seems to have fallen out of favour of the conservatives as indicated during the previous presidential elections in 2013, when he was disqualified to contest the elections by the Guardian Council.

Members of the Assembly of Experts are directly elected by the Iranian electorate for an eight-year term. The body is tasked with electing and overseeing the activities of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, and also has the power to dismiss the Supreme Leader if he did not conduct and discharge his duties according to the Islamic principles. However, this has never happened in the history of the Islamic Republic and only once the body has elected the Supreme Leader, in 1989, after the death of Iran's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Although the Assembly does not intervene in the daily activities of the Islamic Republic, its responsibility to elect the new Supreme Leader makes it an extremely powerful constitutional institution in Iran.

In 1985 the Assembly of Experts had chosen Ayatollah Montazeri as the successor to the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. However, the two leaders developed serious differences on various issues leading to the decision of Ayatollah Khomeini to dismiss Ayatollah Montazeri from the designated position in 1989. Since the dismissal of Ayatollah Montazeri, it has become a taboo in Iran to discuss the successor of the Supreme Leader during his lifetime. Nevertheless, the internal contest for the position amongst the ruling elite of the Iranian political system cannot be entirely ruled out.

Ayatollah Yazdi is already 84 years old and he would remain the Chair of the Assembly of Experts until February 2016, when the elections for the 86 members of the Assembly would coincide with the elections of the Iranian parliament. The election of the Chair of Iran's Assembly of Experts is significant on two counts. Ayatollah Yazdi has been elected to this prominent position during a time when Iran nuclear negotiations is at a critical stage. Secondly, the significance of this election also lies in the fact that it comes at a time when there are high speculations on the health of the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei who has recently undergone prostate surgery. Amidst this scenario, the election of a hard-liner Ayatollah Yazdi may be indicative of the likely face of the new leadership in Iran.

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