

SUDDEN SUCCESSION

Examining the Impact of Abrupt Change in the Middle East



Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf

The 2021 Iranian Presidential Election: A Preliminary Assessment

By Albert B. Wolf

In June 2021, the Islamic Republic of Iran is scheduled to hold a presidential election to determine the successor to Hassan Rouhani. According to the conventional wisdom, the hardliners, or principlists, are most likely to win. It is important to note, however, that the conventional wisdom was wrong about each of the last three elections when no incumbent was running. The elections in 1997, 2005, and 2013 yielded surprising results, signaling unexpected changes in direction.

As it stands today, Iran's various factions have not aligned behind a single candidate,¹ and many of the candidates who have either declared their candidacy or signaled a likely run have political baggage. Several are perennial candidates who have previously fared poorly and lack a large public following. The election will also be Iran's second during the Covid era, as well as its second taking place under extreme economic duress.



Hossein Dehghan

Qalibaf, the current Majlis speaker, and Dehghan, a former defense minister, are two high-profile potential candidates in the June contest.



This paper examines:

- The institutional constraints on the Iranian presidency, and how they have changed over time
- The role elections play in the Iranian polity—and what turnout in this upcoming election might reveal both about that and about overall regime stability
- The veracity of the thesis that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), or Pasdaran, is attempting to install a military regime
- Some of the current and likely candidates in the June election

INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS ON THE IRANIAN PRESIDENCY

For years, the Iranian presidency had been portrayed as a very public but institutionally weak office in which the incumbent is constrained by a series of religious veto holders and must fight for influence at every turn. At the time the 1979 constitution was presented, the country's president stated that the "powers afforded by the 1979 Constitution to the executive branch were 'weak' and not comparable to those of other countries."² Shortly after the transition from Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to Ali Khamenei, the executive was assessed as being "the only system in the world in which the elected president [, indeed the entire executive,] must be 'approved' by an unelected *faqih*. It is the only system in which the President is ultimately subordinated to a religious authority, the *faqih*."³ Throughout Ali Khamenei's tenure as Supreme Leader (*rahbar*), which began in 1989, he has systematically weakened elected officials while maintaining a façade of democracy.⁴

Khomeini, the Islamic Republic's founding leader, called for *tamarkoz-e modiriyat*, or concentration of management, within the executive branch—a

process that continued after his death and with Khamenei's succession as Supreme Leader. Khamenei did, however, retain his position on the Revision Council, responsible for reforming the executive branch and resolving any and all ambiguities that remained from the 1979 constitution. The position of prime minister was abolished, and the president became a directly elected figure not subject to the approval of the Majlis (Iranian parliament)—although all presidential *appointees* required a majority Majlis vote to take office. The new arrangement came to be seen as reflecting an appropriate distribution of influence between the new Supreme Leader and the Majlis speaker (and incoming president), Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.⁵

THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN THE IRANIAN POLITY

Iran is all too often treated as a *sui generis* entity to be studied in isolation, when it should be considered in comparative perspective.⁶ Specifically, students of comparative authoritarianism tend to focus on Iran's status as a so-called theocracy and ignore what its institutions and elections can teach about the role of elections in nondemocratic settings, as well as the role mass publics play in Middle East autocracies. Instead, their attention has been squarely focused on Arab states after the Arab Spring uprisings.

Too often, moreover, studies of Iranian elections focus on the proverbial "horse race" of players and personalities, without examining the functions that the elections themselves play. The forthcoming presidential elections—assuming there are two rounds rather than one—can reveal much about the role of elections within the Iranian polity, as well as something about the level of support for the regime. They can shed light on the functioning of the regime itself, in particular by signaling which way Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei wants to go. Khamenei has many instruments at his disposal for influencing election

outcomes while remaining aloof from the policies of the president on whose behalf he has rigged the system.

Election turnout can reveal several things. In mature liberal democracies, elections are a straightforward means of determining who gets which offices. In authoritarian regimes, elections may play a variety of roles, from serving as a “safety valve” to providing entrée to a “patronage network” to constituting a “performance ritual.”⁷ In cases of relatively high turnout (and a lopsided outcome), elections are seen as occasions for regimes to dispense patronage in various ways, such as naked vote buying (e.g., paying voters cash or giving them gifts to cast their ballot for certain candidates). High turnout is also consistent with elections functioning as a “safety valve”: an opportunity for voters to simply “blow off steam” to register their disenchantment with the incumbent regime.⁸ Low turnout, on the other hand, is often interpreted as a sign that elections simply do not matter—that they are regarded as an ineffective means for the public to vent their frustrations. Obviously, determining what is considered “high” and “low” turnout can be a judgment call; one study found that the range of turnout for executive elections in pre–Arab Spring states in the Middle East and North Africa, excluding Iran, was between 40 and 90 percent.⁹

Alternatives for gauging support for a regime are problematic. Researchers fear that public opinion surveys, for example, may be subject to preference falsification by participants who sense that pollsters may have a hidden agenda, and that if they give the “wrong” answer they may face retaliation: from harassment to losing their jobs to imprisonment. Other proxies for voting, such as protests, signal displeasure with a regime, but often originate with small, if sometimes organized, minorities. They do not provide a reliable measure of public opinion in a country.

Elections can also be a means for a regime’s various components to signal to rival power centers their

ability to “get out the vote,” and hence to rely on public support in the event of a power struggle. This was one of the original functions of political parties in authoritarian regimes. Although political parties are formally banned in the Islamic Republic, they have been replaced by so-called associations. The ability of power centers in the government and their informally allied associations to get their supporters to the polls indicates who would likely prevail in the event of a crisis.¹⁰

It is important to note that during the February 2020 Majlis elections, many saw the low turnout, notwithstanding the constraints imposed by Covid-19, as a sign of discontent with the regime. Generally speaking, organized election boycotts are a threat to an incumbent regime—and a harbinger of democratization—when boycott leaders receive international support. When boycotts lack such support, on the other hand, they tend to reinforce authoritarianism.¹¹

“PASDARAN COUP” THESIS

Iran analyst Ali Alfoneh has argued that the IRGC, or Pasdaran, would use its institutional resources to mobilize support behind a clerical figurehead in the battle for succession to Khamenei and attempt to transform Iran into a de facto military dictatorship.¹² Past speculation, however, suggested that the Pasdaran might attempt to do this with respect to other offices, including the presidency: it was thought that in 2013, a Pasdaran-supported candidate would win the presidency. Khamenei prevented that from happening, however: he directed the withdrawal of several reformists except for Rouhani—and confounded expectations by allowing multiple IRGC-linked candidates to stay in the race, instead of selecting a favorite so as to consolidate the hardline vote—and boosted efforts to get non-regime-supporting Iranians to vote. This brought about Rouhani’s victory and administered a setback to the Pasdaran, reminding it that Khamenei held the paramount role in the regime.¹³

In addition to the effects of any IRGC maneuvering, the dismal state of the Iranian economy—due to both Covid-19 and the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal and reinstatement of sanctions, as well as serial government mismanagement of the economy—is believed to have given hardliners, or principlists, a leg up on any candidates who may emerge from the current reform-minded conservative administration, as well as on more traditional reformists.

Some Possible Candidates

Extending Alfoneh's thesis, the Pasdaran very well may be planning to fill all the major offices with loyal figures in order to facilitate an easy takeover, presumably when Khamenei dies. Mohammad Sadeq Javadi-Hesar, a reformist, has argued that an IRGC politician may be in a prime position to "harmonize the country."¹⁴ Two main candidates to watch are Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, the speaker of the Majlis and a perennial presidential candidate, and Hossein Dehghan, a former defense minister with close ties to Supreme Leader Khamenei.

The recently elected Majlis speaker (and former Tehran mayor), **Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf**, has close ties to the Pasdaran.¹⁵ Before entering electoral politics, Qalibaf commanded the IRGC Aerospace Force, and he has run for president three times, in 2005, 2013, and 2017. Although he has been affiliated with principlists, or hardliners, Qalibaf has intermittently advocated for dialogue with the United States while simultaneously calling for U.S. influence to be expunged from Iran and the entire Middle East. He has recently hailed the defeat of Donald Trump in the U.S. presidential election and said that Joe Biden would turn maximum pressure into "smart pressure."¹⁶

Hossein Dehghan, the defense minister during Rouhani's first term, is a declared candidate for the presidency. He is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq War and has held a number of positions in the Pasdaran, including as leader of the IRGC training center, in southern Lebanon, that facilitated the creation of

Hezbollah. Dehghan is not a formal member of any political association or faction, but he is generally viewed as a hardliner in light of his close ties to the Pasdaran. (He is also under U.S. sanctions because of his close ties to Hezbollah.) Dehghan is believed to be jockeying for the support of powerful clerics, such as the custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad and Ayatollah Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, Tehran's imam of Friday prayers and a fierce critic of Rouhani's foreign policy, in particular the nuclear deal with the P5+1 (Britain, China, France, Russia, and the United States, plus Germany).¹⁷

Furthermore, **Mohsen Rezaii** is rumored to be considering yet another run for the presidency, having withdrawn his candidacy in 2005 and then run in 2009 and 2013. He commanded the IRGC during most of the Iran-Iraq War and formally rejoined the organization in 2015; he currently serves as secretary of the Expediency Council.¹⁸ Another potential candidate is **Saeed Jalili**, a hardline former chief nuclear negotiator who served in the Basij militia during the Iran-Iraq War and was awarded the distinction "living martyr" for his service during the conflict.¹⁹ Jalili also previously ran for president, placing third in the 2013 contest.

A relatively new candidate receiving attention is **Saeed Mohammad**, commander of the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters, an IRGC conglomerate responsible for billions of dollars in projects involving dams, water supply systems, freeways, and other infrastructure.²⁰

The former Majlis speaker, **Ali Larijani**, is often spoken of as another potential candidate to succeed Rouhani. Larijani ran unsuccessfully in 2005 before competing for a Majlis seat; over time, he has distanced himself from his initial hardline, principlist stances and moved toward the center. Larijani also served in several political capacities in the Revolutionary Guards for much of the Iran-Iraq War, and from 1982 to 1992 was acting commander of the Joint Staff.²¹ He is seldom mentioned as one of the IRGC's favorite candidates for the presidency, however; more often, he is seen as

a consensus candidate able to attract moderate and conservative voters.²² Additional hurdles to a potential Larijani candidacy include rumored health issues as well as corruption allegations.

It is unclear whether the Pasdaran would prefer to allow several candidates to run, or to concentrate its forces behind a single candidate. Each approach carries risks. If it ran several candidates, the IRGC might boost voter turnout and potentially increase the general public's interest in its candidates' platforms (which are likely to overlap). At the same time, multiple candidates running in the first round could result in a divided base that might not be motivated to vote in a second round of elections. Running a single candidate, on the other hand, demonstrates unity—but should the selected candidate make a mistake or commit a series of gaffes, the IRGC would be stuck with that person, and would risk losing an election that might otherwise be an easy win.

A potential candidate who may appeal to the Pasdaran is **Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi**, the head of the judiciary (chief justice), a career prosecutor and cleric who has never actually belonged to the IRGC. Raisi is rumored to have been responsible for executing political prisoners in 1988.²³ His connections to high-level clerics include Ayatollah Ahmad Alam al-Hoda, the Tehran Friday prayer imam, whose support Pasdaran-linked candidates have sought.

But Raisi, who ran for president unsuccessfully in 2017, may not be interested in the job anymore. Some believe he is being groomed to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader.²⁴ He is already a member of the Assembly of Experts, the body tasked with choosing the Supreme Leader, even though the *rahbar* is actually chosen behind closed doors before any formal vote occurs.

Another possible candidate is former president **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad**, who served from 2005 to 2013, a tenure viewed by many as a disaster.²⁵ Ahmadinejad's ties to the IRGC are a matter of

conjecture; some suggest he served as a volunteer member of the Basij during the Iran-Iraq War.²⁶ But he attempted to make a comeback with a run in 2017 that was rejected by the Guardian Council—the powerful twelve-member Iranian body that vets candidates, among other responsibilities—and he could be rejected again, given that he was problematic for moderate conservatives as well as Khamenei principlists during his two terms in office.

While the Pasdaran is very unlikely to seize power without regard to the constitutional structures of the Islamic Republic, the Guards could take control of the state's nominally democratic institutions by working with the Guardian Council to eliminate anti- or non-IRGC candidates. That may not work, however. Many of the candidates discussed above, with the exception of Hossein Dehghan and Saeed Mohammad, have run before and fared poorly, advancing unattractive platforms and failing to show charisma on the hustings. Several lack large public followings, making it more difficult for them to run successful campaigns. One can imagine a scenario like 2013, in which the IRGC is confident one of its favored candidates will win, but, sensing the public mood and wanting to show the Guards who is still boss, Khamenei puts his thumb on the scale on behalf of a different candidate, who is deferential to himself but not close to the IRGC. Presumably, that would be a candidate described as a moderate rather than a hardliner.

As noted, Rouhani's failure to deliver on expectations surrounding economic growth may have doomed many moderate and reformist candidates' hopes of running for the Iranian presidency in 2021. The World Bank reported that for 2019–20, inflation in Iran was at 41.2 percent, GDP contracted by 6.8 percent, and unemployment stood at 10.7 percent.²⁷ Furthermore, the Guardian Council is likely to veto many if not all moderate and reformist presidential candidates, just as it vetoed several moderate and reformist candidates prior to the Majlis elections in 2020.²⁸ But a few potential reformists/moderates are rumored to be willing to contest the presidential elections anyway.

CONCLUSION

As this paper has shown, Iranian hardliners, or principlists, would appear to have the upper hand in the June 2021 presidential vote, given the weak Iranian economy; but the history of surprise results in Iranian elections should advise caution. The system is so open to manipulation—by the Guardian Council or by the Supreme Leader—that the expected outcome as of a few months before the voting could shift sharply by Election Day. Specifically, the poor record of some hardline candidates suggests they may not be able to get traction this time, either.

Separately, the forthcoming election provides outside observers with an opportunity to assess the stability of the Islamic Republic based on voter turnout—and also, perhaps, to assess the country’s future.

Specifically, if the winning slate of candidates is altogether loyal to the Pasdaran, that raises the likelihood that Iran will become a military dictatorship once Khamenei passes from the scene.

Between late winter and the June vote, the Biden and Rouhani administrations have a limited window within which to negotiate a return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, as the nuclear deal is known. However, Rouhani’s lack of popularity, along with the JCPOA’s own damaged track record, given its failure to deliver economic relief, will make it difficult to strike a bargain before the presidential election. Events such as the targeted killing of the head of Iran’s nuclear program have made it more difficult to extract concessions from Iran. Finally, Rouhani’s successor, whoever he is and whatever camp he comes from, will have little incentive to honor any commitments Rouhani makes.

NOTES

1. Thanks to Patrick Clawson for raising this point.
2. Quoted in Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, *The Quest for Authority in Iran: A History of the Presidency from Revolution to Rouhani* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2018), loc. 1470.
3. *Ibid.*, loc. 366.
4. Mehdi Khalaji, *Iran’s 2021 Presidential Vote and the Tightening of Regime Control*, Policy Note 89 (Washington DC: Washington Institute, 2020), <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-2021-presidential-vote-and-tightening-regime-control>.
5. Randjbar-Daemi, *The Quest for Authority in Iran*, locs. 1470–1508.
6. See Barbara Geddes, Joseph Wright, and Erica Frantz, *How Dictatorships Work* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).
7. Jason Brownlee, “Executive Elections in the Arab World: When and How Do They Matter?” *Comparative Political Studies* 44, no. 7 (July 2011): 807–28.
8. *Ibid.*, 808, 818.
9. *Ibid.*, 819.
10. This caveat regarding the 2009 elections should be kept in mind: those elections were subject to blatant manipulation by the incumbent government, so one cannot assume that the announced results accurately reflect the votes cast. Thanks to Patrick Clawson for pointing this out.
11. See Emily Beaulieu, *Electoral Protest and Democracy in the Developing World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

12. Ali Alfoneh, *Political Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Rise of the Revolutionary Guards*, Issue Paper 1 (Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2019), 1, https://agsiw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/Alfoneh_Iran-Succession_ONLINE.pdf.
13. Thanks to Patrick Clawson for raising this point.
14. Sina Azodi, "Hossein Dehghan and Other Military Vets Vie for Iran's Presidency," IranSource, Atlantic Council, October 7, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/hossein-dehghan-and-other-military-vets-vie-for-irans-presidency/>.
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16. "Biden to Turn 'Maximum Pressure' into 'Smart Pressure,' Iran Speaker Says," Iran International, November 15, 2020, <https://iranintl.com/en/world/biden-turn-maximum-pressure-smart-pressure-iran-speaker-says>.
17. See Azodi, "Hossein Dehghan and Other Military Vets Vie," <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/hossein-dehghan-and-other-military-vets-vie-for-irans-presidency/>.
18. Shahir Shahidsaless, "Iran Presidential Election: Reformists Face an Uphill Battle," Middle East Eye, October 12, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-presidential-election-reformists-face-uphill-battle>.
19. Garrett Nada and Helia Ighani, "Old War Haunts New Election," Iran Primer, U.S. Institute of Peace, June 11, 2013, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2013/jun/11/old-war-haunts-new-election>.
20. Shahidsaless, "Iran Presidential Election," <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-presidential-election-reformists-face-uphill-battle>.
21. Thanks to Farzin Nadimi for raising this point.
22. Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran's Hardliners Jostle for Chance to Succeed Rouhani in Poll Race," *Financial Times*, November 1, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/07906d3e-d6ea-4675-91a3-bc4466b84e0a>.
23. Dexter Filkins, "Letter from Iran: The Twilight of the Iranian Revolution," *The New Yorker*, May 18, 2020, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/05/25/the-twilight-of-the-iranian-revolution>.
24. Ibid.
25. See Ali M. Ansari, *Iran Under Ahmadinejad: The Politics of Confrontation* (New York: Routledge, 2007).
26. See analysis by Roula Khalaf in the *Financial Times*, May 29, 2008, https://www.ft.com/content/3c04bcbc-2d9e-11dd-b92a-000077b07658?nclick_check=1.
27. "Overview: Islamic Republic of Iran," World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/iran/overview>.
28. Shahidsaless, "Iran Presidential Election," <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-presidential-election-reformists-face-uphill-battle>.

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