

Iranian Moderates Face Tall Obstacles in 2016 Elections

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Brief Analysis

Uncertainty over the nuclear deal's economic effects will make it difficult for moderates to win more votes, as will the hardliners' greater capacity to shape public opinion and the electoral process.

On February 26, 2016, two elections will be held simultaneously in Iran: one for parliament (Majlis) and one for the Assembly of Experts, a largely ceremonial body whose importance may increase dramatically in the coming years due to its role in determining Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's eventual successor. Historically, the turnout for parliamentary elections has been quite high, while assembly elections suffer from the lowest participation rate of all Iranian polls. Besides the technical and financial advantages of holding two elections together, the regime hopes that Majlis voters will participate in the assembly vote too, believing that higher turnout might boost the legitimacy of a political body that has suffered from significant criticism over the past three decades. The main question then becomes whether allies of President Hassan Rouhani and other so-called moderates will be able to seize a significant number of seats in both institutions at once.

ELECTIONS IN AN UNDEMOCRATIC REGIME

Majlis members are elected for four years, and assembly members for seven. These elections are controlled by the Supreme Leader, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and other unelected power circles through various means.

First, prominent figures hoping to appear on the ballot typically need to determine beforehand whether Khamenei opposes their candidacy. The Supreme Leader does not explicitly advise anyone against running, but his office or other high-ranking officials will often reveal his views on specific cases. In May 2013, for example, moderate parliamentarian Mohammad Reza Khabbaz noted the following while advocating Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami for that year's presidential election: "Of course before announcing their candidacy, they should

have a meeting with the Supreme Leader and obtain his tacit approval, because solving current problems in the country would not be possible without the Supreme Leader's support."

Second, when candidates register their names, the Guardian Council has to qualify them based on several criteria, most notably their full "practical" loyalty to the Supreme Leader and their recognition of his authority over all matters of the state (i.e., the principle of *velayat-e faqih*). The council consists of six ayatollahs and six lawyers; its main decisions are made by the ayatollahs, who are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. The council's powerful secretary is Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, a leading hardliner who does not hide his anti-reformist and anti-moderate approach to domestic and foreign policy.

Third, once elections are complete, the Guardian Council is solely responsible for endorsing the final result, despite sharing supervision over the vote counting process with the Interior Ministry. Taken together, these and other measures usually ensure that election results do not stray too far from the planning and expectations of the Supreme Leader, the IRGC, the Guardian Council, and other institutions, unless the leadership has seriously miscalculated a given candidate's social power base.

MAJLIS AS A TOOL TO CONTROL THE PRESIDENT

Parliamentary elections are important in Iran for several reasons. As with municipal elections, many Iranians -- especially in small towns -- vote in Majlis elections less for political reasons and more as a response to local economic and administrative affairs. In recent years, the IRGC has taken advantage of this fact, placing dozens of former personnel in the Majlis by having them run for seats in small and marginal regions. The strategy has helped hardliners use the legislature as a tool for constraining the president's power, especially his ability to appoint cabinet members and influence budget planning. The current Majlis has also tried to play a bolder role in foreign and nuclear policy, which are traditionally not on its agenda.

By unofficially guiding the Majlis in this manner, the Supreme Leader can control the president without undertaking any responsibility for the resultant government policies. As cabinet spokesman Mohammad Bagher Nobakht stated while addressing parliament on May 12, "This is a usual custom, that the Supreme Leader expresses his views about some bills to the cabinet through the top Majlis officials."

CONSERVATIVES VS. CONSERVATIVES?

As the elections approach, the traditional struggle between reformists and conservatives has largely been replaced by divisions between powerful conservative factions, with the reformists/moderates pushed to the margins. To be sure, the reformists are still attempting to mobilize and unite. Last October, Hossein Marashi, a member of the Kargozaran Party, announced that his faction was planning to work within a "Reformist Grand Front" led by former president Khatami, with the aim of sending reformist and moderate candidates to Majlis. Similarly, Khatami's former vice president, Mohammad Reza Aref, has announced his candidacy, and reformist sources indicate that Khatami himself is considering a run as well.

Yet the deck is stacked against the moderates. For instance, Khatami was disgraced by the Supreme Leader in 2009 - Iranian media are still officially banned from publishing any news about him, and he is barred from traveling abroad. As for Rouhani, his team seems to have no obvious plan for the elections, even though the deadline window for registering candidates (December 19-25) is fast approaching.

Meanwhile, the conservative camp seems more dynamic than the moderates. Conservatives are no longer monolithic; various factions are expressing serious disagreements on key issues such as the nuclear deal. This will make it easier for them to represent the major political and economic tendencies of potential voters and fill the vacuum that will be created by the Guardian Council's inevitable disqualification of important moderate and reformist figures. On August 1, however, Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri, a prominent conservative close to the moderates, told

Iranian media that neither reformists nor "moderate conservatives" have any clear plan for the elections.

MANAGING A SUCCESSION CRISIS

As mentioned above, the Experts Assembly is constitutionally in charge of appointing a new Supreme Leader; it is also tasked with overseeing his work and dismissing him in case he fails to perform his duties, but its actual ability to hold him accountable has been virtually nil in practice. For example, one of the reasons why the institution has been criticized so heavily over the years is because of the manner in which former assembly member Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri was dismissed in 1989. Flouting the assembly's sole authority to remove members, the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini dismissed Montazeri in part because of his protest against the Supreme Leader's illegal 1988 order to execute more than four thousand political prisoners. Khomeini's move showed that the assembly was simply another instrument in the hands of the Supreme Leader rather than an authority to hold him responsible.

Regarding its role in succession, the assembly elected Khamenei to follow Khomeini nearly three decades ago, but the legal procedure by which he was chosen continues to raise serious questions. After the next assembly is elected in February, it will be in place until 2023, so it will most likely face the challenge of naming a successor to the seventy-six-year-old Khamenei. Therefore, despite the institution's historically ceremonial role, the next set of assembly members are poised to become key political players. While the IRGC and other powerful institutions will of course wield strong influence on succession decisionmaking, the Experts Assembly is the sole authority endowed with the legal power to appoint and legitimize the next Supreme Leader.

As for the assembly's composition, all members must be ayatollahs, the highest rank in the clerical hierarchy. Yet this title has become increasingly political under the Islamic Republic, and achieving it often reveals more about one's status within the regime than one's theological credentials. In addition, the next assembly will be expanded to ninety-nine members -- thirteen seats are being added for the February vote.

In a recent interview with *Tolou* weekly, Rafsanjani announced that he will run in the assembly election. He also advocated the candidacy of Hasan Khomeini, a grandson of the Islamic Republic's founder and a close confidant of Rafsanjani and Khatami. Yet Rafsanjani remains suspicious of the Guardian Council and has repeatedly accused it of manipulating elections. The council disqualified him from even participating in the 2013 presidential election, and he lost the 2005 vote to hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad under controversial circumstances.

CONCLUSION

In an effort to help moderate candidates defeat conservatives in February, Rouhani will likely play the only major card in his hand: his success in lifting sanctions after two years of tough nuclear negotiations with the P5+1. The main theme of his 2013 presidential campaign and the past two years of discourse was his promise that the people's living conditions would change drastically once sanctions were lifted.

Yet the reality is that most Iranians are unlikely to feel these positive effects by February, if at all. Even if the nuclear agreement receives prompt final approval in both the United States and Iran (see "[Why Khamenei's Official Approval of the Nuclear Deal Matters](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-khameneis-official-approval-of-the-nuclear-deal-matters)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/why-khameneis-official-approval-of-the-nuclear-deal-matters>)), the complexity of the sanctions regime and the international banking system will probably delay its most tangible effects, as will a lingering lack of confidence among investors and bankers for resuming business with Iran. Moreover, while Iran's currency strengthened for a few weeks before negotiations ended, the stock and currency markets both began to drop again right after the deal was signed in July. Therefore, moderates cannot rely on the economic factor for attracting voters. In fact, Rouhani's opponents may well use the slow pace of post-sanctions improvements to accuse him of being an incompetent manager and exaggerating the link between a good economy and nuclear compromise. For now, Rouhani's team is

very busy finalizing the nuclear deal and planning for the subsequent economic changes, but they may have to adjust their expectations about how much this will change voters' living conditions in the short term.

Another obstacle is the fact that moderates have no strong media or organizational leverage for influencing public opinion. In addition to Khatami's ban, reformists are generally blacklisted by establishment media outlets, and their political organizations (e.g., Mosharekat-e Iran-e Islami and Mujahedin-e Enghelab-e Islami) are either banned or not very active due to regime pressure.

Finally, Rouhani allies were no doubt discouraged by the fact that arch-conservative Jannati was not only reappointed as Guardian Council secretary, but also named the head of the committee for monitoring Majlis and Experts Assembly elections. Both of these recent moves send a strong message to all potential candidates outside the conservative camp.

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