

Iran's Political Landscape -- and What Is Unlikely to Change with Friday's Elections

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Feb 25, 2016

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As in past votes, the candidates have been closely screened, the outcome is expected to uphold the legislature's largely conservative makeup, and the victors will remain largely dependent on military institutions.

Some speculate that new leadership could change Iran's direction -- and the power equation in the Middle East -- by refashioning the country's foreign and regional policy. The influence of the Iranian elections Friday, for parliament and the Assembly of Experts -- the clerical body that appoints the supreme leader -- is likely to be narrower in the short term, with more far-reaching change coming with the next generation. Here are a few things that can be expected in the near term in the often-unpredictable Islamic Republic.

The upcoming vote will largely mirror past elections in Iran, being neither free nor fair. The candidates have been closely screened and the outcome is expected to uphold the largely conservative makeup in parliament and the Assembly of Experts. In addition, the victors will remain largely dependent on military institutions, namely the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Moderates will stay marginalized in this arrangement and face intensified pressure from hard-line colleagues.

President Hassan Rouhani can expect challenges to his political viability. The president's reelection campaign in 2017 is all but certain to be tested by tight curbs on political and media freedoms, as well as continued economic frustrations exacerbated by structural corruption and unregulated state-supported groups. Economic uncertainty is likely to persist despite sanctions relief tied to the international agreement over Iran's nuclear program.

Mr. Rouhani was elected in 2013 thanks to popular mobilization and support from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, driven by the sense that Mr. Rouhani could navigate the nuclear talks and deliver financial relief for the Islamic Republic. Now that Mr. Rouhani has achieved implementation of the nuclear deal, the supreme leader has

little reason to continue backing him in the face of tremendous pressure from hard-liners.

For their part, Iran's reformists may have fewer tools to back Mr. Rouhani than they did in 2013. Mr. Rouhani has focused most of his energy on the nuclear deal. He has not improved the dismal human rights situation in Iran nor gotten Green Movement leaders released from more than four years of house arrest. During his tenure, military and intelligence suppression of political activists has remained robust and effective. As Mohammad Reza Khatami, former deputy speaker of parliament and a prominent reformist, put it recently, Mr. Rouhani's government is "the loneliest government ever of the Islamic Republic."

Presidential candidates in 2017 will need to establish strong relations with the supreme leader and his apparatus, especially the Revolutionary Guards, and are likely to succeed by reassuring these entities that their political and economic interests will not be undermined.

Ayatollah Khamenei is 77 and has hinted repeatedly that he expects the next Assembly of Experts to appoint his successor. Iran holds elections for president, parliament, municipal positions, and the Assembly of Experts. It is the institution of the supreme leader -- with its precepts of divine legitimacy and exclusive authority over the judiciary, armed forces, intelligence, media, and political and economic entities -- that prevents a true democratic system from emerging in Iran. The Guardian Council, another entity under the supreme leader's control and the body that oversees elections, has tightened the qualification process and blocked many non-conservative candidates.

The Iranian government sees itself as not only the region's preeminent political actor but also the protector of Shiite Muslims across the world. In this arrangement, the supreme leader serves as both the top religious and political authority. One Shiite figure has checked Ayatollah Khamenei's religious dominance: Ayatollah Ali Sistani, an Iranian cleric who has resided for decades in the Shiite holy city of Najaf, Iraq. Ayatollah Sistani's followers include millions of Shiites worldwide, and his presence in Iraq contains, to an extent, Iran's interference in its neighbor's affairs.

But Ayatollah Sistani is 86 and has no heir to transfer his religious authority and financial assets to. His death will mark the passing of a generation of transnational ayatollahs who held political sway but were unbound by allegiance to any ordinary political entity, institution, or government. Eventually, after the passing of both Ayatollah Sistani and Ayatollah Khamenei, we will see a new era in Shiite clerical politics whereby religious authorities will multiply but be largely constrained to their local communities. (Notably, Ayatollah Sistani's exit could well lead to increased Iranian military intervention in Iraq and the region more broadly.)

In assessing Iran's future leadership, U.S. analysts -- and the next U.S. administration -- are better off not focusing on personality or political inclination. A future Iranian leader is likely to govern from a comparatively collective and corporate mind-set -- and the process of becoming leader is likely to reset his interests and orientations. One possibility is that the next Iranian leader will further entrench its policy of defying Western interests regionally and globally, intensifying its ideological ambitions. Then again, new leadership could deviate from the revolutionary road, jettisoning anti-Western aspirations and seeking the comforts of inclusion as a normal international player. At this juncture, with Ayatollah Khamenei and hard-liners in the Assembly of Experts firmly in control, fundamental change looks to be a ways off.

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