

Vanishing Islam in Iran's Election

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Brief Analysis

With Islamic ideology losing its seductive influence, the only way to prolong the regime's life is to reform the economy -- a difficult prospect given the president's weakness and the continued interference of powerful, unaccountable entities.

Over the course of three televised debates and numerous campaign speeches, Iran's presidential candidates have focused on two themes: promising to bring the country out of economic crisis and accusing each other of economic corruption. Although all of the remaining contenders are high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic, their efforts to tarnish each other's image have helped paint the darkest picture of the regime ever seen in state media. This cynicism is also reflected in the election's almost complete absence of Islamic issues and regime ideology, two typical pivot points of Iranian political campaigns. Candidates have seemingly concluded that Islamic ideology has lost its power as a driving factor among voters and is therefore not worth addressing. Interestingly, even Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei eschewed mentioning Islamic issues in his recent speech on the election, instead urging candidates to focus on the role of economics in preserving national security.

THE ECONOMY IS NOW KHAMENEI'S TOP CONCERN

From the beginning of this Persian year (March 21), Khamenei has strengthened his emphasis on the economy as the epicenter of government planning and performance. For example, [his motto](#) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/khameneis-nowruz-nuances>) for this year's televised Nowruz message was "Resistance Economy: Production and Employment."

On May 10, he reiterated this theme at the graduation ceremony for military cadets at Imam Hossein University, which he attended in his capacity as commander-in-chief of the armed forces. There, he offered a string of requests

and warnings to the presidential candidates, who currently include the incumbent, Hassan Rouhani, and his main rivals: the top hardline contender Ebrahim Raisi, a notorious judge who heads the Imam Reza Shrine, the largest endowment in the Islamic world; Mostafa Mir Salim, the chief of staff when Khamenei was president in the 1980s and former minister of culture and Islamic guidance; and reformist Mostafa Hashemi Taba, a former vice president and minister of industry.

First, Khamenei called on the candidates "to explicitly and decisively declare that the economy and people's living conditions are their priority." He also asked them to pledge that they would "make efforts to solve economic problems," "highlight Iran's national independence, pride, and grandeur," and "protect national security and the country's peacefulness." In addition, he declared that the "source of the Islamic Republic's power" lay in a "strong and independent economy," as well as the "military capability and security apparatus" of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

In discussing security issues, Khamenei accused "the enemy" (the United States) of pursuing a three-stage plan against Iran. In the short term, he said, America seeks to threaten the country's security by creating chaos. In the mid-term, it plans to target Iran's economy and the people's financial life. The aim of this "malicious" project is to ensure that "the country's economy does not move forward, people fail in their financial life, employment and production do not grow, and unemployment becomes so epidemic that the people lose hope in the Islamic Republic." In short, the enemy's main strategy against Iran "is economic pressure."

In Khamenei's view, the first two phases lead to a long-term objective: abolishing the regime itself. Contrary to the Islamic Republic's early years, he argued, the enemy does not explicitly spell this goal out anymore: "Nowadays the agenda is to confront the regime through 'change of behavior,' which means gradual deviation from the path of Islam, revolution, and the Imam's line." Accordingly, he told the candidates to avoid "false diagnoses" of Iran's problems, since this could deepen the country's "religious, geographic, lingual, and ethnic gaps" and further "the enemy's unfinished project." He then offered a sharp and rather condescending warning: any candidates who acted against Iran's security in this manner "would be slapped hard."

With these and other threats hanging over their heads, the candidates seem reluctant to speak about key issues such as the nuclear program, Iran's regional policy, and the various non-nuclear economic sanctions still in place. Even more strikingly, they have been silent on promoting Islamic ideology, despite their deep revolutionary and religious credentials. In a May 7 Facebook post titled "The Islamic Republic's Theoretical Crisis," Mohammad Javad Gholamreza Kashi, a political science professor at Allameh Tabatabai University, wrote, "If I was in the moderator's place in the presidential debate, I would have asked conservative candidates, 'What happened to Islam? Why is no one advocating that the Islamic dress code be imposed on women? Why is no one claiming their willingness to fight America? Why is no one talking about the necessity of imposing religious restrictions on cultural and social spheres?'" For Kashi, the paradox underlying the marriage of "Islamic" and "Republic" needs to be urgently addressed -- otherwise those who are disappointed with the republic's shortcomings and those who are disappointed with the regime's Islamic track record will eventually coalesce at the radical ends of the spectrum, with "one group tending to follow the Taliban's model and the other wishing for a foreign military attack" to topple the regime.

ENDEMIC CORRUPTION

The economic focus of this electoral season is less surprising when one considers the often misleading meaning of terms such as "state" and "government" in the Iranian context. The executive branch, led by the president, has around 450,000 bureau chiefs and directors, pays monthly salaries to at least 8.5 million active or retired employees, and supervises around 1,700 central government organizations and 247 provincial or municipal institutions. As one recent BBC report put it, "One out of every two Iranian households has a family member working as a government employee."

In addition, Iran has numerous important entities that lie completely outside the three branches of government and have zero transparency or accountability to elected officials. They include the IRGC, state radio and television, and gigantic financial enterprises such as the Imam Reza Shrine and the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled. These entities recognize Khamenei as their sole authority, hold resources that rival those of the state, and compete with public and private businesses alike. Such a complicated, unregulated system is fertile ground for deep-rooted corruption all over the country -- a source of growing frustration for the people.

ROUHANI'S PROSPECTS

The presidential race has changed significantly in recent days, making Rouhani's chances of reelection uncertain. Conservative candidate Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf has just withdrawn in favor of Raisi, presumably with the hope of boosting the hardline camp's odds of either winning the election outright or beating Rouhani in the second round. Yet Qalibaf's support had dropped significantly after the May 12 debate, and it is difficult to believe all of his supporters will vote for Raisi anyway, so his exit may not be a game-changer. Moreover, Raisi himself is not as popular as previous conservative presidents (e.g., Mahmoud Ahmadinejad). He also lacks managerial experience, has never been active in politics, and is infamous for his role on the "death committee" that oversaw the mass killing of political prisoners in 1988.

Thus, while narrowing the field down to one main candidate may seem like the right tactic by conservatives (Mir Salim is still in the race but has received no major conservative endorsements), competing against Raisi alone might not be a problem for Rouhani, who won more than 50 percent of the vote in 2013. Although polls show he has lost a great deal of his social power base, his main rival is so notorious that voters may feel compelled to choose Rouhani as the lesser evil. Moreover, reformist candidate Eshaq Jahangiri has just withdrawn in favor of Rouhani, which could help the incumbent attract some of his reluctant non-conservative critics.

Rouhani might also benefit from Ayatollah Khamenei's preference to see a decisive outcome in the election's first round. A second round of voting would definitely polarize the race, perhaps spurring dissatisfied people into the streets in unmanageable numbers.

CONCLUSION

Recent statements by Khamenei and the top presidential candidates indicate that they regard the economic crisis as the regime's main vulnerability -- one capable of precipitating a security crisis that jeopardizes the Islamic Republic. Because of the regime's failure to deliver on its ideological promises over the past four decades, the people mistrust its ability to make Iran an ordinary member of the international community. With Islamic ideology losing its seductive influence, the only way to prolong the regime's life is to reform the economy. But the prospects for such reform do not look bright given the very limited authority granted to the president and the continued interference of powerful, unaccountable entities in the country's economy.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its recent study [The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-leadership-in-the-shiite-community) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-leadership-in-the-shiite-community>). ❖

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