

Elections Expose Iran's Fading Democratic Pretensions

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Brief Analysis

The latest election cycle offers further proof that the regime is counting on centralization and open repression as its main tools of control, with elected bodies becoming increasingly irrelevant.

March 1 is election day in Iran, with voters choosing 290 representatives for parliament and 88 jurists for the Assembly of Experts, the body formally charged with selecting the eventual successor (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-questions-irans-elections>) to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. These will be the twelfth and sixth such elections since 1979, yet much like Iran's various other political contests, they will not be free or fair. Why does the regime continue to hold elections, and what does the current cycle reveal about the domestic political climate?

Long History of Manipulated Elections

Some of the Islamic Republic's past elections were relatively competitive political contests. For instance, the Majlis campaigns of 1996 and 2000 saw intense rivalry between "reformists" and hardliners, and the resulting parliaments hotly debated the direction of the revolution.

Of course, even when reformers were able to pass legislation calling for liberalization, nearly all of these laws were rejected by the Guardian Council. Consisting of six clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six lawyers recommended by the head of the judiciary (another Khamenei appointee), the Guardian Council holds sweeping powers, including the authority to veto any parliamentary bill and disqualify any electoral candidate.

Even so, the significant differences between candidates in past decades contributed to widespread public enthusiasm for elections. Iranians would stand in line for hours to vote, hoping for peaceful and gradual change, while the regime publicized the high turnout as proof of its legitimacy and popularity.

After Khamenei consolidated his power in 2004-5, however, elections became more manipulated and less competitive. The Guardian Council even barred regime elites from running when it deemed them less ideologically

committed to Khamenei, including Ali Motahhari and Mohsen Kouhkan in 2020 and all candidates close to Ali Larijani in the current campaign.

Elected bodies have become more irrelevant as well. The Majlis once had considerable powers, from interrogating government ministers to substantially changing certain laws, but it has largely atrophied today. The parliament's irrelevance is exacerbated by the proliferation of unelected, unconstitutional bodies with lawmaking power, including the Supreme Council for Cultural Revolution, the Supreme Council for Cyberspace, and the Council of Cooperation, which coordinates between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches.

These efforts to “purify” and centralize the regime have deepened since 2019, when Khamenei **announced his manifesto (<https://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/6839125/%D8%A8%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86%DB%8C%D9%87-%DA%AF%D8%A7%D9%85-%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%85-%D9%85%D9%86%D8%B4%D9%88%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%82%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%86%D9%82%D8%B7%D9%87-%D8%B9%D8%B7%D9%81-%DA%86%D9%87%D9%84-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%AA>)** about the “second phase” of the revolution. For the 2020 Majlis election and 2021 presidential election, the Guardian Council disqualified many conservative candidates whom the Supreme Leader saw as being less loyal to his personal rule. This was done to pave the way for the creation of a “Hezbollahi” parliament, meaning one dominated by strong supporters of Khamenei who accept his cult of personality.

The Declining Role of Elections

As in other authoritarian regimes, the Islamic Republic has long used elections to create the illusion of public participation, legitimize the dictatorship, and coopt elites. Yet recent elections have proven less effective at achieving these aims.

One reason for this trend is the steady decline of popular interest in voting. More Iranians have come to believe that political campaigns are just a game designed to maintain the facade of democracy without any real possibility of reform from the inside. Voter participation has plummeted even amid the regime's efforts to misrepresent it. In the 1996 and 2000 Majlis elections, turnout reached as high as 71% and 67%, respectively. In 2004 and 2008, however, it was reported at 51%, a figure that many observers deemed relatively honest. After that, the regime became more shameless about skewing the numbers, reporting turnout of 64% in 2012 and 62% in 2016. By 2020, however, the announced figure fell to 42%, and the real number was thought to be even lower.

Elections have also become less effective at coopting elites into working for the regime. Due to Khamenei's “purification” efforts, many old technocrats were replaced with younger, more zealous “revolutionaries,” worsening the regime's bureaucratic incompetence and inefficiency. Public dissatisfaction grew in response—during the 2022-23 mass demonstrations over **Mahsa Amini's death (<https://www.hudson.org/mahsa-amini-protests-defeat-islamism-iran>)**, many protesters **chanted (<https://theconversation.com/why-irans-protests-matter-this-time-89745>)** “It's over for both reformists and hardliners,” and these sentiments were just the tip of the iceberg in terms of widespread dissent.

Prospects for the 2024 Vote

Instead of trying to improve the state's machinery, Khamenei has reemphasized his regime purification project to prepare for his looming succession. Toward that end, nearly all so-called moderate and reformist candidates were disqualified ahead of the March 1 elections. For the Experts Assembly vote, 144 candidates were carefully selected out of the 510 who registered; even former president Hassan Rouhani, a member of previous assemblies, was disqualified. For the Majlis election, none of the reformist parties announced candidate lists due to the mass disqualifications.

According to many surveys, turnout for these elections will be very low, estimated at 10% in large cities like Tehran and 30% in the country. The regime will use all its tactics to increase these numbers. For instance, it will attempt to scare people by telling them that their identity documents require a stamp proving they voted—otherwise they might not qualify for state employment, university admission, job promotions, or even state subsidies.

From one perspective, the lack of interest in elections is hurting the regime's image. The low turnout indicates that its core constituency has shrunk to around 10-15% of the population at best, and few Iranians take the regime's claim of being a religious democracy seriously. In the past, many hoped they could reform it into a more representative democratic regime, but the Islamic Republic has instead become a more repressive police state.

From Khamenei's perspective, however, high turnout is no longer as crucial to his strategy of homogenizing the elite and personalizing power. He cares less about his public legitimacy, knowing that fewer Iranians care about his claims to religious leadership (according to one estimate, **73% of the public** (<https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cmlgj8j3xl1o>) supports the separation of mosque and state). With the regime **relying more on political repression** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehran-makes-gains-concerns-persist-about-regime-vulnerability>) to maintain order, Iran's elections are well on their way to becoming as empty as those in Syria or Russia.

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