

Rouhani's Road Already Taken

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Aug 16, 2017

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Brief Analysis

The second-term Iranian president has failed to deliver on campaign promises, and the Supreme Leader is fortifying his hardline backers.

On August 14, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, appointed [Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi \(<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-leadership-in-the-shiite-community>\)](#) as the new head of the regime's Expediency Council. He also named five new members, including Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran and a main rival of Hassan Rouhani in the recent presidential election; Ebrahim Raisi, the custodian of the Astan-e Qods Razavi foundation and another presidential competitor; and Mohammad Mir-Mohammadi, the accountability and audit deputy in the Supreme Leader's office. The council -- which outlines regime policies in the case of disagreement between the Guardian Council and the Majlis -- now begins its new five-year term with more hardliners than the previous body, along with greater authority in controlling Iran's three branches of government. Following the death this past January of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, known in the West as Iran's most pragmatic high-ranking official, Khamenei for months had hesitated in naming a replacement.

Rouhani vs. Khamenei

The conflict of interest between the Iranian president and Supreme Leader is built into the country's system of dual sovereignty, as enshrined in the Islamic Republic constitution. But the openness and harshness of the current Rouhani-Khamenei dynamic is unique. Not only did the Supreme Leader refrain from offering congratulations to Rouhani for his election victory or the start of his second presidential term, he also has constantly criticized the president's stances on issues ranging from cultural matters to the nuclear deal to Iran's relations with the international community. Khamenei even went so far as to draw an analogy between Rouhani's position and that of

Abholhassan Bani Sadr, who served as the first president of the Islamic Republic but was forced into exile after a one-year tenure, indicating an obvious threat to Rouhani should he fail to follow Khamenei's guidance. Rouhani's democratically elected position, in such a circumstance, would offer no protection.

Despite the genuine power struggle, Khamenei is still using his country's moderate president to guard his interests both at home and abroad. In particular, the Supreme Leader appreciates Rouhani's distinct diplomatic skills and positive image within the international community, which have prevented a consolidation of Western economic and security pressure against the Islamic Republic. Neither Raisi nor any other hardline presidential candidate could have provided such a shield for Iran's repressive domestic policies or its aggressive regional agenda, explaining why Khamenei did not speak out forcefully against Rouhani during the actual campaign.

Rouhani vs. the IRGC

Beginning in the first year of his presidency, Rouhani has criticized the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its increasing role in Iran's politics and economy. He intensified this attack during this year's presidential campaign. Yet perhaps unsurprisingly, he immediately toned down the rhetoric after winning, while effectively granting more privileges to the IRGC. On August 13, for example, in response to new sanctions enacted by the U.S. Congress, the Majlis increased the government's military budget by \$540 million, half of which will go to boost the IRGC-run missile program, the other half to the elite IRGC Qods Force. Demonstrating Rouhani's full support for the bill -- which translates roughly as "confronting America's terrorist and adventurous initiatives" -- was its unanimous passage by parliament.

Addressing the Majlis, Abbas Araqchi, a Foreign Ministry deputy and top nuclear negotiator, stated that Rouhani's "government is grateful [to the Majlis] for such a 'decisive, smart' bill and supports it." Separately, when IRGC officials launched missiles into eastern Syria this past June, Rouhani tried to share credit by asserting that the "IRGC's initiative...was not a decision made by a single person or a military section, but such decisions are made by the Supreme National Security Council," which is headed by the president. On June 21, however, just a few hours after Rouhani's remarks, the IRGC issued a statement emphasizing that, in fact, "the missile operation took place in coordination with the armed forces, by the commander-in-chief's order," indicating that Ayatollah Khamenei had the final word in this operation, whereas the president had none.

Further reflecting the gap between his campaign rhetoric and his presidential actions, Rouhani, on July 25 -- not long after bashing the IRGC as "a government with gun" with which "no one dares compete" -- facilitated an agreement with the Khatam al-Anbia Construction Headquarters, an IRGC arm. According to the deal, the IRGC can supersede both private-sector and foreign companies in all government contracts amounting to more than \$52.4 million. Indeed, the IRGC now holds a monopoly on all state projects, including those involving oil fields and refineries, as well as construction and trade. The day before the deal, July 24, Gholamreza Tajardoost, who heads the Majlis Budget and Planning Committee, made clear that "in the last four years, Hassan Rouhani's government has fully cooperated with the IRGC over budgetary allocation."

Rouhani vs. the People

In electoral authoritarian regimes such as the Islamic Republic -- wherein elections are essential to maintaining the political system's legitimacy -- the elections themselves are stripped of their actual meaning by a covert set of sophisticated manipulation techniques. These measures are reinforced by various undemocratic institutions and power centers that seek to weaken elected authorities and enlist them as their agents, even if such elected officials were voted in by overwhelming margins. Because the unofficial power centers know they cannot actually abolish the elections, they instead seek to push back hard against any agenda that goes against their interests.

In such a context, the ideal president for Khamenei is one who can be subdued enough to fold under pressure from the Supreme Leader's political-military machine. Notably, Khamenei exerted an unprecedented level of intervention in choosing Rouhani's cabinet list. According to Abdullah Naseri, a member of the Reformists' Advisory Council, Khamenei refused to meet with Rouhani until two weeks after the election, whereupon, as announced by Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri, the president consulted with Khamenei in forming the cabinet, which turned out to be no more moderate than the outgoing one. In keeping the appointees politically close to Khamenei and the IRGC, Rouhani simultaneously failed to deliver on campaign promises to seat women and minority ministers, enraging advocates for such blocs and disappointing ordinary voters.

Through his exertion of influence over Rouhani's cabinet picks, Khamenei was seeking not only to maintain control over the executive branch but also to tarnish Rouhani's image as a moderate set on de-ideologizing the major political and economic agendas of the Islamic Republic. Such a move could both dramatically erode Rouhani's base of support and discredit other "reformist" and "moderate" elements who supported him, thus hindering their ability to mobilize support in future contests with hardliners.

A Gateway to Future Militarism?

Khamenei's new vision for the Expediency Council would grant it a freer hand, while similarly empowering the Guardian Council, the twelve-member entity that consists of six ayatollahs and six legal authorities. Indeed, only after Rafsanjani's death has Khamenei sought to implement the contents of a letter he sent to the Majlis in 2014 regarding the procedure for Expediency Council review of parliamentary bills. According to this procedure, all bills should first go to the Expediency Council. If the ensuing evaluation finds them to oppose the "general policies of the regime" -- a subjective criterion, to be sure -- the council should order the Majlis to make necessary modifications, with failure to do so leading to certain rejection by the Guardian Council.

Alongside its role in reviewing legislation, the Expediency Council could expand its portfolio in the post-Khamenei era by increasing the authority of the Provisional Leadership Council -- an entity that assumes power if a new Supreme Leader is not immediately named -- particularly its military authority. According to the constitution, the provisional council does not share the full authorities of the Supreme Leader himself. Unlike the Supreme Leader, for example, the provisional council cannot replace the six ayatollah members on the Guardian Council or any military member, including the IRGC commander. Nor can the provisional council declare war or peace. Only the Expediency Council can effect such an outcome, with a three-quarters vote.

All the recent shifts brought about by the Supreme Leader are aimed at insulating the regime's hard core from moderating forces -- and safeguarding its revolutionary character. Rouhani, for his part, is taking a road already traversed by his moderate predecessors, and true reforms will be elusive at best. The further empowerment of hardliners, meanwhile, could pave the way for the IRGC, Ministry of Intelligence, Ministry of Justice, and other powerful unelected entities to take over the government as soon as Khamenei leaves the scene, without serious concern about reformist insiders, civil society, or even the clerical establishment.

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