

# Iran's Predetermined Parliamentary Election

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Brief Analysis

**The vote will further consolidate Khamenei's authoritarian rule, while the Majlis seems set to continue its decline in importance.**

**O**n February 21, Iran will hold its eleventh parliamentary election, along with its fifth election for the Assembly of Experts, the body charged with naming the next Supreme Leader. It is safe to predict that the next Majlis will be predominantly loyal to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei; in fact, it will probably be Iran's least autonomous legislature in decades. This forecast puts President Hassan Rouhani in a perilous position: his political role compels him to encourage public participation in an election that his camp is guaranteed to lose.

## ELECTIONS ARE CENTRAL TO THE REGIME'S SELF-CONCEPTION

**T**he Islamic Republic's claim to be a revolutionary government depends on mass participation in politics. In order to deny the unpalatable reality—that coercion is the main factor in its survival—the regime needs evidence to back the claim that it still enjoys wide popular support.

Accordingly, the leadership is using all available means to encourage people to vote on February 21, just as it has done in previous elections. At the same time, it is marshaling its traditional methods of manipulating every phrase of the process, from candidate qualification to the final vote count and announcement of results. Yet such fraudulence is limited somewhat by several factors, including the presence of candidate representatives at voting stations and during the counting process, as well as power struggles between the Rouhani government's Interior Ministry and the Khamenei-controlled Guardian Council.

To portray the election as proof of its continued popularity and "democratic" legitimacy, the regime must be able to announce an official turnout rate of at least 50 percent of eligible voters. Even with its well-oiled machinery of fraud

at work, credibly announcing that figure will require the regime to reach at least 40 percent actual participation.

Toward that end, the Supreme Leader and other religious authorities have called on people to vote not as a political right, but as a religious duty. Yet the regime's shrinking popularity has diminished its powers of persuasion on this front. Given the twin crises of ideals and authority that Iranian society has been undergoing for some time, authorities of all stripes—from religious figures to sports stars and celebrities—have lost much of their ability to politically mobilize the masses. Furthermore, the government's continuous economic failures have damaged the public's trust so badly that seducing voters by offering new economic promises seems delusional.

## **HYPOCRITICAL NATIONALIST CLAIMS**

**T**he political context in which the current election is taking place appears quite distinct. Two major developments have shaped this environment: the regime's unprecedented violence in oppressing peaceful demonstrators last November, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' January 8 downing of a Ukrainian passenger jet filled with Iranian citizens.

The public could plausibly accept the notion that the IRGC accidentally shot down an airliner, however tragic the results. What infuriated Iranians—even many of the regime's supporters—was the government's initial denial of the fact, its irresponsible and arrogant attitude toward the victims' families, and its persistent refusal to be transparent about the incident. Instead, the regime shamelessly hid the truth and disseminated confusing claims in order to mislead both the people and foreign governments. Such behavior traumatized many Iranians and further corroded their already decaying trust in the regime.

To overcome this long-unfolding crisis of legitimacy, the government needed to go beyond its social power base (reduced to a minority at present) and reground its popularity on invented nationalist sentiment. This was a tricky move given that the regime had relied on ardent anti-nationalist policies and propaganda under the late Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini, particularly after his 1981 fatwa outlawing such sentiment as apostasy and calling past nationalist exemplar Muhammad Mossadeq an infidel. To sidestep this contradiction while playing the nationalist card, Supreme Leader Khamenei has relied on the politics of fear over the past few years. According to his narrative—which sharpened after the 2011 Syrian uprising—Iran was at actual war with its enemies, and national security was now the top priority uniting all citizens behind the regime.

In order to sell this idea and intensify Iranian securitization efforts at home and abroad, the regime has sought to convince nationalist Iranians outside its narrow constituency that the country is under imminent military threat, and that the Islamic Republic is the only leadership structure capable of staving off regional chaos and preventing territorial disintegration. This argument has been used not only to justify Iran's defiant, expansionist regional policy, but also to neutralize domestic opposition. Such contortions put the citizenry in an awkward position: namely, being an Iranian nationalist now entails supporting the regime even if you hate the regime.

Thus, in a speech he delivered on February 5, Khamenei called on “everyone who loves Iran” to participate, even if they “dislike” the Supreme Leader. He also repeatedly described the election in nationalist, security-oriented terms, calling the process a “threat to the enemy,” claiming that it “guarantees the country's security,” and noting that its positive impact on foreign perceptions of Iran would help resolve “many of our international problems.”

## **MAJLIS IS BEING SIDELINED**

**B**eside openly and repeatedly stating that the parliament must subordinate itself to his will, Khamenei has frequently dictated legislative policy to Majlis members and exerted his authority over their votes. This approach, coupled with the tradition of purging candidate lists ahead of elections, has stripped the Majlis of any ability to protect its autonomy and democratic functions. Instead, the body's enforced loyalty to Khamenei has given

him another effective tool to weaken the president and prevent the elected government from disobeying his directives or challenging his authority. Pushing for a monolithically hardline Majlis will also help protect the regime's revolutionary core if Khamenei passes away during its four-year term.

Even as the parliament becomes less and less important, hardliners are still determined to keep it from serving as a platform for reformist complaints. Accordingly, the Guardian Council disqualified an astounding number of parliamentary candidates leading up to this election—more than 16,000 in total, including 90 members of the current Majlis and nearly all reformist figures and Rouhani allies. This decision may indicate Khamenei's overconfidence, since it essentially ends the traditional practice of allowing reformists to voice some of their criticisms via the Majlis. Sadly, such self-assurance may be justified given Rouhani's dramatic decline in popularity and the overwhelming loss of public hope regarding the reformists.

This approach does carry some risk for Khamenei, though. If the people continue to lose confidence in their ability to make changes within the system, they are more likely to decide that the entire system must go. Indeed, anti-regime and anti-Khamenei chants are now among the first to be heard at most public protests—a development once deemed unthinkable.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR WASHINGTON

The election gives the U.S. government an opportunity to amplify the voices of Iranians who have been calling out the regime's increasingly anti-democratic nature. When remarking on the vote and its aftermath, U.S. officials should put the words of these Iranians front and center, since they are much more credible than foreign criticisms from the Trump administration. Washington has become quite adept at citing Iranian complaints about corruption and abuse, so now is the time to turn up the volume—both by asking senior officials to highlight such complaints, and by having U.S. broadcast channels bring Iranians the news that their government will not.

*Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute.* ❖

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