

The 2024 Election Cycle Starts in Iran

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Brief Analysis

Upcoming votes pose a dilemma for the Supreme Leader: should he aggressively disqualify candidates and further alienate the public, or risk a Majlis dominated by his political rivals?

Iran's last election cycle proved anticlimactic (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/rouhani-raisi-pressing-questions-eve-irans-election>). In 2021, the regime's Guardian Council—a body of twelve members appointed directly or indirectly by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei—disqualified several high-profile figures from running for president and left eventual winner Ebrahim Raisi with no real competition. The aggressive rejection of moderate and reformist candidates exacerbated the public's lack of enthusiasm for the contest, resulting in the lowest turnout in history.

Last week, Iran started a new election cycle to be completed in March 2024, when voters will choose representatives for two institutions—the Majlis and the Assembly of Experts—that are perceived to have little real influence on the country's policies. Yet the coming campaign season still merits close watching for what it may reveal about the intentions of the Supreme Leader, who must decide how to balance concerns about embarrassingly low turnout, eventual succession, reformist political strategies, and regime legitimacy in the wake of mass protests.

A Majlis in Decline

Although the 290-member parliament is one of the Islamic Republic's three main branches of government, it has long held only minor importance in setting the regime's policies, especially regarding nuclear issues and foreign relations. Its role has declined even further in recent years, and much of the public has become apathetic to its makeup and deliberations. According to a [July 25 poll](#)

(<https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1793622/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%85%D9%87-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%84%D8%AA-%D8%B4%D9%85%D8%B4%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%B4-%D8%B1%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%B1%DB%8C%D8%A8-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%81-%D8%A7%D8%B2-%D8%B1%D9%88-%DA%A9%D8%B4%DB%8C%D8%AF-53%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B5%D8%AF>) by the government's official news

outlet, 68 percent of Iranians are dissatisfied with parliament, and a majority could not name its current speaker.

Nevertheless, the Majlis still plays a role in building consensus around important decisions. Officials will sometimes brief legislators about key issues such as [the status of nuclear talks \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-garnering-internal-support-potential-nuclear-deal\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-garnering-internal-support-potential-nuclear-deal); in other cases, the Majlis is used to run ideas up the flagpole or echo the regime's current line of thought. One prominent example is the parliament's December 2020 "Strategic Action Plan to Lift Sanctions and Protect the Iranian Nation's Interests," an initiative intended to bolster Khamenei's maximalist stance toward nuclear negotiations by pressuring the government to take substantial steps (e.g., increasing uranium enrichment, limiting outside monitoring) if international sanctions were not lifted. At the time, President Hassan Rouhani blamed this legislation for hindering attempts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal; this May, however, [Khamenei declared \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nuclear-balancing-act\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-nuclear-balancing-act) that the law had "saved the country from confusion on the nuclear issue."

Will the Next Experts Assembly Be the Crucial One?

Iransians are also set to vote for representatives in the Assembly of Experts, a body with very little influence over their daily lives aside from [one critical process \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/choosing-irans-next-supreme-leader\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/choosing-irans-next-supreme-leader)—choosing a new Supreme Leader. According to the constitution, the assembly is charged with appointing the next Supreme Leader when the current one passes away and dismissing a leader if he becomes incapable of fulfilling his duties. Given Khamenei's advancing age (84), the next assembly may be the one that formally designates his successor at some point during its eight-year term. The actual kingmaking will surely be done in other rooms, but the assembly will likely be essential in creating legitimacy for the succession process and the final candidate.

Apart from that eventual announcement, however, the public is generally excluded from the assembly's workings, decisions, and notes. Composed of eighty-eight members—all male, and all but one of them clerics—the body is perceived as being under Khamenei's control despite being constitutionally entrusted with supervising him. This is partly because the aforementioned Guardian Council greatly restricts which candidates are allowed to run for assembly seats (see below). In 2018, reformist politician Mehdi Karrubi [published an open letter \(https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-karroubi-khamenei-criticism-1.4510013\)](https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/iran-karroubi-khamenei-criticism-1.4510013) arguing that the assembly had become a "ceremonial council that only praises the leader." The age of its members has affected its legitimacy as well—during the 2016 election, more than 90 percent of the winning candidates were older than fifty, and chairman Ahmad Jannati is now ninety-seven, leading to the common Iranian joke that the assembly's average age is "dead."

Fighting Low Turnout

The 2024 vote will be Iran's first since the [massive wave of protests \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/human-rights-sanctions-iran-need-more-coordination-and-creativity\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/human-rights-sanctions-iran-need-more-coordination-and-creativity) sparked by the death of Mahsa Amini, so turnout could have particularly strong symbolic value. Regime officials often discuss public participation in elections as "proof" of the Islamic Republic's support base; likewise, [Khamenei argued \(http://english.khamenei.ir/news/9827/Imam-Khomeini-brought-about-great-transformation-in-Iran-Islamic\)](http://english.khamenei.ir/news/9827/Imam-Khomeini-brought-about-great-transformation-in-Iran-Islamic) in a June 4 speech that elections are very important for the regime, warning that Iran's "enemies" are trying to create "despair" and make people pessimistic toward voting.

But the Supreme Leader has only himself to blame for the public's antagonism on this front. In 2016, his Guardian Council disqualified 80 percent of candidates who applied to run for that year's Experts Assembly election; even reformist candidate Hasan Khomeini, grandson to the Islamic Republic's founder, was rejected. Similarly, half of the proposed candidates for the 2020 Majlis election were disqualified, including many incumbent legislators. Such moves no doubt played a role in making turnout for that parliamentary election the lowest since the 1979 revolution;

[%D9%85%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%B1%D9%87%D8%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%81%D8%B9%D8%A7%D9%84-%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%AF\).](#)

Back in 2021, Khamenei and the Guardian Council barred prominent presidential contenders from running to make sure that Raisi won the race—perhaps with the goal of gradually grooming him to become the next Supreme Leader. In doing so, Khamenei seemed willing to stomach the side effect of further undermining the regime’s legitimacy and public support. Will he repeat this pattern in the next cycle?

On one hand, Khamenei could make the coming elections more inclusive in the hope of regaining some popular support and promoting national reconciliation after months of unrest. This approach might also help him reconcile with the various prominent figures he alienated over the past decade while neutralizing potential opposition bases.

On the other hand, the Supreme Leader may fear that high turnout in an inclusive election process might produce a Majlis dominated by pragmatists and reformists, who could prove to be more skeptical of the regime’s current hardline approach and more willing to challenge Raisi’s government. And if Khamenei aims to prioritize longer-term succession maneuvers, he may be even less inclined to help his rivals notch political achievements in parliament or the Experts Assembly, since that could better position them for the eventual game of thrones.

Omer Carmi is a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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