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Perspective

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Iran's 2013 Presidential Election: Its Meaning and Implications

Alireza Nader

Iran's June 14, 2013, election will take place in the shadow of the turbulent 2009 presidential election, after which Iran witnessed the largest protests since the 1979 revolution. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards, keen to prevent a replay of 2009, are attempting to "engineer" the election in order ensure a loyal president. Khamenei has marginalized the reformists and suppressed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his preferred candidate, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. The only serious challenger to the political status quo may have been former president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was disqualified by the Guardian Council on May 21, 2013. Other prominent candidates, such as Ali Akbar Velayati, Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, are closely aligned with Khamenei.

The presidency is an important position: Responsible for devising and implementing an economic policy, the president appoints key ministers and heads the Supreme National Security Council.

AP Photo/Kamran Jebreili

However, his ability to reshape important policies, especially on the nuclear program, should not be overestimated. Khamenei makes all the key decisions in Iran; since his selection as Supreme Leader in 1989, he has attempted to monopolize power at the expense of other political institutions and personalities.

The postelection period in Iran may result in a period of reduced tensions with the international community (if there is an orderly and undisputed election), especially since the provocative Ahmadinejad will no longer be president. But any change in Iran's nuclear position will be decided by Khamenei, who theoretically could use the new government as a cover for possible concessions, although it is more likely his monopolization of power and the election of a loyal president will make Iran even less flexible on the nuclear issue. This is particularly true if Khamenei views diplomatic negotiations as not providing a face-saving way out of the nuclear crisis.

Major divisions resulting from a disputed election could also paralyze the regime and prevent it from making critical decisions.

This perspective seeks to examine the meaning and implications of the 2013 presidential election. Specifically, it analyzes Khamenei's

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei makes all the key decisions in Iran.

Sipa via AP Images

objectives, the regime's electoral strategy, the competing factions and personalities, and the potential implications for the United States, especially concerning Iran's nuclear program.

Among the key findings:

- Ayatollah Khamenei is concerned with the election's legitimacy, but his goal above all else is to ensure a stable election that produces a president loyal to him personally.
- The only serious potential challenge to Khamenei, Rafsanjani, has been removed from the field of candidates, and this could help Khamenei further consolidate his power.
- One of the pro-Khamenei candidates—Ali Akbar Velayati, Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and Saeed Jalili—may have the best chance of winning.
- The reformists will not have a major role in the elections for the first time since the 1979 revolution. Their main potential candidates are either under arrest or would face physical danger if they sought to run. However, two reformist-leaning candidates, Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Reza Aref, may still have a small chance of winning.
- The election could theoretically lead to a limited reduction of tensions between Iran and the international community. It could also facilitate more productive negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany). On the other hand, Khamenei's monopolization of power will likely decrease Iran's flexibility on the nuclear program, especially if the Supreme Leader believes that compromise will jeopardize the regime's survival more than increased sanctions. Any change in Iran's nuclear position will be driven by Khamenei.
- No matter who is elected president, the Islamic Republic is likely to continue its evolution into an authoritarian political system dominated by Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards.
- The vote of the Iranian population will be largely irrelevant, as the election is a jockeying for power among competing factions rather than an expression of popular will.

Introduction

Iran's June 14, 2013, presidential election comes at a time of intense pressure on the Islamic Republic. The diplomatic stalemate over Iran's nuclear program has led to unprecedented sanctions that are devastating the Iranian economy. Israel has threatened to strike Iran's nuclear facilities, while the Obama administration, lacking absolute certainty that diplomacy will prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, has left the option of war with Iran "on the table." The Islamic Republic, once considered the Middle East's "ascendant power," faces the loss of its key ally in Syria and its overall position as the leader of regional "resistance" to the United States and Israel.

Perhaps more importantly, the Iranian regime confronts deep internal divisions. The June 14 election will take place in the shadow of the 2009 presidential election and its violent aftermath. Four years ago, Iran faced the largest public demonstrations since the 1979 revolution. The so-called Green uprising was precipitated

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by what many Iranians considered to be the fraudulent re-election of Ahmadinejad. But the protests also provided an opportunity for the venting of years, if not decades, of popular and even elite dissatisfaction, and a challenge to the monopolization of power by Khamenei.

Iran's increasingly authoritarian and militarized political system, declining economy, and constriction of individual freedoms created a combustible atmosphere ignited by Ahmadinejad's declared victory. For many Iranians, the Islamic Republic, which prides itself on having "democratic" elections, demonstrated its true nature: an autocratic theocracy led by the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards. Even revolutionary figures such as Rafsanjani, a founding father of the Islamic Republic, were marginalized from the halls of power.

The 2013 election may demonstrate whether the Islamic Republic will continue on its present trajectory and become an even more exclusive and unpopular political system. Khamenei has spoken of eliminating direct elections for president,[1] but even if Iran continues to have elections, Khamenei would prefer a pliant and obedient president who implements his dictates. He has demonstrated little tolerance for dissent or competing institutions. The current political trends suggest a move toward an even less democratic political system.

Khamenei and the Guardian Council have disqualified Rafsanjani and Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, Ahmadinejad's preferred successor. Mashaei, who is Ahmadinejad's in-law and key adviser, has been a particular target of the regime's ire and opposition. Rafsanjani, who would have garnered solid support from the reformists, was viewed by Khamenei as posing a risk to his authority. But Rafsanjani's disqualification is also risky, as it could further jeopardize the election's legitimacy, not to mention the regime's credibility. Rafsanjani has long been considered to be a pillar of the revolution, and his diminishing influence could mean the shrinking of Khamenei's support base and a more unstable system.

Khamenei is seeking to preserve regime unity in the face of economic decline and regime isolation. He may realize that his regime has lost much support among the population, but it is still important for the Islamic Republic to demonstrate some popular legitimacy to shore up its narrowing base. Nevertheless, Khamenei is primarily concerned with regime security; his goal is to produce an orderly, calm, and undisputed election. Essentially, the regime is "engineering" the election by creating an atmosphere of fear through mass intimidation and violence.[2] The Iranian regime also seeks to tightly control the information sphere by choking off any independent media and nongovernmental groups, and even cutting Iran off from the Internet.[3]

Khamenei will still make key decisions no matter who is elected as president. The new president will remain influential, as he will be in charge of administrating Iran's vast bureaucracy and shaping the economic agenda, but he will not be able to undertake a fundamental transformation of a nondemocratic system, and will not have the authority to reshape Iran's policies, including on the nuclear program. Power and authority flow from the very top in today's Iran—

much like during the time of Iran's last monarch, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi.

However, the election can theoretically usher in a calmer atmosphere a bit more conducive to negotiations. The rabble-rousing and provocative Ahmadinejad will no longer be president. And a new executive administration in Tehran, focused on the country's economic plight, may propel the system to a less intransigent position. Khamenei, keen to save face under intense pressure, may use the new government as a cover for concessions on the nuclear program.

But Khamenei's consolidation of power and the election of a loyal president are likely to make Iran more intransigent on the nuclear program. Khamenei is wedded to a policy of "resistance" against the United States. Increasingly harsh sanctions in the absence of a serious U.S. push for diplomacy could further persuade him that the United States and its allies intend to collapse his regime rather than reshape Iran's nuclear calculations; this would make Khamenei and his new president more likely to dig in rather than concede on the nuclear issue.

On the other hand, the election could again become a flashpoint for elite rivalries and public demonstrations. Ahmadinejad has threatened to air the regime's dirty laundry if Mashaei is not allowed to run, although at this point he appears to have accepted his protégé's disqualification without too much fuss.[4] Any provocation from him and Mashaei could lead to a forceful regime reaction, including the arrest of both men. Rafsanjani, although disqualified, can still serve as a threat to Khamenei's ambitions. And the Green Movement, while dormant, could renew its challenge to the Supreme Leader. Finally, the sort of spontaneous popular uprising that shook Iran in 2009 and has led to the toppling of Arab regimes since 2011 cannot be discounted.

June 14 and its aftermath may provide a clue as to whether Khamenei and his Guards will relent in the face of mounting pressures, or prepare Iran for a time of greater internal crisis and external confrontation.

The 2009 Election: Khamenei Consolidates Power

The 2009 presidential election was the culmination of a long-developing trend: the consolidation of power by Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards. As Iran's ultimate political, religious, and military leader, Khamenei has faced a host of challenges from personalities, factions, and institutions at odds with not only his political agenda, but his personal power. Khamenei has never had the charisma and religious standing of his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Rather, Khamenei's wielding of power has depended on a carefully crafted patronage system backed by military force; his leadership has not been based on winning prestige and influence, but on grabbing power from others.[5]

A Unique and Dysfunctional Political System

The Islamic Republic is a truly distinctive political system. The world's only modern theocracy, it combines clerical rule supposedly "sanctioned" by God with popular presidential and parliamentary elections. At the apex of the system sits the Supreme Leader, whose authority as the chief of state is not only guaranteed by Iran's constitution, but by the regime's theory of velayat-e faghih (rule of the supreme jurisprudent). According to this theory, the Supreme Leader acts as the representative of the Hidden Imam, the leader of Shi'a believers. The brainchild of Khomeini (leader of the revolution and founder of the Islamic Republic), velayat-e faghih has shallow roots in Shi'a Islam, but has been used by Khomeini and Khamenei to justify Islamist rule.

Khamenei's relationships with the three presidents who have served under him—Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Ahmadinejad—have been complicated, if not outright challenging.

Khamenei was chosen as Supreme Leader in 1989 by the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body theoretically responsible for the selection and supervision of the Leader. In reality, Khamenei came to power as the preferred candidate of Khomeini, as claimed by Rafsanjani, the head of the Assembly at the time.[6]

The president is technically the second most powerful figure in Iran. He is responsible for the day-to-day administration of the government and has the authority to devise and implement economic policy. Although not the ultimate decider on foreign policy, the president chairs the Supreme National Security Council; appoints key cabinet officials such as the foreign, defense, and intelligence ministers; and often helps to shape the tone and tenor of the regime's foreign policies.[7]

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This is partly because of the awkward bifurcation of the Islamic Republic into an appointed and unaccountable theocracy, and an elected republic. The constitution delineates regime authority in relative detail, but the wielding of power tends to be dysfunctional in practice.[8] For example, the president has the authority to set economic policy, but he has limited control over the Revolutionary Guards' business empire and Iran's autonomous and wealthy *bonyads*, private charities that function as economic conglomerates. Similarly, the president can hire and fire the minister of intelligence, a key national security figure, but he must have the Supreme Leader's consent to do so.

More importantly, Khamenei is not a man who prizes democratic and inclusive decisionmaking. This appears to be a result of his insecurity as Supreme Leader; Khamenei was not chosen due to his religious qualifications or popular standing, but because Khomeini—and perhaps more importantly, Rafsanjani—viewed him as a trusted cleric who could protect and continue the political legacy of *velayat-e faghih*.[9]

Khamenei has often been overshadowed by Rafsanjani, the man who played a critical role in his selection by the Assembly of Experts.[10] Rafsanjani was elected president the same year Khamenei was selected as Supreme Leader; politically astute and calculating, Rafsanjani built a network of supporters that enabled him to make major decisions as president. Over time, he was accused of using his position and network to build a vast business empire and is considered to be one of Iran's richest men.[11] Khamenei appears to resent Rafsanjani's power and position, and has attempted to marginalize him for the past two decades.

An Insecure Leader and His Guards

Khamenei managed to escape Rafsanjani's shadow by creating a patronage system of loyal clerics and bureaucrats. But crucially, Khamenei relied on the Revolutionary Guards to buttress and strengthen his authority.[12] Among key positions held by Khamenei in the early post-revolutionary period was the supervisor of the Revolutionary Guards and deputy minister of defense. Khamenei's early experience appears to have shaped his approach

to politics; in later years, he viewed the Guards as more dependable allies than Iran's quarrelsome clerics and factions.

Under Khamenei's reign, the Guards have surpassed their role as the regime's praetorian soldiers. In addition to defending the Islamic Republic from external and internal threats, the Revolutionary Guards have become a decisive economic and political power broker. They are believed to be one of Iran's biggest economic players, with a stake in nearly every major sector of the economy, including energy, transportation, construction, telecommunications, and, of course, the military-industrial complex.[13] Khamenei appears to have made an implicit deal with the Guards in which he would empower them economically in return for the Guards' support of his political agenda. Over the years, Khamenei has relied on the Guards to marginalize Rafsanjani, the reformists, and more recently, Ahmadinejad.

Khamenei's close embrace of the Guards was in large part due to the rise of the reformists, who posed the biggest challenge to Khamenei's authority as *vali-e faghih* (supreme jurist). Rafsanjani sought to reform Iran's state-dominated economy and lessen its international isolation. But the reformists wanted to liberalize Iran's political system, and enhance the republican aspects of the Islamic Republic. Their emphasis on elections and the public's participation in the political process was a direct challenge to Khamenei's absolutist notions of *velayat-e faghih* and divine authority.[14]

Khamenei did not want to share power with the reformists, and appears to have resented the charismatic and popular reformist Khatami (who served as president from 1997 to 2005). The 1990s chain murders of reformist intellectuals and activists by shadowy groups tied to Iran's conservative security establishment served as

Former president Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was disqualified as a presidential candidate by the Guardian Council.
AP Photo/Vahid Salemi

Supporters of reformist candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, some wearing green, the color of the party, gather on the streets June 13, 2009, to protest the results of the Iranian presidential election in Tehran, Iran.

AP File Photo/Ben Curtis

a stark warning to those who sought political reforms. The 1999 student riots in Tehran were the final straw for Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards; they viewed Khatami's agenda as precipitating the riots and posing a direct challenge to the regime. In a publicized letter, top Guards commanders warned Khatami of a military coup if he did not restrain his supporters.[15]

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad

Ahmadinejad suited Khamenei's ambitions more than Rafsanjani or Khatami. He was a seemingly humble and principled lay revolutionary without a popular base or religious credentials. Ahmadinejad demonstrated a public deference to Khamenei not shared by Rafsanjani and Khatami, both of whom were technically the same clerical rank as Khamenei. Ahmadinejad was also hostile toward Rafsanjani, viewing him as irredeemably corrupt and anti-revolutionary. Ahmadinejad was also deeply anti-reformist, espoused an assertive foreign policy, and perhaps most importantly, he was supported by the top Guards echelon. A minor candidate when he first entered the contest, Ahmadinejad was nevertheless elected president in 2005, despite allegations of fraud and vote-rigging.

Ahmadinejad has proven to be the most troublesome president for Khamenei, however. He has managed to antagonize not only the reformists and Rafsanjani, but most of the pro-Khamenei conservatives as well. Ahmadinejad has undermined the economy and his provocative language has led to Iran being internationally ostracized and paved the way for a possible military confrontation over the

nuclear program. Of course, he should not be blamed for all of Iran's ills. But his presidency, and particularly his re-election in 2009, played a decisive role in exposing the flaws and dysfunctions of the Islamic Republic.

Khamenei appears to have greatly miscalculated in supporting Ahmadinejad in 2005, even more so in 2009. The Supreme Leader's eagerness to prevent the reformists, namely Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, from assuming the presidency in 2009 weakened the legitimacy of the electoral system and the viability of the Islamic Republic. Despite widespread evidence of fraud, Khamenei decided to back Ahmadinejad publicly, and responded to protesters with brute force.[16]

After the election, however, Ahmadinejad appeared to think he had carte blanche to rule; he fired the foreign minister but overreached when he dismissed the minister of intelligence in 2011 despite Khamenei's disapproval;[17] since then, the gutsy but reckless president has barely hidden his animosity toward the clerical class and even Khamenei. Ahmadinejad, who claims direct communication with the Hidden Imam, appears to view himself as a more suitable leader than the Iranian clergy. It is, after all, the clergy's job to interpret religion and communicate with the Hidden Imam. The Revolutionary Guards, key to Ahmadinejad's success in 2005 and 2009, have turned harshly against him, along with most of Iran's political establishment.[18]

The 2009 election demonstrated Khamenei's tendency to monopolize power as Supreme Leader. The 2013 election may not be so different in this regard. Khamenei cannot risk a return to the Khatami era of reforms and questioning of *velayat-e faghih*. And he cannot afford a president who will challenge him publicly, as Ahmadinejad has done. In October 2011, Khamenei spoke of eliminating the presidency in favor of a prime minister selected by parliament.[18] The regime appears to have dropped that idea, for now. But Khamenei's speech demonstrated his overall thinking: He must be Iran's undisputed leader.

The 2013 Election: The Regime in Crisis

The 2013 election represents a continuation of Iran's political crisis, and Khamenei's continuing efforts to consolidate power. But it is taking place amid unprecedented challenges to the Iranian regime. The Islamic Republic faces its toughest days since the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88), if not since the Iranian revolution (1979). The economy is in dire condition, the population is restless, and Iran's regional position is in jeopardy.

The Ahmadinejad administration's mishandling of the economy, as well as sanctions against the financial system and energy sector have created a perfect economic storm.[19] Iran's Statistics Center estimates inflation to have reached nearly 30 percent,[20] although some economists claim that Iran has experienced hyperinflation (50 percent or above) in the last year and half.[21] The price of some food items has nearly doubled in the past year; meat is now unaffordable for millions of Iranians.

In addition, Iran's currency, the *rial*, lost nearly 80 percent of its value in 2012 alone.[22] Due to sanctions, Iran's oil exports have

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declined by 40 percent.[23] Other important industries, such as automaking, steel production, and even pistachio exports, have also been adversely affected.

The list of Iran's economic woes is long; suffice it to say, the declining economy has meant greater unemployment and underemployment, a significant increase in crime, and social and political instability. Despite claims that Iran can survive sanctions by becoming more self-sufficient and adopting a "resistance economy," Khamenei and the next president must contend with an increasingly dangerous economic environment. In some ways, the current economic situation is even worse than that of prerevolutionary Iran's economic malaise, which facilitated the revolution and overthrow of the monarchy. The Islamic Republic's inability to improve the economy could lead to a similar scenario.[24] The next president's highest priority will likely be the economy.

In addition, the Arab Spring has witnessed a serious decline in the Islamic Republic's influence in the Middle East. The Iranian regime, which portrayed itself as a beacon to the region's repressed Arabs in the last three decades, must now contend with a widespread perception of it not as a liberator, but as another oppressor.[25]

The regime's public relations problem started before the Arab Spring. Its violent reaction to the 2009 protests—including mass arrests, torture, rape, and executions—demonstrated that it cared more about clinging to power than addressing the rights of the average voter. The millions of Arabs who watched the 2009 upheaval on their televisions may have found the Islamic Republic to be little different from their own repressive governments. It is no surprise, then, that successive polls have shown a marked decline in the Islamic Republic's popularity among the Arab public since 2009.[26]

But the Islamic Republic's active support of the Syrian regime may mark a tipping point in its regional influence. President Bashar al-Assad's bloody fight with the Sunni-dominated insurgency has been strongly supported by the Iranian regime, which is reported to have provided financial support and weapons to the Syrian government. Revolutionary Guards officers have even admitted to giving counterinsurgency advice to pro-Assad forces.[27]

Iran's vigorous support of Assad is based on Syria's vital strategic importance to Tehran. Syria is the Islamic Republic's gateway to the Arab world. The Persian-dominated Shi'a theocracy is relatively isolated in a Sunni Arab majority Middle East, and Tehran's alliance with Syria and the Lebanese group Hezbollah lends it substantial weight.

In addition, the survival of the Syrian regime is important in maintaining Iranian deterrence vis-à-vis Israel. Syria serves as a critical conduit for Iranian weapons to Hezbollah. Without al-Assad in power, Iran would find supplying the Lebanese Shi'a group much more difficult, especially in the event of an Israeli-Hezbollah military conflict. From Tehran's standpoint, Hezbollah's voluminous stockpile of rockets, some capable of reaching Tel Aviv, is an effective deterrent against an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities.

Some Iranian politicians question the Islamic Republic's support of the al-Assad regime, especially given the costs to Iran's regional reputation and financial resources.[28] But Khamenei and the Revo-

lutionary Guards view Syria as Iran's front line in an existential battle with the United States and the Western world. For them, the collapse of the Alawite-dominated regime carries too many strategic risks. The Syrian conflict and the increasing pressures on Hezbollah will be important priorities for Khamenei and the next president.

The future president must also contend with the nuclear crisis, the Islamic Republic's most challenging and complex foreign policy issue. As already stated, nuclear policy is determined by the Supreme Leader, and Iran's interlocutors with the P5+1 are under Khamenei's direct authority. Nevertheless, Ahmadinejad's role in nuclear policy cannot be denied. His overall characterization of Iran's nuclear pursuits as a "train without brakes" did much to harden Tehran's position on the issue. His often-bombastic rhetoric, including denials of the Holocaust and threats against Israel, not only angered many Iranian conservatives, but facilitated the creation of a broad international coalition against Iran.

Khamenei will still play the decisive role on nuclear policy after the election. But the next Iranian president could have an opportunity to defuse some of the tensions created by Ahmadinejad. This is not to suggest that the election will lead to an immediate resolution of the crisis, but it is safe to assume that the next president will be less polarizing and more diplomatic than his predecessor. This could provide a limited easing of the nuclear stalemate, but the true problem for Iran's nuclear program stems from conflicting interests between the United States and Iran, not from vexing personalities.

Iran's next president is likely to pursue the Supreme Leader's policy on the nuclear program, especially if hand-picked by Khamenei. For example, Saeed Jalili, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator with the P5+1 and one of the main presidential candidates, tends to parrot Khamenei's discourse of "resistance" regarding the United States. From Tehran's standpoint, the answer to new and harsher sanctions could be a policy of greater intransigence, a policy that would be supported by both Khamenei and possibly the new president.

The Three Competing Factions

There are three distinct factions competing in the presidential election. Regime figures such as Ali Saidi, Khamenei's representative to the Revolutionary Guards, have observed a similar factional breakdown.[29] All of these factions trace their origins to groups that participated in the Iranian revolution and founding of the Islamic Republic. Prominent members of these factions have been competing with each other since the revolution, although today's feuding is more bitter and consequential than in past years.

The three broad factions are pro-Khamenei conservatives, pro-Rafsanjani technocrats, and reformists. Each faction has a specific political and economic agenda and a particular vision of Iran's future direction. Although the three factions are united on broad issues, such as support for Iran's declared right to enrich uranium, they differ on strategies to achieve Iranian objectives.

1. **Pro-Khamenei Conservatives:** Centered on the leadership of Khamenei, this group is the most powerful of the three factions and favors the status quo more than the others. It includes senior members of the Revolutionary Guards, many members of the clergy, the Baazari merchants, and the regime's bureaucracy. Pro-Khamenei conservatives believe in the concept of *velayat-e faghih* and are personally loyal to Khamenei as leader (at least, publicly). They hold conservative views on religion and society, and are wedded to a policy of "resistance" regarding the United States. They oppose the

reformists and the pro-Ahmadinejad camps; most pro-Khamenei conservatives describe the reformists as *fetne-gar* (seditionist) while they call Ahmadinejad and his followers *enherafi* (deviants). Many pro-Khamenei conservatives also consider Rafsanjani to be a leader of the 2009 "sedition," although the former president does still maintain significant support within the conservative clerical and merchant establishment.[30] Three candidates closely associated with Khamenei—Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, Baqer Qalibaf, and Ali Akbar Velayati—have formed a coalition of "2+1" (Velayati, Haddad-Adel, plus Qalibaf) to ensure the election of a president loyal to Khamenei. The current nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili, is also a Khamenei loyalist.

2. **Pro-Rafsanjani technocrats:** Although conservative, this group is less ideological and more technocratic in outlook than other conservative groups. Many of the conservative technocrats are supporters of Rafsanjani, who styles himself as an Islamic modernizer. A very wealthy man by most estimates, Rafsanjani attempted to fashion a more efficient economic system under his presidency. He also favored less ideological foreign policies that could facilitate his goal of a more globally integrated Iranian economy. Rafsanjani has also spoken of reducing tensions with the United States, and even Israel. Known by his supporters as *sardar-e sazandegi* (generalissimo of construction), Rafsanjani did have some modest success in achieving his domestic and foreign goals as president. However, he was often stymied by more-hard-line conservatives. In addition, greater corruption occurred during Rafsanjani's presidency, much of which appears to have benefitted his family and associates. Instances of external terrorism and internal repression also reduced his appeal. Rafsanjani and his family suffered after the 2009 elections. He lost most of his major posts in government and two of his children were briefly jailed. The Rafsanani camp has explicitly allied itself with the reformists against Ahmadinejad, and implicitly against Khamenei. Rafsanjani has been disqualified, but Hassan Rouhani, one of eight candidates approved by the Guardian Council, is close to this faction.
3. **The reformists:** The 1990s and early 2000s were a golden era for the reformist movement. Many hailed from the radical left of the revolutionary Islamist movement; some of the most-hard-line Iranian revolutionaries, including those who stormed the U.S. Embassy in 1979, became prominent reformists in later years. They believe it is possible to salvage the Islamic Republic through reforms that increase political participation and personal freedoms. Prominent reformist leaders such as Khatami, Mousavi, and former speaker of parliament Mehdi Karroubi view the Islamic Republic as facing a crisis that it may not survive. Senior reformists such as Khatami publicly support *velayat-e faghih* and Khamenei's rule. Yet reformist intellectuals and activists have criticized *velayat-e faghih* and Khamenei's authoritarianism.[31] Many have been jailed, tortured, and exiled to Europe and the United States since 2009. Mousavi and Karroubi have been under house arrest for more than two years. Khatami faced immense pressure from the reformists to run for president, but ultimately declined. The reformists, lacking a prominent candidate, may unite around Rouhani, whose positions are closer to the reformists than other factions. Mohammad

Aref, a former vice president who is respected even by conservatives, appears to be the only other real reformist candidate.

The Candidates

Anyone can register as a presidential candidate. In reality, he or she must be certified by the Guardian Council, which has never approved any women. At first, some 40 relatively prominent figures registered for the election. Out of those, only eight have received the Guardian Council's approval. The Guardian Council disqualified Mashaei, which was not a shock; its disqualification of Rafsanjani, however, took many Iranians by surprise.

The Guardian Council is made up of six clerics and six laymen who examine each candidate's Islamic and legal qualifications. The clerics are chosen by the Supreme Leader, while the six legal experts are picked by the Judiciary chief, who in turn is appointed by the Supreme Leader. This allows Khamenei a final say on who is chosen as a candidate. The Revolutionary Guards have also assumed an important informal role in vetting candidates. Both the Guardian Council chief, the ultra-conservative Ayatollah Ali Jannati, and the Guards commander in chief, Mohammad Ali Jafari, have opposed the candidacy of "seditionist" and "deviant" figures. The most prominent candidates are listed below:

Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf

Qalibaf is the mayor of Tehran. His performance in that job has won him praise from across the political spectrum. A former Revolutionary Guards air force commander and chief of police, Qalibaf has portrayed himself as a principled but technocratic politician. However, his level of popularity, especially beyond Tehran, is not clear and recent revelations about his personal role in a harsh crackdown

on students in 1999 have sullied his sheen among the public, although his standing among conservatives may have risen. He is considered to be a conservative antidote to the widely perceived incompetence of the Ahmadinejad administration. Qalibaf is probably the most popular member of the 2+1 grouping.

Ali Akbar Velayati

Velyati, a U.S.-trained doctor by profession, served as foreign minister (1981–97) during the regime's most unstable years. Velayati, who considers himself a principlist,[32] is a close adviser to and confidant of the Supreme Leader. Velayati has stated he will reduce tensions over Iran's nuclear program as president; he is widely considered to be more diplomatic and capable than other principlist figures. Velayati, however, is not a politician per se and has little popular appeal.

Saeed Jalili

Jalili is Iran's national security adviser and chief nuclear negotiator with the P5+1. Foreign observers have described him as dogmatic and socially awkward. His specialty is the foreign policy and diplomacy of the Prophet Mohammad. Jalili is a devoted follower of Khamenei, and appears to be an implementer of policy, rather than an original thinker and theoretician. The stern bureaucrat is not considered to be a popular figure. Regardless, he has one of the more active campaigns in Iran and is reported by Iranian and Western media to be a front-runner.

Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel

Haddad-Adel is one of Khamenei's favorite politicians. This is perhaps due to his daughter's marriage to Khamenei's most influential son, Mojtaba. Haddad-Adel's proximity to Khamenei helped him become speaker of parliament in 2004. Haddad-Adel has formed a principlist group of 2+1 (himself, Qalibaf, and Velayati) in order to ensure the election of a principlist (read pro-Khamenei) president. He openly criticized Rafsanjani's candidacy.

Mohsen Rezai

Rezai, the former commander-in-chief of the Revolutionary Guards, is a perennial presidential candidate. He currently serves as Secretary of the Expediency Council (headed by Rafsanjani), but identifies himself as a principlist. Rezai is ideological but is not as strident and divisive as Ahmadinejad. He was a candidate in 2009 and complained of voting irregularities after the election, but withdrew his complaints in the interest of "political unity." Rezai is not a popular figure, and according to rumors from Iran, is disliked by Khamenei.

Hassan Rouhani

Rouhani was Iran's lead nuclear negotiator during the Khatami administration; he is also associated with the Rafsanjani camp. Rouhani has been particularly critical of Ahmadinejad's foreign and nuclear policies, in addition to his "superstitious" religious beliefs. Rouhani depicts Iran's diplomatic position under his watch as more favorable for regime interests. Specifically, Rouhani has

claimed that the nuclear program made progress under Khatami's presidency without provoking strong external pressures. During a television interview on May 27, Rouhani gave an impassioned defense of his role as nuclear negotiator, challenged the show's host to be more honest about his record, and promised to solve Iran's economic and diplomatic problems as president. Rouhani is the head of the Center for Strategic Research (CSR), which provides strategic advice to the Iranian government. CSR offices were reportedly attacked by hard-liners during the 2009 election. He is one of the few remaining candidates who appeals to reformists and moderate conservatives.

Mohammad Reza Aref

Aref is one of the few prominent reformists acceptable to principlists and conservatives. He is not considered by the regime to have been involved in the 2009 "sedition" and has been quoted by Iranian media as saying that ""there were some violations (in 2009), but not vote fraud"[33]; he has, however, called for Mousavi and Karroubi's freedom. Aref is relatively non-ideological and technocratic; he served as vice president under Khatami and is a current member of the Expediency Council. It is unclear whether Aref would push strongly for reforms or challenge the status quo as president. This may be why he is more acceptable to conservative figures.

Mohammad Qarazi

Qarazi is the former oil minister and a former minister of telecommunciations and a hard-line conservative. His approval by the Guardian Council is puzzling. He is relatively unknown within Iran and does not have a popular following. He has reportedly bragged that he has neither a campaign nor a political platform.

Possible Election Scenarios

- **Khamenei loyalist wins:** The most likely scenario at this point is the election of a candidate loyal to Khamenei. The creation of the 2+1 group was meant to ensure such a scenario. Hence, it would be reasonable to assume that Velayati, Qalibaf, and Haddad-Adel are more likely to win the election than the other candidates. Any of them may step aside if it helps the election of a 2+1 member. A pro-Khamenei president is more likely to enforce Khamenei's agenda rather than act independently. Velayati and Haddad-Adel are more closely aligned with Khamenei than Qalibaf, but the former Guards officer is more popular, and may have more credibility as president. Saeed Jalili's loyalty to Khamenei and position as chief nuclear negotiator also makes him a serious contender.
- **An alternative candidate wins:** None of the eight candidates can be considered to be disloyal to Khamenei, but not all of them are as politically beholden to him as the four just mentioned. Rouhani, in particular, has demonstrated political independence and a less ideological view on foreign policy issues. Aref is also a relatively nonideological candidate. Rezai, although a principlist, tends to appear more pragmatic than Jalili. Qarazi is not a high-profile figure, but he exhibits more ideological tendencies, especially on the nuclear issue.
- **A disputed election:** The 2009 election has taught the regime to be on its guard; the "engineering" of the election by pro-Khamenei forces is supposed to prevent disturbances and instability after the June 14 election. However, there is no guarantee that the current election and its aftermath will be peaceful. The regime's internal divisions and the personal animosities between Khamenei, Rafsanjani, and Ahmadinejad could lead one faction or the other to dispute the election. The use of force by the regime is also a distinct possibility; several of Ahmadinejad's advisers have been threatened and arrested in the last two years. Moreover, Iran could face spontaneous demonstrations and uprisings.

Implications for the United States

The next president will not be in charge of nuclear policy, the most pressing issue for the United States. However, the postelection environment can be more conducive to negotiations, especially if Ahmadinejad is gone from the political scene. That said, the effects of the presidential election on nuclear policy should not be exaggerated. Even if elected, someone like Rouhani may be constrained by Khamenei and the Guards, and thwarted in his declared goal of reducing tensions over the nuclear program.

The election of Velayati, Qalibaf, Haddad-Adel or Jalili is likely to confirm a nuclear policy crafted by Khamenei and his most trusted advisers. A disputed election and its chaotic aftermath may distract Tehran from the negotiations, or even harden its position, raising the pressure for Israel and the United States to consider military strikes against Iran.

Regardless, Khamenei is likely to face increasing economic and political pressure in the coming months, in addition to pressure from some Iranians to concede on the nuclear program. Even a more technocratic and capable president such as Qalibaf will not be able to solve Iran's major economic problems, which are the result of poor planning, a dysfunctional political system, corruption, and fundamental (perhaps irreconcilable) differences with the United States. The postelection period may result in a calmer atmosphere between Iran and the international community, or it could lead to a greater crisis for Iran's revolutionary regime. The decision rests in the hands of Khamenei, Iran's unelected and unaccountable Supreme Leader, and in the policies of the United States and Israel.

Conclusion

Over time, Khamenei and his supporters have transformed Iran's political system from an Islamic Republic (*jomhouriy-e islami*) into an Islamic government (*hokumat-e islami*) dominated by the Supreme Leader. The 2009 election demonstrated the extent to which Khamenei and his supporters were willing to cling to absolute power. The Iranian regime seeks to produce a 2013 election that at least appears to be popular and legitimate; but more importantly, Khamenei desires a president who will act as his prime minister, rather than as an independent power. The ruling establishment has successfully marginalized the reformists and has sidelined Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad. This has resulted in what appears to be a presidential selection rather than an election. The Iranian people will largely serve as spectators. The Islamic Republic, once described by the late Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri as "neither Islamic nor a Republic,"[34] is likely to produce a president who owes his allegiance not to the Iranian people, but to Khamenei and his close supporters.

Notes

[1] Shaul Bakhash, "No Elected President for Iran?" *Iran Primer*, U.S. Institute of Peace, October 31, 2012.

[2] Senior Revolutionary Guards have spoken of "rationally engineering" the elections so "acceptable" candidates win. Bahram Rafiei, "The Guards' Rational Engineering of Iran's Elections," Roozonline, January 10, 2013; "Iran: Khatami Says Situation Not Ripe for His Candidacy; Expresses Hope Rafsanjani Would Run for President," *Tehran Times*, May 9, 2013.

[3] Behrang Tajdin, "Will Iran's National Internet Mean No World Wide Web?" *BBC Persia*, April 27, 2013.

[4] The prominent Iranian website Baztab.com published a story claiming that Ahmadinejad possessed a tape proving that the 2009 election was rigged in his favor, and that he would air the tape if Mashaei was disqualified by the Guardian Council. The story was promptly taken off the Baztab site and the editor was subsequently arrested.

[5] Alireza Nader, David E. Thaler, and S. R. Bohandy, *The Next Supreme Leader: Succession in the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-1052-OSD, 2011. As of June 4, 2013: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1052.html

[6] Nader, Thaler, Bohandy, 2011.

[7] For background on Iran's political system, see David E. Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jerrold D. Green, Charlotte Lynch, and Frederic Wehrey, *Mullahs, Guards, and Bonyads: An Exploration of Iranian Leadership Dynamics*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-878-OSD, 2010. As of June 4, 2013: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG878.html

[8] *Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran*, As of July 9, 2012: http://www.iranchamber.com/government/laws/constitution.php

[9] At the time of his selection as Supreme Leader, Khamenei was considered a mid-ranking cleric. However, after his selection, the regime portrayed him as a mujtahid (jurist) and even a Grand Ayatollah. See Mehdi Khalaji, *The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shi'ism*, Washington, D.C.: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2006.

[10] Rafsanjani also claimed that Khomeini had indicated Khamenei as his preferred successor prior to his passing. Nader, Thaler, Bohandy, 2011.

[11] Paul Klebnikov, "Millionaire Mullahs," *Forbes.com*, July 21, 2003. As of May 14, 2013: http://www.forbes.com/global/2003/0721/024_2.html

[12] Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2002.

[13] Julian Borger, "The Financial Power of the Revolutionary Guards," *Guardian*, February 15, 2010. See also Frederic Wehrey, Jerrold D. Green, Brian Nichiporuk, Alireza Nader, Lydia Hansell, Rasool Nafisi, and S. R. Bohandy, *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-821-OSD, 2009. As of November 18, 2010: http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG821.html

[14] Mohsen Kadivar, "This Iranian Form of Theocracy Has Failed," *Spiegel Online*, July 7, 2001.

[15] "Guards Chief Backs Khatami," *BBC News*, July 23, 1999.

[16] Ali Ansari, *Crisis of Authority: Iran's 2009 Presidential Election*, Chatam House, 2010.

[17] Barbara Slavin, "The Incredible Shrinking Ahmadinejad," *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2011. As of May 30, 2013: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/25/the_incredible_shrinking_ahmadinejad

[18] Bakhash, 2012.

[18] Golnaz Esfandiari, "In Unusual Move, Iran's Revolutionary Guards Slam Ahmadinejad Over Comments," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 14, 2013.

[19] Jahangir Amuzegar, "Iran's Economy Facing a Challenging Year," *Middle East Economic Survey*, April 8, 2013.

[20] "Inflation Rate Hits 29.8 Percent: Statistics Center of Iran," *Tehran Times*, May 6, 2013.

[21] Steve Hanke, "The Iran Hyperinflation Fact Sheet," Cato Institute, October 5, 2012. As of May 14, 2013: http://www.cato.org/blog/iran-hyperinflation-fact-sheet

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[23] Rick Gladstone, "Iranian Oil Minister Concedes Sanctions Have Hurt Exports," *New York Times*, January 7, 2013.

[24] Alireza Nader and Leila Mahnad, "Labor and Opposition in Iran," *Foreign Policy*, April 22, 2013.

[25] Shahram Chubin, *Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated,* Gulf Research Center, September 2012. See also Dalia Dassa Kaye and Fred Wehrey, "Arab Spring, Persian Winter," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2011.

[26] James Zogby, *Looking at Iran: How 20 Arab and Muslim Nations View Iran and Its Policies*, Zogby Research Services, 2013.

[27] "IRGC Confirms Presence in Syria as Advisors," *Radio Zamaneh*, September 16, 2012.

[28] Ahmad Avayi, "Iranian MP Warns against 'Absolute' Support for Syria," *Radio Zamaneh*, August 31, 2011.

[29] The fourth faction would have been composed of Ahmadinejad's supporters, but Mashaei's disqualification means they have been shut out of the race. *Radio Zamaneh*, "Iran's Election Called a Race Among Four Groups," April 18, 2013.

[30] Frud Bezhan, "Rafsanjani Candidacy Draws Fire From Iran's Hard-Liners," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, May 14, 2013.

[31] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Open Letter to Ayatollah Khamenei," *Democratic Republic of Iran* website, September 17, 2009. As of May 30, 2013: http://droi.wordpress.com/2009/09/17/ open-letter-to-ayatollah-khamenei-from-abdolkarim-soroush/

[32] Principlists like Velayati tend to be less populist than principlists associated with Ahamadinejad, who tend to exhibit more anticlerical and nationalist tendencies.

[33] "'Reformist' Candidate Runs for the President of Iran," *Radio Zamaneh*, May 10, 2013.

[34] Masoumeh Torfeh, "Neither Islamic Nor a Republic," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2009. Montazeri was one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic and Khomeini's designated successor; however he was sidelined by Khomeini and Rafsanjani due to his criticisms of the regime.

About This Perspective

This Perspective seeks to examine the meaning and implications of the Iranian 2013 presidential election, which is taking place amid an economic and political crisis for the Islamic Republic. Specifically, it analyzes the Iranian government's political objectives, electoral strategy, the competing factions and personalities, and the potential implications for the United States, especially concerning Iran's nuclear program.

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