

Middle East Report by Thierry Lalevée

Iran has new faces, same policy

"Radicals" running two key ministries have been replaced by men who don't look much different.

The Aug. 20 announcement of Iran's new government under its new President, Ali Akhbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, is being hailed by many in the West as a great victory for the "moderate" mullahs. But even a peek into the intricacies of Iranian internal politics shows that this is more wishful thinking than reality.

The appointment of the new government came in the wake of a difficult constitutional crisis, whereby Rafsanjani has to be sworn in at least twice before he could become the actual President. He was first sworn in on July 28 by Iran's new "Guide of the Revolution" Ali Khamenei, as the last electoral results were still coming in confirming his victory against non-existent rivals. But voices were then raised over the validity of this procedure, since Khamenei technically was still President until October. An Assembly of Experts had to convene in order to confirm Rafsanjani's effective powers as of August 1989. They also used the occasion to reconfirm Khamenei's role as Guide of the Revolution at a time where the authenticity of Ruhollah Khomeini's letter designating Khamenei as his successor, was being questioned.

Hence, what many in the West expected to be a smooth transition of power from an Iranian Islamic regime led by fundamentalist maniac Ruhollah Khomeini to a more pro-Western and moderate regime led by "pragmatist" Rafsanjani, had a bad start. To encourage Rafsanjani, the West, especially the United States, made it clear that—aside from the question of the hostages—only a few things stood in the way of normalizing Iranian re-

lations with the West, namely, the "radicals" in control of key ministries, such as Interior Minister Ali Akbar Mohtashemi and Security Minister Mohammedi Reyshahri. Should they be dismissed, the Western powers broadly hinted—the move would be understood both as a serious goodwill gesture from the side of the new Iranian regime, as well as confirmation that this regime has developed its own power base. In brief, it would be safe to deal with Iran again.

And indeed, Iran met those demands on Aug. 20 when these two ministers were dropped. Moreover, the fact that most of the members of the new government are primarily technocrats with little past history of political activism, has been read as additional signs of Iranian "moderation." Many political commentators are expressing the hope that the new Economic and Finance Minister, Dr. Mohsen Nourbakhsh, formerly at Iran's Central Bank, will reopen Iran to foreign international borrowing.

But a more precise look at the new government reveals a very different picture. True, most are technocrats with no political past, and especially no previous activities in any of the policymaking bodies of the regime. But they are also the kind of people whom Rafsanjani can order around at his own whim. There is scarcely any information about the two replacements of the radical ministers Mohtashemi and Reyshahri.

Replacing Mohtashemi is Sheikh Abdullah Nuri, now known as "Hojatoleslam" Abdullah Nuri. Both of these are religious titles; but Nuri has never followed any religious studies,

and suddenly became a religious "sheikh" in 1979. Nuri is known to be an activist. According to biographical material gathered from a special investigation, he was trained in Lebanon in the late 1960s, and was involved in guerrilla activities within Iran in the mid-1970s.

In 1979, Nuri became one of the associates of Defense Minister Mostafa Shemran in the creation of the Pasdarans, Khomeini's Revolutionary Guards. When Shemran died during the early stages of the Iran-Iraq war, Nuri joined with Mohammed "Ringo" Montazeri, the crazy son of the Ayatollah, in joint operations in Lebanon. After the death of the elder Montazeri in the bombing of the headquarters of the Islamic Republican Party in 1981, Nuri joined Khomeini's staff, where he started working with the Ayatollah's son Ahmed Khomeini.

After several years of work within the Iranian intelligence services, Nuri was appointed by Khomeini as his special representative at the leadership of the Pasdarans last October 1988, as a ploy to undercut Rafsanjani's power then as acting commander-in-chief. Nuri's power was then confirmed in April when he also became a member of the Assembly of Experts.

Replacing Reyshahri is Ali Fallahian. He is even less known than Nuri, and no complete biography is available, except for the fact that he spent the past few years at the leadership of the Iranian intelligence service Savama under Reyshahri. Yet, Fallahian, like Nuri, is a member of the faction of the Association of the Fighting Clergy, which worked with Mohtashemi.

Thus, Nuri and Fallahian's appointments indicate that the balance of power among the major factions fighting for full power, has not been dramatically altered.