



Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (left) during a meeting with several senior officials in attendance

Khamenei Sets The Scene For Raisi's Chairmanship In Key Assembly

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Less than two weeks before elections in Iran, 35 of the 88 members have decided not to run for the Assembly of Experts, which is tasked to select the next Supreme Leader.

Lotfollah Dejakam, the Friday prayers Imam of Shiraz has said that the 35 men have realized that they are too old for the Assembly's membership and that they have decided to leave the task to younger clerics.

The AoE has always been a predominantly elder's assembly and photos from the previous and current rounds of the assembly show elderly clerics dozing off during meetings.

Although in the Iranian press the Majles (parliament) elections is in the spotlight, the Assembly of experts election which will be held on the same date, March 1, is the one which is more important as its results affect the fate of succession and post-Khamenei Iran.

On Wednesday, **Mohammad Emami Kashani, a 92-year-old senior cleric** of the Assembly was said to have been disqualified from running. But reports on Thursday said that Emami Kashani has withdrawn his candidacy because of his medical conditions.



Mohammed Emami-Kashani, a member of Assembly of Experts for Constitution of Iran

Earlier, Ahmad Jannati, the oldest member of the Assembly at 97 declared his withdrawal from the competition although he still retains his extremely significant post as the Secretary of election watchdog Guardian Council.

Mostafa Faghihi, the editor of centrist Entekhab news website had said that Jannati and others' withdrawal from the Assembly of Experts elections is part of a possible project to pave the way for President Ebrahim Raisi's chairmanship at the new round of the Assembly.

Other observers have also said the same about the withdrawal of dozens of senior clerics from the competition, stating that they would not want to have a relatively younger and definitely less educated cleric as their superior at the Assembly.

Still others believe the dynamics is being furthered by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who wants to be in control of the assembly's leadership. He is also said to prefer to have Raisi as the Chairman of the Assembly so that Raisi could become the next supreme leader or play a key part in naming Khamenei's son, Mojtaba as the successor.

According to a report published by Khabar Online website, hardline clerics in Tehran and Qom have reached an agreement about the list of 11 candidates for Tehran. The clerics in Qom and Tehran gave a list of 16 candidates each, but 5 of the candidates in each list are not on the other group's list. Still this partial agreement among conservatives is interesting as they have not been able to react to a consensus over their lists in the previous three rounds of the Assembly election.

All the 11 candidates shared by Tehran and Qom clerics are middle-aged mullahs previously trusted by Khamenei. They include former Intelligence Minister Ghorban Ali Dorri Najafabadi, Seminary Dean Alireza E'rafi, and Islamic Propaganda Office Chairman Mahmoud Mohammadi Araghi.

The five candidates exclusive to Tehran clerics' list are led by former hardliner prosecutor Ali Razini, but all the five on the Qom clerics' list are less known and relatively younger clerics.

Critics in Iran say that now, even without an election on March 1, the ideal scene is set for Khamenei's favorite clerics to enter the next Assembly of Experts under Raisi's chairmanship without any challenge when the time comes later this summer.

In the meantime, to save Raisi the embarrassment of being the only candidate in South Khorasan for the region's only seat at the Assembly, the Guardian Council endorsed a hitherto unknown cleric out of the blue to be the second candidate from the remote constituency. However, everyone in Iran knows how the rest of the process works to ensure that Raisi wins the competition if there is a competition at all. This process is what Iranian electioneers call engineering; something in between election rigging and grafting.

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