

# Iranian Presidential Elections:

## A Preview

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### Brief Analysis

**T**wo-hundred and thirty-eight Iranians submitted their candidacy for the presidency, but the Council of Guardians, a group of senior clerics appointed by the supreme spiritual leader, only approved four. The two leading contenders are Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, present speaker of the Majles (parliament), and Mohammad Khatami, the former minister of Islamic Guidance.

Genuine Elections? Presidential candidates are limited to members of the revolutionary elite, and even serious members of the political community are often prohibited from running. For example, three members of the Iran Liberation Movement, a group that advocates parliamentary politics, were excluded by the Council of Guardians. The issues raised during the campaign are also limited by the ruling elite; foreign policy, internal security, and military affairs are not debated by the candidates.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the elections are meaningless. There has been a genuine election campaign and both candidates and potential voters are acting as if the election matters. Khatami and Nateq-Nuri have campaigned vigorously by giving speeches across the country, buying advertising supplements, tearing down each other's signs, appealing to women and the youth vote, and soliciting the endorsement of various religious groups and influential individuals.

The Main Candidates. Nateq-Nuri is likely to maintain the status quo-economically and culturally-if elected. He is the nominee of those conservative clerics that have held the majority in the last two parliaments. Nateq-Nuri is backed by the bazaar merchants and other small businessmen, and his supporters have stressed the importance of a free economy and a strong private sector. Additionally, under Nateq-Nuri's speakership, the parliament maintained onerous restrictions on social issues and the media. The parliament banned satellite dishes and fired government officials for liberal cultural policies-including Khatami as minister of Islamic Guidance, and Rafsanjani's brother as head of the state radio and TV broadcasting service.

Khatami, on the other hand, represents the possibility of a more liberal government. He has campaigned on a platform emphasizing the rule of law and finding a balance between democracy and the authority of the spiritual leader. Khatami's tenure as minister of Islamic Guidance was a relative "golden age" for Iranian culture and

intellectual pursuits. Khatami advocates less restrictive policies on social issues, such as women's dress, while always being careful to affirm his support for the government's Islamic orientation. His personal views on economics are not known, but his campaign speeches have focused on investing in industry, curbing the money supply, and clearing the bureaucracy of red tape. He is supported both by the Militant Clerics Association-the party consisting of the former radical revolutionaries who seized the U.S. embassy in 1979-and by the Servants of Construction-a group of high government officials and technocrats closely associated with President Rafsanjani and his more moderate economic and political programs.

It is an "open secret" that Ayatollah Khamene'i, although supposed to remain impartial as the supreme spiritual guide, strongly backs the conservative Nateq-Nuri. But Khatami has garnered the support of urban women, youth, and the Westernized middle class, and if the election is fair and graft-free, Khatami could win. Nateq-Nuri, however, is favored.

Configuration of Power in the Post-Election Period. The ability of either candidate to alter fundamentally Iran's political course once in office is sharply curtailed by the role of the supreme spiritual guide and the Iranian decision-making process. Ayatollah Khamene'i must approve all foreign and domestic policy and does not seem inclined to depart from the status quo. There are also crucial policies which are already set and beyond the ability of a new president to alter, such as the economic five-year plans for investment in oil, petrochemicals, and steel. Moreover, Khamene'i recently expanded the size and prerogatives of the Council for Discerning the Interests for the Islamic Republic, which was established to mediate differences between the Council of Guardians and the parliament. The Council was enlarged to include representatives of all political factions in the ruling group, assigned new responsibilities for advising the supreme spiritual leader on the entire range of policy, and given a secretariat to improve its bureaucratic clout. President Rafsanjani was appointed the chairman of the Council, ensuring continuity in the government and further suggesting the Council might be considerably more powerful than in the past. Whether Khamene'i will use this council to force through more controversial edicts or to solidify his own power at the expense of the president and the parliament remains unclear.

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Foreign policy is not a major issue in the campaign because the Iranian public has little knowledge of or interest in the outside world. Nateq-Nuri has not traveled outside of Iran very much and does not seem concerned about learning about international affairs or foreign cultures. Although Khatami has lived abroad and speaks both German and English, he too has barely discussed international affairs in his major campaign speeches. It will be difficult for any president to change Iran's foreign policy, especially its anti-U.S. orientation, in light of the apathy of the majority and the militant commitment of a dwindling, but still important segment of radicals for a confrontational policy with the United States. Indeed, the segment of Iran's population that is most concerned with foreign policy is a radical minority, the Ansar-e Hizbollah, that fervently upholds Ayatollah Khomeini's legacy and protests against any deviation from Khomeini's vision. The day after the official demonstrations against the Mykonos verdict, Ansar-e Hizbollah said that it was prepared to suicide bomb the German embassy. Nateq-Nuri's coalition includes these Khomeinists, in addition to the conservative bazaar merchants and lower-level government officials, but relations between the radicals and Nateq-Nuri are not particularly warm.

Turning to the East. Regardless of who wins the presidency, the Iranian elite feels that there is no longer a need to make concessions to the West. For instance, Iran refused to allow the German and Danish ambassadors to return to Tehran on April 30, and Foreign Minister 'Ali Akbar Velayati remarked that the later the diplomats came back the better, even if they never returned. Iran wants to create a "great Asian power" bloc with Russia, China, and India. Additionally, Iran has been courting Arab leaders to attend the meeting of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Tehran in December. Iran expects-probably correctly-that Europe will cave in to Iranian demands rather

than revise its policy of engagement and trade with Iran.

Whether Iran decides to accommodate the West or establish closer ties to Asia probably will not depend on who is elected president. The decision will be based on the potential costs of confronting Europe and the United States and the benefits of closer relations with Asia. The Iranian elite is growing increasingly pessimistic about their economy and the government could decide to seek improved trade with Asia to compensate for an expected long-term decline in Iranian oil production. In addition, Iran feels encircled by hostile states-Turkey, Israel, and Azerbaijan-and its leaders are convinced that the United States instigated the Taliban rebellion in Afghanistan to further harm Iran. An alliance with Asian countries would give Iran a strategic counterweight.

The Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Rachel Ingber.

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