

Tehran to Decide Who Can Run for President

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Brief Analysis

As the regime narrows the list of approved candidates for the upcoming presidential election, Washington should criticize Tehran for limiting who is permitted to run.

On May 12, Iran's Guardian Council will begin deliberations on which candidates can participate in the June presidential election, perhaps the most important step in selecting Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's successor. The uncertainty regarding the outcome, coupled with the regime's repeated claims that nuclear sanctions are intended to hurt the people, gives Washington ample room to criticize the highly controlled electoral process and call for a more open and democratic Iran.

BACKGROUND

To be considered for this year's election, all presidential aspirants must file by May 11. The Guardian Council -- a powerful body with twelve members, six of whom are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader -- then decides which candidates are permitted to run based on its subjective judgment of their qualifications. The results of that process will be announced on May 16. Those disqualified can ask the council to reconsider; any such appeals would be decided by May 23.

On June 14, elections will be held for president, municipal council seats, and two vacant seats in the Assembly of Experts, which selects a new Supreme Leader if Ali Khamenei dies. Holding major elections simultaneously helps the regime keep costs down while exploiting the people's interest in local politics to raise turnout for the presidential vote. Hundreds of thousands of candidates have already registered for the municipal elections; here too, the Guardian Council determines who is qualified to run. Simultaneous elections also decrease the chances of a boycott -- reformists and technocrats have applied to run at all levels, so they would have difficulty asking voters to stay home on election day if the Guardian Council disqualifies their presidential candidates but approves their local candidates. Past presidential elections have frequently produced surprising results, and no one is sure how this one will turn out

-- at least in terms of which conservative will prevail. If no candidate wins a majority on June 14, a runoff between the top two vote-getters will be held on June 21.

REFORMISTS SIDELINED BUT NOT ELIMINATED

Despite efforts to convince the Islamic Republic's two previous presidents -- seventy-nine-year-old Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Muhammad Khatami -- to enter the race, neither has accepted thus far. In addressing his supporters recently, Khatami asked how one can run for president if he is not even allowed to travel abroad, implicitly referring to himself (he has been barred from leaving the country to participate in international conferences since 2009).

In addition, the regime has heightened its vitriolic rhetoric against both men. In an April 29 editorial by the leading Iranian daily *Kayhan*, publisher Hossein Shariatmadari, a close confidant of Khamenei, called Khatami a "traitor," "corrupt on earth," and "fifth column." Similarly, Intelligence Minister Haydar Moslehi recently declared, "We have information that the person who claims that he predicted the *fitna* was himself involved in creating it," referring to the mass opposition protests of 2009. This was interpreted as a clear warning that neither Rafsanjani nor Khatami should run for president.

Indeed, Ayatollah Khamenei seems bent on not only marginalizing reformists, but also sidelining figures from the first generation of the Islamic Republic. He is unlikely to let Rafsanjani or Khatami run, and all of the other reformist/technocrat candidates are minor figures who have little chance of prevailing in June (e.g., former nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, who is unknown to the vast majority of Iranians despite his high profile abroad). In fact, the Guardian Council may approve such candidates precisely because they are unlikely to garner many votes.

END OF THE ROAD FOR AHMADINEJAD?

In an April 10 editorial in *Kayhan*, Shariatmadari attacked Ahmadinejad for backing the controversial Esfandiar Rahim Mashai as his favorite candidate (Ahmadinejad himself cannot run because of Iran's two-term limit). The article pointed out Khamenei's July 2009 letter to Ahmadinejad criticizing Mashai as an inappropriate choice for vice president, making it difficult to imagine why he would now be considered a viable presidential candidate. Although one Guardian Council member responded to the editorial by stating that no decisions had been made on anyone yet, Mashai has little chance of being approved.

Some Iranian analysts believe that Ahmadinejad is well aware of Mashai's poor prospects and is pursuing a more subtle agenda -- namely, portraying himself as a victim of Khamenei and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. If that tactic succeeds in boosting his faction's popularity, he would then either introduce another candidate after Mashai's disqualification or use the momentum to further his own postelection plans. Yet Mashai is probably the only figure in Ahmadinejad's camp capable of attracting voters, since most Iranians blame the president and his team for years of economic mismanagement, corruption, and international isolation. Accordingly, Khamenei and the Guardian Council's strategy toward Ahmadinejad's faction may be the same as their approach to the technocrats and reformists -- disqualify or intimidate the main figures while approving the candidacy of minor figures who are unlikely to receive many votes.

NO CONSERVATIVE CONSENSUS

Iran's hardliners have put forward a great many candidates for the presidential race; in an April 27 speech, Khamenei expressed concern about the number of people vying to run. None of these conservative candidates has emerged as a clear frontrunner, and it is difficult to find any substantial ideological or policy differences between them. Their main strategy centers on blaming Ahmadinejad for Iran's economic problems, which is a convenient way to minimize the role of international sanctions.

Conservative candidates have also been eager to highlight the president's penchant for challenging the Supreme Leader's authority, running a rhetorical race to prove their own loyalty and subservience to Khamenei. Accordingly, the Guardian Council will have difficulty narrowing the field -- most of the conservative applicants have served in government, criticized the reformists and technocrats consistently, and advocated the radical version of *velayat-e faqih* (the doctrine granting the Supreme Leader his authority), so the council has no real justification to disqualify them.

CONCLUSION

Washington should not ignore Iran's presidential election, particularly given the regime's repeated claim that U.S. sanctions aim to hurt the people rather than curb the nuclear program. To rebut such rhetoric, Washington should show its concern for the people's democratic demands.

The U.S. government will have two clear opportunities to react to the election. First, once the final list of approved presidential candidates is announced, Washington should criticize Khamenei for letting the Guardian Council disqualify certain figures and intimidate others into staying out of the race. Second, in the likely event that opposition members inside or outside the country accuse the regime of manipulating the voting process, Washington should express concern about the election's legitimacy.

Sharp U.S. criticism of the electoral process would pose little risk of hurting the nuclear negotiations, and restraint has proven ineffective in the past -- Washington's relatively muted reaction to the 2009 postelection turmoil failed to improve the regime's negotiating posture then, so there is little sense in remaining quiet now. In contrast, taking a strong stance against electoral manipulation would show the Iranian people that the target of U.S. pressure is the regime, not them. Supporting their calls for democracy and civil rights is the most effective way to neutralize the government's anti-American propaganda. Once the election's trajectory becomes clearer, Washington can turn to the task of assessing how the outcome will affect the nuclear impasse and other crucial issues.

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