



## Spotlight on Iran



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### The rise and fall of radical cleric Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi

Since the Iranian presidential election, Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, considered the radical right-winger of the conservative religious establishment, has come under growing criticism from top figures in the religious establishment, the political system, and the conservative media. The criticism revolves around the support he offered in the past to President Ahmadinejad, his support for the Steadfast Front candidates in the recent election (first Kamran Baqeri Lankarani and then Sa'id Jalili, after the former withdrew from the presidential race), and his radical views.

In recent years, and all the more so in the wake of the 2009 political crisis, Mesbah-Yazdi has greatly increased his political influence. However, Ahmadinejad's siding with the "deviant faction" and the growing differences of opinion in the conservative right have led to Mesbah-Yazdi being increasingly criticized. The criticism directed at the top cleric has reached its peak as the conservatives are trading accusations after their failure in the election.

The erosion of Mesbah-Yazdi's status may be temporary and it is quite implausible that he will lose all of his political and religious influence. It may, however, undermine his ability to play a central, influential role in future political struggles, particularly the succession struggle that will likely emerge after the death of the current Supreme Leader.

In a recent interview given by Hojjat-ol-Eslam Hossein Ebrahimi, member of the conservative Militant Clergy Association, to Arya News, the cleric said that the political conduct of top cleric Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi during the Iranian presidential election had a lot to do with the failure of the conservative faction in the election. By initially supporting Steadfast Front candidate Kamran Baqeri Lankarani and then shifting his support to Sa'id Jalili after Lankarani's withdrawal from the presidential race, Mesbah-Yazdi weakened the conservative faction, Ebrahimi said (<http://www.aryanews.com/News.aspx?code=20130705143346077&svc=22>).

Several days prior to that, Ahmad Karimi Esfahani, the head of Tehran's bazaar unions, accused Mesbah-Yazdi of creating differences of opinion among the clerics during the presidential election campaign. In an interview to ILNA News Agency, Esfahani said that the top cleric must put an end to his disagreements with the other top clerics (<http://ilna.ir/news/news.cfm?id=83106>).

### **Mesbah-Yazdi: the radical right winger of Iran's religious establishment**

Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, born 1934, is considered the radical right winger of Iran's religious establishment and the most characteristic representative of the "absolute rule of the jurisprudent" (Velayat-e Motlaq-e Faqih), which considers the authority of the Supreme Leader to be divine, indisputable, and not subject to the elected institutions of the Islamic republic. According to this view, state laws and the decisions of the state's elected institutions have no legitimacy unless they coincide with the positions of the Supreme Leader, the earthly representative of the Vanished Imam.

Mesbah-Yazdi is thought of as the most prominent spokesman of that group in the conservative establishment that categorically rules out democratic discourse, considering it as being fundamentally opposed to the idea of God's absolute sovereignty that is the basis for Islamic political thought. He rejects any view that suggests that the people have a role in legitimizing the government, and completely denies the idea that an Islamic government needs the people's mandate. Whereas in democracy the citizens can change the law through elections and the parliament, the law in Islam is established by God, making it eternal and immutable. Furthermore, the liberal view gives priority to personal interests over the good of the community and asserts that the laws of religion may be abolished if the people are so inclined, which is

completely opposed to the religious view. In Islam, on the other hand, a person has no right to think independently about anything, since the law governs all aspects of life.<sup>1</sup>



### Changes in Mesbah-Yazdi's political influence

Mesbah-Yazdi's political influence grew stronger after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad became president of Iran. The election of Ahmadinejad, considered Mesbah-Yazdi's spiritual protégé, for president in June 2005 was perceived as an expression of growing commitment to the implementation of Islamic revolutionary ideology. Following Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's defeat in the 2005 election and the ousting of the reformist camp from the political scene after eight years of Muhammad Khatami's presidency, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei became increasingly dependent on Mesbah-Yazdi's brand of radical right-wing conservatism and on the Revolutionary Guards.

Even though Mesbah-Yazdi and his allies entrenched their hold on the political system and the conservative media, the traditional conservative faction was still able to maintain its political status. Some commentators speculated ahead of the Assembly of Experts election on December 15, 2006 that the supporters of Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi would attempt to take over the assembly as well so that they could

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<sup>1</sup> In this context, see Meir Litvak, "The rule of jurisprudent and the struggle for democracy: the religious discourse in Iran" (Hebrew), in David Menashri and Liora Hendelman-Baavur (Eds.), *Iran – Anatomy of Revolution* (Tel-Aviv, 2009), pp. 47-75.

restrict Khamenei's power and, in due course, have a say in the appointment of his heir. When the election results were made public, it became clear that the traditional conservative faction was able to maintain its hold on the assembly. Rafsanjani, who had lost to Ahmadinejad in the 2005 election, won the first spot in the Assembly of Experts election in Tehran. While Mesbah-Yazdi won a seat as well, the supporters of the traditional conservative faction proved that they were able to maintain their status vis-à-vis their political opponents in the conservative camp and the radical right.

The political crisis that hit Iran in the summer of 2009 made the Supreme Leader even more dependent on the radical right. Mesbah-Yazdi took that opportunity to entrench his status while putting an emphasis on his support for Khamenei. He referred to the Supreme Leader as "Imam" and praised his rare, unique qualities.

And yet, President Ahmadinejad's association with the "deviant faction" and his ongoing, unconditional support for his controversial office chief Rahim Masha'i forced Mesbah-Yazdi to remove his support for the president. On several occasions these past two years the top cleric has strongly criticized the "deviant faction" and expressed reservations about Ahmadinejad's constant siding with Masha'i. Mesbah-Yazdi warned about the intention of the "deviant faction" to take over the presidency in the 2013 election and about its increasing influence on society, which, he said, was a threat to Islam, the regime, and the achievements of the revolution.

Prior to the March 2012 Majles election, Mesbah-Yazdi orchestrated the establishment of the Steadfast Front (Jebhe-ye Paydari). Affiliated with the radical right of the conservative camp, the front was able to make substantial accomplishments in the election and put several dozens of its members into the Majles; however, control of the legislative branch remained in the hands of those Majles members affiliated with the centrist faction of the conservative camp, who ran on the United Osulgarayan Front ballot.

Mesbah-Yazdi's growing political involvement, his initial support for Ahmadinejad, and his siding with the Steadfast Front resulted in him being increasingly criticized by the political system and the religious establishment. As the date of the Iranian presidential election approached, differences of opinion arose between Mesbah-Yazdi and elements in the Steadfast Front. In September 2012 the Iranian media reported that the "Qom faction", affiliated with the top cleric's supporters, and the Steadfast Front's "Tehran faction" were at odds in the wake of a heated debate on the front's position

with regard to a presidential candidate to run on its behalf (<http://www.digarban.com/node/8933>).

The differences of opinion further escalated during the presidential campaign itself. While Mesbah-Yazdi publicly expressed support for Lankarani's candidacy and said that there was no worthier candidate "on earth and under the sky", most Steadfast Front members supported the candidacy of Sa'id Jalili, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. It was only after Lankarani, pressured by most members of the front, announced that he was quitting the presidential race that Mesbah-Yazdi was forced to shift his support to Jalili (<http://alef.ir/vdcd5j0fzyt0jx6.2a2y.html?188270>).

In May 2013 a group of students from the religious seminary in Qom released a public letter sent to Mesbah-Yazdi criticizing his political conduct in the past several years. The religion students expressed reservations about his support for Ahmadinejad, his statements about the president and his government enjoying the support of the Vanished Imam, and his support for the Steadfast Front. The religion students also called on Mesbah-Yazdi to stop his involvement in day-to-day political issues (<http://irangreenvoice.com/article/2013/may/15/33958>).



**Mesbah-Yazdi and Sa'id Jalili**

### **Score-settling with Mesbah-Yazdi in the aftermath of the 2013 election**

After Hassan Rowhani's victory in the presidential election, the conservatives began accusing each other of responsibility for their failure. These recriminations soon led to fingers being pointed at Mesbah-Yazdi. Jomhuri-ye Eslami, a daily affiliated with Ali-

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, has recently published a particularly strong-worded editorial which made an unprecedented personal attack on the top cleric. The author of the article accused Mesbah-Yazdi of radicalism and argued that his conduct and remarks in the past several years have deepened the schism in Iranian society. According to the article, the election results show that the vast majority of the Iranian public rejects his radical way and advocates moderation.

The author of the article argued that the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, headed by Mesbah-Yazdi, encourages ideas aligned with radical views that were firmly rejected by the founder of the Islamic revolution at the time. The article also said that Mesbah-Yazdi's stance in favor of the "absolute rule of the jurispudent" goes against the Iranian constitution and Khomeini's position.

Jomhuri-ye Eslami also questioned Mesbah-Yazdi's commitment to the war effort during the Iran-Iraq War. According to the daily, the top cleric had no involvement whatsoever in the eight-year war, did not send his children or students to the front line, did not support the fighters, and did not go to the front even once to cheer up the fighters. The daily also criticized Mesbah-Yazdi's support for Ahmadinejad and his controversial statements on the Vanished Imam's support for the outgoing government (<http://www.jomhourieslami.com/1392/13920401>).

The article prompted a detailed response from one of Mesbah-Yazdi's students, Hojjat-ol-Eslam Ahmad Abu-Tourabi. It was posted on Raja News, a website affiliated with the radical right of the conservative camp. The top cleric's student categorically denied the claims and allegations brought up by Jomhuri-ye Eslami, saying they are part of an all-out campaign waged in recent years by bodies with ties to the CIA against Mesbah-Yazdi, who has been identified by U.S. intelligence as a considerable threat to Western culture.

Abu-Tourabi had praise for his teacher's contribution to the Islamic revolution before and after it took place, and for his fight against the revolution's enemies. He categorically denied the claims about Mesbah-Yazdi being radical, saying that his position is in perfect agreement with the position of the regime and the views of the founder of the revolution. He noted that the institution headed by Mesbah-Yazdi works for education in accordance with the values of Islam and the principles of "rule of the jurispudent", and that the only "crime" of which Mesbah-Yazdi and his students are guilty is not believing that their sole objective is to teach lessons, discuss religious law, and engage in personal religious practice—instead, they seek to manifest their

involvement in other areas, including the political scene, as part of their struggle against the enemies of the regime and the revolution.

Speaking about the claims of Mesbah-Yazdi's alleged non-involvement in the Iran-Iraq War, Abu Tourabi said that his teacher contributed greatly to the war—by donating some of his book revenues, by sending students to the front (some of whom were even killed in the war), and by making numerous off-camera visits to the front line.

In response to the claim about Mesbah-Yazdi's support for Ahmadinejad, Abu Tourabi said that the top cleric supported Ahmadinejad based on the views he held early in his tenure, and that he cannot be faulted for his decision to support the president simply because of the fact that the president strayed from his path during his term. Prophet Muhammad, too, supported those who would later stray from his path, and the Supreme Leader previously supported politicians who would go on to take part in the October 2009 riots, the article said (<http://www.rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=161419>).



The Alef website also criticized Mesbah-Yazdi and his positions during the presidential campaign. The website, affiliated with Majles member Ahmad Tavakoli, one of President Ahmadinejad's political opponents in the conservative camp, argued that just a few months prior to the election, Mesbah-Yazdi said at a meeting with Mohammad-Nabi Habibi, secretary-general of the conservative Islamic Coalition Party, that if the reformists took part in the election, the conservatives needed to reach an agreement on one candidate to represent them all. It is therefore unclear why he refused to support the candidate that had the support of the majority of conservative clerics and did not instruct his supporters in the Steadfast Front to reach an agreement even when

it was clear that the reformists were, in fact, going to take part in the election and that Sa'id Jalili had no chance of winning it (<http://alef.ir/vdcjhvevvuqehvz.fsfu.html?191191>

The religious establishment has also stepped up its criticism of Mesbahi-Yazdi in recent days. Last week the criticism was joined by top cleric Mohammad Yazdi, head of the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers. Yazdi accused Mesbah-Yazdi of responsibility for the divide between the clerics during the presidential campaign.

In an interview to Mehr News Agency, Yazdi described his attempts to get the top clerics to agree on a single conservative candidate ahead of the election. He noted that, on the eve of the election, he had a meeting with Mesbah-Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi-Kani, chairman of the Assembly of Experts and secretary of the Combatant Clergy Association, in an attempt to reach a common ground prior to the election. While the meeting ended on a positive note, Mohammad Yazdi said, just three days later Mesbah-Yazdi announced his public support for Lankarani even though it wasn't clear whether his candidacy would be approved by the Guardian Council. Yazdi added that the Combatant Clergy Association and the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers worked together for months in an effort to reach an agreement before the election; however, Mesbahi-Yazdi derailed those efforts by supporting first Lankarani and then Jalili, taking advantage of his influence among some of the clerics to prevent an agreement from being reached. Yazdi had praise for Mesbahi-Yazdi's religious, academic, and moral abilities, but said that he is greatly to blame for the divide between the top clerics that led, according to him, to the conservatives' defeat in the election (<http://www.mehrnews.com/detail/News/2087992>).

Criticism against Mesbahi-Yazdi is also starting to be heard from his former students. The Shebke-ye Iran website reported last week that, in a press interview, Hojjat-ol-Eslam Mohsen Gharavian spoke about the radicalization undergone in recent years by the educational institution that Mesbah-Yazdi heads.

Gharavian, a former student of Mesbah-Yazdi whose views have grown more moderate in the past several years, said in an interview to the weekly Nasim-e Bidari that he had to leave the educational institution when it became engaged in political persecution of anyone who did not share Mesbah-Yazdi's radical political views, such as Rafsanjani. According to Gharavian, Mesbah-Yazdi has turned from an academic personality to a political personality.

Gharavian's remarks drew anger from some of Mesbah-Yazdi's students, mainly Hojjat-ol-Eslam Qasem Ravanbakhsh, the editor-in-chief of the weekly Parto Sokhan. Ravanbakhsh, affiliated with the Ammar Headquarters, a think tank established in early 2011 on the initiative of regime supporters affiliated with the radical right of the conservative camp, said that Gharavian's remarks were "immoral" and "completely groundless". He argued that in recent years Gharavian has adopted views that fall in line with those held by the reformist faction and threatened to expose documents pertaining to the circumstances of Gharavian's retirement from the educational institution (<http://www.inn.ir/NSite/FullStory/News/?Serv=0&Id=157608&Rate=0>).

Following the media storm sparked by the press interview, Gharavian claimed that his statement was taken out of context and exploited by a number of "anti-revolutionary" websites, and that he still respects Mesbah-Yazdi. He said that his sole intention in the interview was to criticize the immoral behavior of several political radicals. He stressed, however, that Ravanbakhsh had no right to speak on behalf of the Khomeini Educational Institution, and that his remarks represented his own personal opinion. Speaking about the threat made by Ravanbakhsh to expose documents that could incriminate him, Gharavian said that the institution is not a defense-related body that keeps personal documents on file ([http://www.ghanoondaily.ir/?News\\_Id=18334](http://www.ghanoondaily.ir/?News_Id=18334)).

### **Temporary erosion of status or loss of influence?**

The growing criticism against Mesbah-Yazdi in the religious establishment, the political system, and the conservative media is an indication that his political status has eroded. Having lost his influence in the president's office, he may lose even further influence within the political system and the conservative media to the benefit of the centrist faction of the conservative camp.

It is not inconceivable that, similarly to other processes undergone by the Iranian political system since the Islamic revolution, the apparent erosion of Mesbah-Yazdi's and his supporters' status in the radical right is only temporary—at any rate, it is unlikely that he will lose altogether his influence in the religious establishment and the political system. However, the damage done to the radical cleric's status may undermine his ability to fulfill a major, influential role in future political struggles, particularly the one that will likely emerge for the succession of the current Supreme Leader.



Photo : Mohammad reza Dehdari

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