

Viewpoints
No. 18

Iran's Pivotal Presidential Election

Shaul Bakhash,
Clarence Robinson Professor of History, George Mason University

Iran's presidential elections will take place in June against a background of crisis. The ruling elite is deeply divided, reformist leaders remain under house arrest, economic problems are mounting and the stand-off with the West over Iran's nuclear program remains unresolved. Shaul Bakhash discusses the potential candidates, the major issues and vexed question of electoral freedom that are likely to dominate the election campaign.

January 2013

Middle East Program



Iran's presidential elections, slated for mid-June, will take place against a background of domestic uncertainty. The economy has been battered by sanctions from abroad and mismanagement at home. Oil sales and foreign exchange earnings have plummeted, while inflation has soared. Industries are flagging. And banks face a looming crisis.

On foreign policy, there is no resolution in sight to the stand-off between Tehran and the P5+1 – the five members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany – over Iran's nuclear program. The ruling elite is riven by factions, and no leader seems to have a clear idea about how to extract Iran from its current predicaments. And the urban middle class, burned by what many consider rigged presidential elections in 2009, is increasingly uninterested in voting.

The election is still five months away, but a flurry of speculation has already begun about possible candidates. Presidential wannabes come from three broad groups: First, conservatives aligned with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Second, populists around President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. And third, reformists, two of whose leaders have been under house arrest for almost two years.

The Conservatives

Conservatives now dominate Iran's political arena, with other major parties and players squeezed out. So the most obvious candidates to run for president in June will come from this camp. The most prominent conservative contenders are:

- Ali Larijani, Speaker of Parliament (Majles) and former secretary of the National Security Council (NSC),
- Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, a former Majles Speaker and current member of parliament from Tehran whose daughter is married to Khamenei's son,
- and Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's principal foreign policy adviser.

All three are close to Khamenei, have shown little independence in the past, and are likely to follow Khamenei's lead. Larijani is especially well-connected. His brother is the hard-line chief of the judiciary. He has served in cabinet posts and as head of national broadcasting. Khamenei has used him for sensitive foreign policy assignments in the past. But he won less than six percent of the vote when he ran for president in 2005.

*This is the complete four-part article that first appeared in the *Iran Primer*.*

Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, a former Revolutionary Guards commander, is also on many lists of potential candidates. He is well-regarded as the current mayor of Tehran, but he does not seem to resonate with voters. He garnered less than 14 percent of the vote in the 2005 presidential ballot against Ahmadinejad and other candidates.

Three other possible conservative candidates are men with national security or nuclear energy experience.

- Hassan Rouhani, a former head of the NSC and lead nuclear negotiator. He has indicated a desire to run, based on his ability to address Iran's foreign policy problems.
- Saeed Jalili, the current head of the NSC and principal nuclear negotiator with the world's six major powers, or P5+1. Several websites are promoting his candidacy.
- Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi, a U.S.-educated physicist who once ran Iran's nuclear agency and was Iran's representative to the International Atomic Energy Agency, may also run.

These men are principally technocrats. Lacking a political base of their own, they too would be beholden to the supreme leader. But they could present themselves as competent problem solvers – candidates with the foreign policy experience to resolve outstanding issues with the United States and the Europeans. Other possible conservative candidates, such as former Guards commander Mohsen Rezai, are long-shots.

There are hints about attempts to coalesce conservatives around one candidate. Haddad-Adel recently called on principalists – as conservative members of parliament call themselves – to avoid giving reformists an opening to split the conservative vote. Among the principalists, the speaker said, he, Velayati or Qalibaf should be the candidate. But agreeing on one conservative candidate may be a pipe-dream, especially since the other two parties to this understanding have not yet confirmed it.

Iran's conservatives come in many shades. About 25 percent of the members of parliament belong to a faction that owes allegiance to Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, an ultra-conservative cleric. During the parliamentary elections last year, the principalists failed to agree on a single slate of candidates, despite much fanfare and repeated efforts. Personal ambitions may also produce more than one conservative candidate.

Yet the current political environment gives conservatives the best shot at the next presidency since they effectively control the key levers of power. They are dominant in the Majles, the security services, the Revolutionary Guards, and the *Basij* paramilitary forces. The 12-man Council of Guardians, which rules on the qualifications of candidates, is overwhelmingly conservative. And they are the majority in the network of Khamenei-appointed clerics who serve as Friday prayer leaders and in other posts.

Conservatives have the means to mobilize vast numbers of voters who rely on the regime for employment and largesse. The supreme leader's sympathies also lie with the conservatives, even though his position technically calls for him to broker among Iran's diverse political factions.

The Ahmadinejad camp

Despite their current political dominance, Iran's conservatives appear inordinately fearful of challenges looming in the June presidential election. Perhaps the most surprising is their concern that President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad may field a member of his inner circle against his former allies. Just four years ago, conservatives rallied to keep Ahmadinejad in office, despite unprecedented opposition during months of Green Movement protests. Now conservatives are dead-set on preventing the election of one of the president's lieutenants.

Now in his final five months in office, Ahmadinejad faces a constitutional limit of two consecutive terms as president. But he clearly would like to remain a defining political force from behind the scenes. Iranians often refer to his strategy as the Putin model, after the Russian president's tactics used to orchestrate the election of Dmitry Medvedev as president in 2008 – until Putin could run again in 2012.

Over the past year, political speculation has centered primarily on Esfandiar Mashaie, Ahmadinejad's principal aide, ideas-man, and political adviser. He is widely considered to have formidable political skills; he is often credited with Rasputin-like influence over the president. The two men are also in-laws through the marriage of their children.

Conservatives have countered with a campaign to discredit the Ahmadinejad team as the "deviant current," trying to push the president and his lieutenants outside the political and religious mainstream. Mashaie is a particular target of the conservatives' ire.

Ahmadinejad's ability to orchestrate a succession now seems extremely limited. He has lost much of his previous power as tensions between conservatives and his camp have escalated. The president fell afoul of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 2012 when he tried to name his own candidate to the Intelligence Ministry – long regarded as the supreme leader's prerogative.

The president and the Majles also have daggers drawn over several major issues, most volubly on Iran's troubled economy. The president barely disguises his contempt for parliament. In turn, the deputies, led by Speaker Ali Larijani, criticize Ahmadinejad's policies and his ministers daily. They regularly issue dire warnings about the president's alleged infractions of the law and the constitution.

Ahmadinejad's support from the Revolutionary Guards has long dissipated, even though he served in the elite military force during the eight-year war with Iraq. Guards commanders are now among his most vocal critics. Ahmadinejad's vaunted subsidies reform program has cost rather than saved the government money, while the larger economy has suffered from the president's misguided policies. The unorthodox religious views of the president and his team have alienated members of the clergy too.

Ultimately, the supreme leader seems highly unlikely to acquiesce in the candidacy of Mashaie and, potentially, other Ahmadinejad aides. The Council of Guardians could also disqualify the president's allies.

Yet the president seems unfazed by his own isolation and the sometimes scathing criticism to which he has been subjected. His populist rhetoric and liberal welfare policies – and his readiness to thumb his nose at the high and mighty – have earned him favor with the rural and urban poor. And he still controls the Interior Ministry, which plays a role in running the elections.

So a challenge to the conservatives by an Ahmadinejad-backed candidate still seems likely.

The Reformists

Iran's reformers transformed revolutionary politics between 1997 and 2005 under former President Mohammed Khatami. But today, the reformists' ability to contest the presidential elections in any meaningful way appears slim. Conservatives have even taken to labeling them the "seditionist current," despite the fact that most were among the original revolutionaries.

As yet, the reformists have a fundamental problem – no viable candidate. Khatami will not run again, even though he technically could. Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi – a former prime minister and a former speaker of parliament – remain under house arrest for their leadership of the opposition Green Movement after the disputed 2009 election. Mohammad Reza Aref, Khatami's former vice president, has reportedly considered running. But the obstacles are formidable for reformists.

The reformist bloc has also issued tough conditions for their participation in the elections – and not to call for a boycott that might discredit the vote both at home and abroad. They demanded release of their leaders and other political prisoners. They also called for guarantees that the poll will be free and transparent. Neither demand is likely to be met.

The main reformist political parties have been proscribed by the Ministry of Interior, although they continue to have a shadowy existence. A congress of all reformist parties and groups was slated for mid-January to discuss election strategy, but it was called off after the authorities effectively banned the meeting by imposing onerous demands on the organizers. The regime required that they renounce Mousavi, Karroubi, and the Green Movement and admit no members of reformist parties to the meeting.

Leading conservatives – including Majles deputies, senior clerics, and Revolutionary Guards commanders – have increasingly denounced the reformist movement, its leaders, and others who took part in the 2009 protests. Charges against reformists have become so serious that Reza Khatami, the former president's brother and spokesman for his political party, had to publicly deny that the reformists want to overthrow the regime.

Their aim is to reform, not to “overthrow” the government, the younger Khatami said. If reform proves impossible, he added, the reformists will simply go home and tend to their own business.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the former president and grand old man of Iranian politics had earlier proposed a “coalition government” of all parties to address the country's problems – a proposal promptly denounced by conservatives. They charged that it provided a back-door for reformers to return to power.

Rafsanjani appears to be quietly urging Khamenei to embrace a compromise solution to Iran's current political dilemma. He also has not yet ruled out another bid for the presidency himself. Theoretically, he could run. Parliament tried to bar candidates over age 75 from running – a move clearly aimed at Rafsanjani, who is 78 – but the Council of Guardians failed to endorse the bill. The council, composed of 12 senior clerics and religious scholars, has veto power over legislative proposals. At a press conference in late January, Rafsanjani denied that he had any intention of running again. (He was president for two terms from 1989 to 1997, then lost to Ahmadinejad in 2009.) But Rafsanjani then added that he “would not hesitate for a second to enter the arena” if he felt he was needed.

A few conservative leaders have also tried to repair the deep divide among factions that emerged from among the original revolutionaries, but so far to no avail. Habibollah Asghar-Owladi, a powerful conservative parliamentarian with close ties to the bazaar and business community, recently said that Mousavi and Karroubi were not leaders of the “seditious current,” even if they had been involved with it. He implied that the two could be returned to the fold.

But within two weeks, Asghar-Owladi was forced to retract his overture. He did not mean to exonerate the two reformists, he insisted. They still had to make amends for their sins.

The Friday prayer leader in Mashhad, who is a Khamenei appointee, also tried to open the door to reconciliation with Mousavi and Karroubi. He was soon pressured into an even more compliant retraction. The two reformist leaders should be put on trial, he said.

Even moderate conservatives now insist that any reformists who want to return to the “embrace” of the revolution must first “apologize” and “ask forgiveness” for their past transgressions. The reformists must also distance themselves from other “secessionists.” A senior Revolutionary Guards commander recently described the 2009 protests as a greater threat to the Islamic Republic than the eight-year war with Iraq in the 1980s. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, head of the Council of Guardians, has also said that the so-called secessionists “should not even dream” of running for president.

Debate about the detained reformist leaders may not be over, however. In late January 2013, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani repeated Ashgar-Owladi’s formulation that Mousavi and Karroubi could indeed return to the fold if they apologized. The comment from Larijani, a potential presidential candidate, may indicate that moderate conservatives – and perhaps even the supreme leader – hope to avoid another tainted election by freeing the opposition leaders. But any release appears to be conditioned on political submission – and public proof that Mousavi and Karroubi have been tamed and humiliated.

Under these conditions, major politicians from the reformist camp are unlikely to run in the coming elections. Voters are more likely to have to choose from conservative candidates and possibly a candidate from the Ahmadinejad camp, if one is allowed to run. At the same time, little-known dark horses have emerged in past elections – and taken Iran in unexpected directions.

The Issues

Three major issues will dominate Iran’s presidential election in June:

- A deteriorating economy due to both chronic mismanagement and tough international sanctions,
- The nuclear stand-off with the West, the flashpoint undermining Iran’s broader foreign policy,
- And, more indirectly, a divisive political environment that has increasingly narrowed over the past decade.

Like elections elsewhere, Iran’s campaign will almost certainly produce calls for change, mainly on the economic front. Although he is stepping aside after two terms, Ahmadinejad has already become the locus of criticism, which is certain to increase as the election heats up. “It’s the economy stupid” also applies in a country where oil sales have dropped by half and the currency has plummeted by up to 70 percent on the open market over the previous year.

Yet candidates will also have to offer solutions – and address the prickly interrelated issue of international sanctions that have increasingly isolated the Islamic Republic. Two views are already emerging.

The Economy

In January, Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani, a presumptive presidential candidate, argued that solving Iran's problems abroad would not fix economic problems at home. Indeed, he contended, the opposite was true: Fixing domestic economic problems would strengthen Iran and make it less vulnerable to foreign pressures.

His position reflected the recent call by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for "an economy of resistance" that preaches defiance of sanctions imposed by the outside world. In January, Khamenei endorsed a plan from the Expediency Council for self-sufficiency in defense, security, industry, and agriculture.

Announced amid much fanfare, the economic program turned out to be a list of high-minded bromides that are unlikely to really solve Iran's pressing economic problems anytime soon. The multi-page document advocated "expansion and deepening of the culture of self-confidence, self-sufficiency, innovation and creativity in all areas of defense and security." In the areas of industry and agriculture, it called for "expanding private ownership and management; ending non-essential preferences and monopolies... improving efficiency in water use."

A second camp is not as ready to overlook the damaging impact of sanctions on Iran's economy, even if it means striking a different tone from the supreme leader. The Minister of Industry, Mines, and Commerce recently described sanctions as "crippling" and warned that they were affecting the entire economy. He acknowledged publicly that Iran lacks foreign exchange, that the Central Bank cannot transfer money, that Iranian ships cannot dock at foreign ports, and that Iran cannot secure pharmaceuticals or raw materials for its industries.

The Nuclear Program

None of the conservative candidates is likely to challenge Khamenei's positions on Iran's nuclear program or negotiations with the United States. As the election approaches, the mood on talks has actually hardened, at least in public. In late 2012, Tehran was abuzz with speculation about direct talks with Washington – beyond recent negotiations with the world's six major powers. But speculation has recently faded, with Tehran showing no sign of major compromise on terms to reach a meaningful deal.

Yet, again, other politicians have staked out different views. In early January, seven prominent former members of parliament issued an open letter calling for direct negotiations between Iran and the United States. Although they all live abroad, their position echoed sentiments shared by many members of the political class at home.

Polls indicate that most Iranians believe the Islamic Republic has a right to enrich uranium for its nuclear energy program. But many Iranians also want to end the standoff with the international community that has devastated the economy and isolated Iran.

Domestic Politics

For more than two decades, Iranian political debates have ultimately centered on political liberalization. But every call or campaign for political openings has clashed with the regime's determination to quash even mild dissent or internal debate.

In different ways, former President Mohammad Khatami, former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and even President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad have separately appealed for free elections. In January, with the election season about to begin, Khamenei countered by warning that such talk only provides comfort to the "enemy" and weakens public faith in the electoral process. Iran's elections, he claimed, are the freest in the world.

Friday prayer leaders in Tehran and other major cities in the country soon echoed his denunciation of free elections. Over 100 members of the Majles voted for a resolution on the same lines.

Iran's body politic is not totally cowed, however. Six leading politicians identified with the old National Front (now excluded from power) wrote an open letter to the supreme leader urging him to open up Iran's political space. From his cell in Evin Prison, Khatami's former deputy interior minister, Mostafa Tajzadeh, not only denounced Khamenei as a creeping dictator but has urged Iranians to continue demanding free elections.

Although small, these moves are reminders that a wider debate is still taking place even as the regime tries to tighten its hold over political life and control the upcoming elections.



The opinions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Woodrow Wilson Center.

Viewpoints Series

Tunisia's Islamists Struggle to Rule

Viewpoints No. 1 (April 2012)

By David Ottaway

Fostering the Next Generation

Viewpoints No. 2 (April 2012)

By Moushira Khattab

Algeria's Islamists Crushed in First Arab Spring Elections

Viewpoints No. 3 (May 2012)

By David Ottaway

Syrian Refugees: Lessons from Other Conflicts and Possible Policies

Viewpoints No. 4 (updated August 2012)

By Rochelle A. Davis

Morocco's Islamists: In Power Without Power

Viewpoints No. 5 (August 2012)

By David Ottaway

The Arab Awakening: Is Democracy a Mirage?

Viewpoints No. 6 (August 2012)

By Roberto Toscano, Moushira Khattab, Fatima Sbaity Kassem, and Daniel Brumberg

Iran is Reversing its Population Policy

Viewpoints No. 7 (August 2012)

By Farzaneh Roudi

Voting as a Powerful Tool for Women

Viewpoints No. 8 (October 2012)

By Hanin Ghaddar

The Uncertain Fate of U.S.-Egyptian Relations

Viewpoints No. 9 (November 2012)

By David Ottaway

The Demon's Besieging Lebanon: Iran's Tighter Grip

Viewpoints No. 10 (November 2012)

By Hanin Ghaddar

Iran's Nuclear Program: A Change in the Winds?

Viewpoints No. 11 (November 2012)

By Shaul Bakhash

Has the Arab Spring Lived Up to Expectations?

Viewpoints No. 12 (December 2012)

By Various Authors

Reflections on the Adoption of UNGA Resolution Banning Female Genital Mutilation

Viewpoints No. 13 (January 2013)

By Moushira Khattab

In 2013, Rise of the Right and in Elections Across the Mideast

Viewpoints No. 14 (January 2013)

By Robin Wright

Women's Rights Under Egypt's Constitutional Disarray

Viewpoints No. 15 (January 2013)

By Moushira Khattab

Repression's Diminishing Returns: The Future of Politics in Egypt

Viewpoints No. 16 (January 2013)

By Joshua Stacher

Mali: The Time for Dithering is Over

Viewpoints No. 17 (January 2013)

By David Ottaway

Edited by Kendra Heideman and Mona Youssef

Designed by Kendra Heideman

Middle East Program
Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars