

Iran's top nuclear negotiator resigns

Contributed by AP
Saturday, 20 October 2007
Last Updated Saturday, 20 October 2007

The Iranian government announced Saturday that its top nuclear negotiator had resigned, a move seen as a victory for hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that could bring about an even tougher stance in ongoing talks.

Government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham, said Saeed Jalili, a little-known deputy foreign minister for European and American affairs, was to succeed Ali Larijani as lead negotiator effective immediately.

Larijani in many cases held a hardline view on the nuclear standoff between Iran and the West but was also considered to be a more moderate figure than Ahmadinejad within Iran's hardline camp. He was seen as more committed to a diplomatic solution over Iran's nuclear program while Ahmadinejad is seen as not favoring talks with the West.

Larijani's resignation was interpreted by many here as giving Ahmadinejad a free hand in dictating his views to the less experienced Jalili.

Elham did not give a specific reason for Larijani's resignation other than to say he wanted to focus on "other political activities."

"Larijani had resigned repeatedly. Finally, the president accepted his resignation," Elham told reporters.

The United States and some of its allies accuse Iran of secretly trying to develop nuclear weapons. Iran denies the claim, saying its program is for peaceful purposes including generating electricity.

Elham stressed that Iran's nuclear policy would not change because of Larijani's resignation.

"Iran's nuclear policies are stabilized and unchangeable. Managerial change won't bring any changes in (those) policies," Elham said.

Former U.S. ambassador to the U.N. John Bolton said Larijani's resignation was "a clear victory for Ahmadinejad" and shows that "the leadership is determined to continue with the nuclear program."

Bolton, who served as the Bush administration's point man on the Iran nuclear issue before becoming U.N. ambassador, said the conflict between Larijani and Ahmadinejad is "part of the larger struggle for power after (Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali) Khamenei dies."

"It's more about personalities and internal politics, but Ahmadinejad saw Larijani as someone with a different perspective on (nuclear) negotiations," Bolton told The Associated Press, suggesting Larijani was more moderate.

Elham said a meeting between the nuclear negotiator and the European Union foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, scheduled for Tuesday in Rome would still take place.

"Despite Larijani's resignation, meetings ... won't change. Larijani's successor will meet Solana instead," Elham said.

Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005 and appointed Larijani, a former Revolutionary Guards Corps commander and a close ally of Khamenei, to replace Hasan Rowhani, considered a moderate politician. Ahmadinejad had accused Rowhani and his team of technocrats as weak and giving too many concessions in nuclear talks with European nations.

After Larijani was appointed, Iran took a more defiant approach to its nuclear program. It resumed uranium enrichment activities, leading to its referral to the U.N. Security Council by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 2006. Iran's refusal to halt enrichment subsequently prompted a resolution by the U.N. Security Council imposing sanctions on Iran in December 2006 and another resolution widening the sanctions in March.

In 2006, Larijani rejected Western economic incentives in return for a suspension of Iran's nuclear activities, saying the Security Council "should not think that they can make us happy with candies."

However, differences between Larijani and Ahmadinejad were revealed earlier this year when Larijani became upset after the president contradicted him on whether Iran would attend a meeting in Egypt to discuss Iraq. Larijani traveled to

Baghdad in May to discuss Iran's conditions for attending the meeting but was upset after a reporter at the Baghdad airport said Ahmadinejad had already confirmed that Iran would attend.

Larijani's absence during Russian President Vladimir Putin's meeting with Khamenei, last week further raised eyebrows in Iran's political circles.

Before he was appointed, Larijani was the head of Iran's state-run radio and television network and was seen as one of the hard-liners' most effective weapon in curtailing former President Mohammad Khatami's reform program. At the time, Larijani used the official media as a weapon to suppress democratic reforms and prohibited the broadcast of information that might have been harmful to hardline clerics.

By ALI AKBAR DAREINI, Associated Press Writer, Saturday July 20, 2007, 0940AM EST

Associated Press writer George Jahn contributed to this report from Vienna, Austria.

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Top Iranian Negotiator Resigns,
Move Seen As Win For Ahmadinejad
Associated Press, WSJ
October 20, 2007 1:08 p.m.

TEHRAN, Iran -- The Iranian government announced Saturday that its top nuclear negotiator had resigned, a move seen as a victory for hardline President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad that could bring about an even tougher stance in ongoing talks. Government spokesman Gholam Hossein Elham, said effective immediately Saeed Jalili, a little-known deputy foreign minister for European and American affairs, was to succeed Ali Larijani as lead negotiator.

Mr. Larijani in many cases held a hardline view on the nuclear standoff between Iran and the West but was also considered to be a more moderate figure than Mr. Ahmadinejad within Iran's hardline camp. He was seen as more committed to a diplomatic solution over Iran's nuclear program while Mr. Ahmadinejad is seen as not favoring talks with the West. It was not clear whether Mr. Larijani left his post under pressure, but the resignation was interpreted by many here as giving Mr. Ahmadinejad a free hand in dictating his views to the less experienced Mr. Jalili. Mr. Elham did not give a specific reason for Larijani's resignation other than to say he wanted to focus on "other political activities." "Larijani had resigned repeatedly. Finally, the president accepted his resignation," Mr. Elham told reporters.

The U.S. and some of its allies accuse Iran of secretly trying to develop nuclear weapons. Iran denies the claim, saying its program is for peaceful purposes including generating electricity. The country has periodically raised alarms over the possibility of war, particularly when the West brings up talk of sanctions over Tehran's rejection of a U.N. Security Council demand that it halt uranium enrichment.

On Saturday, Gen. Mahmoud Chaharbaghi, the missile commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guards Corps, said the country was capable of firing 11,000 rockets into enemy bases within a minute of any attack. "Enemy bases and positions have been identified ... The Guards ground force will fire 11,000 rockets into identified enemy positions within the first minute of any aggression against the Iranian territory," the television quoted Gen. Chaharbaghi as saying. He didn't specifically identify the bases or the enemy and didn't refer to arch foes Israel or the U.S. by name. The U.S. has 40,000 troops on various U.S. bases in other Persian Gulf countries and 20,000 in Mideast waters. Another 160,000 U.S. troops are in neighboring Iraq and about 25,000 are in another one of Iran's neighbors, Afghanistan.

Mr. Elham stressed that Iran's nuclear policy would not change because of Mr. Larijani's resignation and he said the new negotiator would meet as scheduled with the European Union foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, on Tuesday in Rome. "Iran's nuclear policies are stabilized and unchangeable. Managerial change won't bring any changes in (those) policies," Mr. Elham said.

John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the U.N., said Mr. Larijani's resignation was "a clear victory for Ahmadinejad" and shows that "the leadership is determined to continue with the nuclear program." Mr. Bolton, who served as the Bush administration's point man on the Iran nuclear issue before becoming U.N. ambassador, said the conflict between Mr. Larijani and Mr. Ahmadinejad is "part of the larger struggle for power after (Iranian supreme leader Ayatollah Ali) Khamenei dies."

"It's more about personalities and internal politics, but Ahmadinejad saw Larijani as someone with a different perspective on (nuclear) negotiations," Mr. Bolton said, suggesting Mr. Larijani was more moderate.

Mr. Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005 and appointed Mr. Larijani, a former Revolutionary Guards Corps commander and a close ally of Mr. Khamenei, to replace Hasan Rowhani. Mr. Ahmadinejad had accused Mr. Rowhani and his team of technocrats as weak and giving too many concessions in nuclear talks with European nations. After Mr. Larijani was appointed, Iran took a more defiant approach to its nuclear program, drawing two sets of U.N. sanctions.

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