

Profile: Speaker of Iran's Parliament Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

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Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf

On May 28, 2020, Iran's parliament [elected](#) Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf as speaker. Ghalibaf takes over from Ali Larijani, who was the longest-serving speaker in the history of the Islamic Republic. Parliament's authority has eroded in recent years. The institution of a new gas policy in 2019, which circumvented the legislative chamber, is one such example. But the speaker remains relevant because he is a powerful political broker in the legislature and also holds seats on Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the Supreme Economic Coordination Council.

Ghalibaf leads the neoconservative faction in Iran's new parliament. A longtime fixture of the regime, Ghalibaf has a revolutionary and technocratic pedigree. Through the years, he has also alternated between branding himself as a pragmatic modernizer and a hardline authoritarian.

The Early Years in Iran's Armed State

[Born](#) in 1961 in Razavi Khorasan, Ghalibaf joined the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps \(IRGC\)](#) soon after the Islamic Revolution, and became one of its youngest commanders. He was [educated](#) at Tehran University and Tarbiat Modares University, where he eventually received a doctoral degree in political geography in 2001. It was during the Iran-Iraq War when he developed close ties with [Ali Khamenei](#), [Qassem Soleimani](#), [Esmail Ghaani](#), [Nour Ali Shoustari](#), and other future leaders of the IRGC. Ghalibaf was at one point the commander of the Fifth Nasr Division. As scholar Ali Alfoneh has [noted](#), Khamenei often visited the Fifth Nasr Division during the war. In fact, Ghaani served as Ghalibaf's [deputy](#), and was later his [successor](#) as the commander of the Fifth Nasr Division at the end of the war. These connections—particularly with Khamenei—would prove instrumental in his rise.

Ghalibaf's ascension to the top ranks of the regime coincided with Khamenei's ascension as supreme leader in 1989. He [became](#) deputy commander of the Basij, and went on to lead two organs of the IRGC. From 1994-97, he was the head of the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters during a period of rebuilding after the Iran-Iraq War. Later, Ghalibaf became the commander of the IRGC-Air Force from 1997-2000. During his tenure, Ghalibaf signed onto a [letter](#) in July 1999 alongside other IRGC commanders, warning then reformist President Mohammad Khatami over continuing student protests and pressuring him to stem the unrest.

After, Ghalibaf became Iran's chief of police, or the Law Enforcement Force of the Islamic Republic of Iran (LEF). While the LEF [nominally](#) reports to Iran's government through the Interior Ministry, Iran's supreme leader oversees its operations. Ghalibaf's selection was important as his predecessor Hedayat Lotfian was [ousted](#) following the student protests, and it was a signal of Khamenei's confidence in Ghalibaf to [professionalize](#) the LEF during a sensitive period in the Islamic Republic. It was also a check on Khatami during his second term, as Ghalibaf was one of the original signatories to the aforementioned July 1999 public letter. A tape later [emerged](#) of Ghalibaf bragging to the Basij how he ordered police to fire at student demonstrators in 2003.

Politics

After his tenure at the helm of the LEF, Ghalibaf entered Iran’s political scene, [running](#) for the presidency in 2005. Leaked U.S. government diplomatic cables reveal speculation that the supreme leader’s son, Mojtaba Khamenei, was the “[backbone](#)” of Ghalibaf’s political campaigns. But during the 2005 campaign, Iran’s former speaker of parliament, Mehdi Karroubi, [alleged](#) that Mojtaba Khamenei persuaded his father to shift his support to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, then mayor of Tehran, because he was more reliable than Ghalibaf. Ghalibaf lost that race, but soon after took over as mayor of Tehran after Ahmadinejad won the presidency, potentially viewing the position as a platform to pursue higher office after Ahmadinejad’s victory. Ghalibaf’s mayoral tenure was [defined](#) by infrastructural feats, including the expansion of the Tehran metro and the Sadr expressway as well as the [establishment](#) of new green spaces within Tehran. Ghalibaf even made a cameo at the World Economic Forum in Davos in 2008, and [sought](#) to distance himself from then President Ahmadinejad. In a New York Times profile, he flirted with another run for the presidency, [pledging](#) to open the country up to more foreign investment. This is when his brand as a pragmatic modernizer took shape.

But his tenure was damaged by a deadly fire, which resulted in the collapse of Tehran’s Plasco Building. Ghalibaf, who was in Qom at the time of the fire, was [criticized](#) by Iranians for not being in Tehran. Ghalibaf was also sullied by [allegations](#) of corruption concerning a donation by Tehran Municipality of 600 billion rials to a charity run by Ghalibaf’s wife. After he stepped down from the office of the mayor, members of the Tehran City Council [accused](#) Ghalibaf of billions of dollars in corruption. Despite these blemishes in his record, the supreme leader managed to find a landing spot for Ghalibaf, [appointing](#) him to the Expediency Council.

Seeking to capitalize on his management record, Ghalibaf embarked on additional runs for the presidency. In 2013, with Rouhani [winning](#) 50.7 percent of the votes, Ghalibaf came in second place with only 16.6 percent. Four years later, he ran against Rouhani again but [withdrew](#) from the race and [endorsed](#) Rouhani’s conservative challenger Ebrahim Raisi. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, Ghalibaf won big—capitalizing on low voter turnout and his reputation in Tehran by [winning](#) the most votes there. In a sign of how the electoral landscape had shifted, the most [votes](#) in Tehran went to reformist Mohammad Reza Aref in 2016.

Mr. Speaker

As Ghalibaf ascends to the speakership, he may encounter obstacles—particularly over his ambition and independent streak. Some factions view him with suspicion given [rumors](#) Ghalibaf wants to use the speakership as a means to run for the presidency in 2021. Separately, because of his previous election campaigns facing off against Rouhani, Ghalibaf is expected to preside over a more combative parliament. [During](#) his 2017 race for president, he railed against Rouhani for failing to create four million jobs and over “bad management.” Rouhani, in turn, [accused](#) Ghalibaf of wanting to “beat up students.” This heated interpersonal dynamic will be a change for Rouhani, who was used to liaising with Larijani. Larijani often ran legislative interference for Rouhani—

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[specifically](#) over the nuclear deal and endorsement of legislation supporting the Financial Action Task Force's (FATF) action plan. Ghalibaf may not be as amenable to such an arrangement, particularly over issues like the [FATE](#). During his 2017 campaign, Ghalibaf [pledged](#) to “support and protect” the nuclear deal, but [said](#) the Rouhani administration didn't have the power to get the other parties to deliver its benefits. He could employ such a stance as speaker, wielding more confrontational oversight of the way the Rouhani administration has handled the nuclear file.

Rouhani will also now be facing two former political rivals who are in control of two of the three branches of government—Ghalibaf and Raisi. As Ghalibaf endorsed Raisi in the 2017 presidential election, they both have the potential to make life difficult for the Rouhani administration—with parliament's power of impeachment and the judiciary's anti-corruption campaign that has targeted Rouhani's inner circle—for example, his [brother](#).

Lastly, Ghalibaf becomes the first speaker of Iran's parliament to have commanded multiple organs of the IRGC. Larijani [was](#) a deputy chief of staff and deputy minister of the IRGC, but lacks the strength of Ghalibaf's alumni status. Whether Ghalibaf's tenure opens new avenues for IRGC influence within Iran's elected state will be important to monitor.

In the end, Ghalibaf has proven himself to be a crafty political survivor—running as a manager and modernizer while in recent years embracing more conservative elements of Iran's theocracy as the political winds shifted in Tehran. His ability to use the position as a steppingstone to the presidency—which most of his predecessors attempted to do unsuccessfully—will be an early test of his new power.