



Spotlight on Iran



May 19, 2013—Ordibehesht 29, 1392
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Politics and modesty: the debate on Rafsanjani's Mercedes

The launch of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidential bid has his political opponents stepping up their efforts to paint him as a corrupt politician, being part of a campaign to undermine his legitimacy in the eyes of the public.

The debate on Rafsanjani's lifestyle has intensified in the past several days following a statement made by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, secretary of the Guardian Council, during his latest Friday sermon in Tehran. Clearly alluding to Rafsanjani, the top cleric said that anyone who drives a Mercedes Benz cannot empathize with the hardships faced by the Iranian people.

Jannati's statement drew strong reactions from Rafsanjani's supporters in the political establishment, who claimed that the secretary of the Guardian Council had taken advantage of his sermon to slam Rafsanjani using demagogic rhetoric. Media affiliated with the Rafsanjani camp also rallied to his defense, saying that in these days political experience is more important than a modest lifestyle.

Rafsanjani's political opponents are using his public image as a corrupt politician in their campaign to undermine his legitimacy, cashing in on the negative connotations that consumer culture and luxury usually have in Iran's Islamic and revolutionary discourse.

However, it remains to be seen how much public support this campaign can gain in the current presidential elections. It is not inconceivable that, given the failures of Ahmadinejad ("the modest president") and his government in the past eight years and the severe economic crisis, the people of Iran will prefer to support the candidacy of Rafsanjani, who despite being widely perceived as a corrupt politician is also thought of as a man with the experience and executive skill to rescue the country from its misfortunes.

Rafsanjani's Mercedes vs. Jalili's Kia

The launch of Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's presidential bid has reopened the public debate in Iran on the public image of the former president and chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council as a corrupt politician. As soon as his candidacy was registered on May 11, Rafsanjani's political opponents wasted no time posting photographs of his blue Mercedes Benz limousine, in which he arrived at the Ministry of Interior to register for the elections. At the same time, the supporters of Supreme National Security Council Secretary Sa'id Jalili, who is running for the Steadfast Front, posted a photograph showing him arriving at the Ministry of Interior in a Kia Pride.



Source: <http://jamnews.ir/detail/News/180324>

News websites affiliated with the radical right wing of the conservative camp put up both photographs side by side with the following title: "The difference between Sa'id Jalili's car and Hashemi Rafsanjani's".

"Anyone who drives a Mercedes Benz can't understand the suffering of the citizens"

The debate on Rafsanjani's lifestyle has intensified in the past several days following a statement made by Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, Tehran's Friday prayer leader and secretary of the Guardian Council, during a sermon he delivered this past Friday, May 17. Without actually mentioning Rafsanjani's name, the top cleric said that the president of Iran needs to lead a modest lifestyle and be content with simple clothing, a simple house, and a simple car. One who talks about a modest lifestyle but drives a Mercedes Benz can't understand the daily suffering of the citizens and the meaning of hunger, Jannati said (<http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/107578>). In addition to the report on Jannati's remarks, the Parsine website posted an article that goes into extensive

detail about the luxury and convenience items with which Rafsanjani's car is equipped (<http://www.parsine.com/fa/news/108140>).

It wasn't long before Jannati's remarks drew strong reactions from Rafsanjani's supporters in the political establishment and the media. Ali Motahari, a Majles member and one of President Ahmadinejad's strongest political rivals in the conservative camp, said he does not believe that the Peugeot which Jannati drives is cheaper than Rafsanjani's car. Speaking at a press conference that he convened, Motahari said that Jannati's remarks were "unreasonable and demagogic", arguing that the type of vehicle which top Iranian officials drive is decided by their security detail, and that the Mercedes Benz cars used by some of the officials are twenty to thirty years old.

Motahari noted that, if Jannati's intention was to bring up the issue of the car which Rafsanjani drives to justify his disqualification by the Guardian Council, doing so during the Friday sermon wasn't appropriate. He added that there are many conservatives who support Rafsanjani's bid for president, and that it is incorrect to identify him with the reformist faction (<http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/92022818845>).



Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati

Seyyed Reza Akrami, member of the Tehran Combatant Clergy Association, also criticized Jannati's remarks. In an interview given to the Fararu website, the cleric said that Jannati needs to use his Friday sermons to encourage greater voter participation in the elections instead of dealing with issues that have to do with the screening of candidates, particularly when the Guardian Council is in the midst of the screening

process. He noted that even though Jannati is the secretary of the council, he is not allowed to make statements that do not reflect the views of the other council members. Akrami said that, in his sermon, Jannati could have discussed the article in the constitution that specifies the criteria for the approval of presidential candidates, but he should not have gone into such “superficial and minor” issues as the candidates’ lifestyle or the kind of car they drive. “His Honor will pardon me if I ask whether he has never driven a Mercedes Benz in the past 35 years,” Akrami said, and wondered why Jannati did not mention other candidates who, too, lead an opulent lifestyle (<http://fararu.com/fa/news/150150>).

Media affiliated with Rafsanjani’s supporters and the reformist faction also strongly condemned Jannati and rallied to Rafsanjani’s defense. The Asr-e Khabar website had reservations about the radical approach taken in Iran towards a modest lifestyle for politicians, and spoke out against the argument that a modest lifestyle should be considered an advantage for top regime officials.

The website said that, while a modest lifestyle is considered a positive value in Islam, particularly in its Shi’ite denomination, and was greatly emphasized after the Islamic revolution, in recent years it has been used as a demagogic tool for political purposes. According to the website, a modest lifestyle can be an important condition for politicians, but surely it is not sufficient in itself. Political experience is much more important than a modest lifestyle, particularly these days. In a reference to the failed economic performance of President Ahmadinejad, who during the previous presidential election campaigns portrayed himself as a person leading a simple, modest life, the website said that even modest politicians can spend billions of dollars from the state treasury in one ill-considered decision.

A modest lifestyle is not necessarily an indication of executive weakness, Asr-e Khabar said, but the state officials should know that they need to uphold minimal standards and, for example, avoid living in a place where they can be easily targeted. Likewise, using simple cars is not necessarily a good thing, since a simple and cheap car can be one that is not safe, which may turn into a safety risk and undermine the interests of the state.

In a time when the economy is at the top spot of the national priority list, the voters’ primary concern should be which candidate has more experience, and which has a detailed, cohesive program to improve the social situation—the candidates’ real or

imagined lifestyle is beside the point, the website concluded (<http://asrkhabar.com/fa/news/19209>).

The Ayande website also condemned the remarks made by Jannati, and wondered which candidate is better and should be considered a greater supporter of those in need: one who drives an old Mercedes Benz but has the ability and desire to properly manage state affairs and solve the problems faced by the citizens, or one who prefers driving an old car but has ten Mercedes Benz cars following behind, and who is also involved in smuggling luxury cars into Iran and handing them out to his allies in what is an abuse of the economic sanctions regime (<http://www.ayandeneews.com/?a=content.id&id=115>).



Sa'id Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council

In response to Jannati's remarks, the reformist daily Qanun posted a list of the cars driven by the main candidates who have registered for the elections:

Mohammad Hassan Abu-Torabi	Deputy Majles speaker	Peugeot Pars
Davood Ahmadinejad	Former president's office chief	Peugeot GLX
Ebrahim Esgharzadeh	Former Majles member	Nissan Qashqai
Mohammad Reza Bahonar	Deputy Majles speaker	Peugeot Pars
Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel	Majles member	Samand
Eshaq Jahangiri	Former minister of industry	Renault Megane
Sa'id Jalili	Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council	Kia Pride
Mohsen Reza'i	Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council	Citroen Xantia
Hassan Rowhani	Member of the Expediency Discernment Council	BMW 720
Ali-Reza Zakani	Majles member	Peugeot Pars
Hassan Sobhani	Former Majles member	Peugeot 206
Mohammad Sa'idinia	Former minister of housing	Peugeot GLX
Mohammad Shariatmadari	Former minister of commerce	Peugeot Pars GLX
Mohammad Reza Aref	Former vice president	Citroen Xantia
Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf	Mayor of Tehran	Peugeot
Mostafa Kavakebian	Former Majles member	Peugeot Pars
Kamran Baqeri Lankarani	Former minister of health	Tender 90
Esfandiar Rahim	President Ahmadinejad's former	Government cars

Masha'i	office chief	
Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani	Chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council	1992 Mercedes Benz
Ali-Akbar Velayati	Former minister of foreign affairs	Peugeot Pars

Source: <http://alef.ir/vdcb8zb8grhbwzp.uiur.html?187710>

A number of websites and blogs launched personal attacks on Jannati. The reformist website Kaleme posted a comment sent in by one of its readers, who shared his memories from the city of Qom in the first years after the Islamic revolution. The best car used in the city at that time was an Iranian Paykan, while most of the city residents rode bicycles or motorcycles. One day the people of Qom were astonished to see a luxury Mercedes Benz with government license plates driving the city streets. Inside was no other than Guardian Council Secretary Ayatollah Jannati. This story, according to Kaleme, is evidence of Jannati's hypocrisy (<http://www.kaleme.com/1392/02/28/klm-144120>).

Jannati's remarks also generated a great deal of interest on social networks. One blogger posted a mocking comment saying that the reason why the president of Iran can't drive a Mercedes Benz is that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei prefers to drive a BMW over a Mercedes Benz (<http://yarro.blogspot.com/2013/05/blog-post.html>).



Meanwhile, Rafsanjani's brother Mohammad Hashemi clarified earlier this week that the bulletproof car which his brother drives has been used by his security detail for nearly 30 years. According to Hashemi, the type of the car is decided by security personnel to meet security requirements, and it is owned not by Rafsanjani himself but rather by the government or the Revolutionary Guards (<http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/274237>).

Modest lifestyle as a value in the Iranian revolutionary discourse

The preoccupation with the kind of car that Rafsanjani drives is part of a campaign led by his political opponents to undermine his legitimacy ahead of the elections. This campaign is based on his problematic image as a corrupt politician and on the negative connotations that consumer culture and luxury usually have in Iran's Islamic and revolutionary discourse. During his years as president (1989-1997), Rafsanjani played a major part in changing Iran's consumption values in the aftermath of the war against Iraq. While some of the religious leaders, including Khamenei, continued to depict consumer culture as a contradiction to the values of the revolution and stressed the need for a modest lifestyle, Rafsanjani was an advocate of changing the prevailing attitude towards consumer culture and objected to the idea that Iranians should lead a Spartan lifestyle. This was all part of the economic reforms and economic openness he hoped to achieve.

In the past several years, the sanctions regime and the economic crisis have prompted some circles in the religious establishment and the conservative right to once again step up their criticism of consumer culture and lavish lifestyle. The conservative media launched a public information campaign to curtail the Western culture of consumption that spread across Iran, particularly among the middle and high classes.

At the same time, the Supreme Leader's supporters continued emphasizing modest lifestyle as an important value for top regime officials, and even attempted to boost Khamenei's image as a modest leader as part of the efforts to aggrandize him. For example, on February 19, 2012, Fars News Agency issued a report on the Supreme Leader's flight habits. The report was based on the recollections of one of the pilots who accompany the Supreme Leader on his flights across Iran and was intended to testify to his modesty and simple lifestyle. Among other things, the pilot said that the Supreme Leader usually takes "regular" flights with common people, insists that they should not be prevented from approaching him during a flight, and refuses to receive special treatment compared to other passengers. For instance, Khamenei refused a

plate of fruit that he was given during one of his flights since the other passengers on the plane did not receive fruit with their meal.



Can the campaign to discredit Rafsanjani work this time?

The efforts made by Rafsanjani's rivals to portray him as a corrupt and indulgent politician will likely continue and even escalate, particularly if his candidacy is approved by the Guardian Council this week. However, it remains to be seen how much public support these efforts can gain in the current presidential elections.

In a press interview given this weekend by Professor Sadegh Zibakalam of Tehran University, the top political commentator said it was his belief that the attempts to spoil Rafsanjani's chances of re-election using the moral and economic corruption card will not work this time. Zibakalam, who is considered one of Rafsanjani's allies, said that in the 2005 elections, in which Rafsanjani was defeated by Ahmadinejad, his political rivals launched an extensive campaign with the aim of portraying him as a symbol of extravagance and of personal and family corruption compared to his simple, modest opponent. These attempts did not stop 10 million Iranians from voting for him, and his rivals' chances of hurting his public status in the current election campaign are even smaller given the failed performance of Ahmadinejad's government in the past eight years (<http://masihalinejad.com/?p=6163>).

In light of this assessment, the Iranian public is currently interested in electing a president with a proven track record, one who can successfully deal with the economic crisis. It is not inconceivable that, given the failures of the government and the severe

economic crisis facing Iran, the people will prefer to vote for a candidate who, despite being widely perceived as a corrupt politician, is also thought of as a man with the experience and executive skill to rescue the country from its misfortunes.

