

# Why the world should take the Iran elections seriously

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In Iran's eleventh presidential election on June 14, if no candidate receives more than 50% of the votes, a second round will be held on June 21 between the two candidates with the highest number of votes. The next president will take over from Iran's controversial incumbent, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad on 3 August 2013.

Eight candidates were in the race, but two withdrew. So the race is between these six: Saeed Jalili, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and chief Iranian nuclear negotiator, a hardliner; Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and current advisor to the Supreme Leader, a conservative; Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, a former Revolutionary Guards Commander and the current mayor of Tehran, a hardliner; Mohsen Rezaei, a former supreme commander of the Revolutionary Guards Corps and current secretary of the Expediency Council, a moderate conservative; Mohammad Gharazi, a former minister and governor of Khuzestan during the Iran-Iraq war, a hardliner and an independent candidate; and Hassan Rohani, former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, a moderate-centrist.

Rohani is the only cleric among the candidates. With the exception of Velayati, who was foreign minister for 16 years, most of it during the war, all other candidates fought in the war and three of them held high positions in the Revolution Guards Corps. In fact, Jalili lost a leg in the war and has an artificial leg.

In 2009, when President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was running for a second term against the reformist candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi-Karroubi, the world's attention was focused on Iran. Hundreds of foreign journalists rushed to Tehran and the Iranian election probably got more attention than any other election except the previous U.S. election that resulted in the victory of President Barack Obama.

The media coverage was a sign of Iran's importance in regional and world affairs, and the desire of both Iranians and many people across the world for the victory of more moderate candidates and the end of Ahmadinejad's divisive and populist rule.

The result of that election, when Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, was controversial. While millions of supporters of the reformist Green Movement poured into the streets demanding

“where is my vote”, the conservatives argued that it had been a failed attempt at a “velvet revolution”, supported by the West.

The unprecedented demonstrations posed the greatest challenge to the Islamic Republic since the revolution in 1978-79, and some have argued that they also became a model for subsequent demonstrations in a number of Arab countries that gave rise to the so-called Arab Spring. The protests were brutally suppressed, resulting in a number of deaths and injuries, and thousands of arrests. The two leaders of the Green Movement have been under house arrest ever since. With the suppression of the Green Movement, many in the West came to the erroneous conclusion that the reformist movement had dissipated.

As the result of the experiences of four years ago, there has been much less interest both at home and abroad in the current election. Many western analysts have dismissed the election, arguing that it will result in the victory of a right-wing candidate handpicked by Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

However, the election campaigns during the past few weeks have proved those assumptions wrong. The boisterous campaign rallies of 2009 may be missing, but three live television debates with heated exchanges between the candidates have galvanised the public and offered a rare glimpse into the profound differences among the leading figures in the Iranian government. Consequently, the outcome of the election is wide open and the reformists, or at least the centrists, have a good chance of victory.

The world should also take these elections seriously, because Iran is still a pivotal state in the Middle East and its conflict with the West over its nuclear programme could either drag the world into another disastrous war, or, if managed wisely by a reformist government and by the West, it could usher in a new era in Iran’s relations with the outside world. It could even have a major bearing on the current crises in Afghanistan, Iraq, and in Syria and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Even Iranians who live abroad, and who are opposed to the Islamic Republic, should take the election seriously, because although the elections are not fully democratic and transparent, Iran’s fate will be – or should be – decided at home, and not

through foreign intervention. Whether the next Iranian president is another reformist like former President Mohammad Khatami or a hardliner such as President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will make a big difference in the domestic and foreign policies of Iran.

## **Iran's flawed democracy**

**A**lthough Iran has all the trappings of democracy – universal vote by men and women, an elected parliament, an elected president (women and members of religious minorities are excluded), and political parties – Iran's theocratic system is far from democratic.

The Iranian Constitution has given enormous powers to Iran's 'Supreme Leader', who is Ayatollah Ali Khamenei at the moment. He is the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, he appoints the head of the judiciary, he can dismiss the parliament, he has to confirm the president, and, above all, he directly appoints six "jurists" in the Guardian Council. The other six members of the Guardian Council are lawyers selected by the judiciary, whose head is again appointed by Ayatollah Khamenei. According to the Constitution, the job of the Guardian Council is to supervise the elections, but under Ayatollah Khamenei it has also taken on the role of approving the qualifications of both the presidential and parliamentary candidates, which gives it a veto power over the selection of the candidates.

As the person who also appoints the leaders of the Friday prayer in all the important cities, and is directly in charge of the paramilitary Basij forces that enforce "Islamic morality", as well as the Quds Brigade that is in charge of the foreign operations of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards, Ayatollah Khamenei controls practically all the leading powers and organisations of the state, in addition to his spiritual position as the representative of the Hidden Imam. As a result, his powers far exceed those of the former Shah of Iran.

Under Ayatollah Khamenei, the Supreme Leader's Office (beyt-e rahbari) has become far more organised and more powerful than Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's relatively modest establishment. Ayatollah Khamenei has set up parallel organisations to virtually

all government ministries, and his advisors, particularly in defence, security, intelligence, foreign affairs and domestic issues, are much more powerful than the ministers appointed by the president. Indeed, he has frequently forced the president to reverse his decisions over some key government ministers and even his vice-president.

Ayatollah Khamenei has the final word on all major national policies, including Iran's nuclear programme. So it is clear that in the forthcoming election, the voters are not choosing the head of state or the ultimate decision-maker, but the chief executive who has to balance his power with the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards Corps

In the past, Ayatollah Khamenei tried to remain above day-to-day politics and act as a final arbiter between various factions. However, his clear support for Ahmadinejad's re-election in 2009 even before the results of the election were known, lost him the support of a large segment of the population, especially the reformists. Despite these shortcomings, there have been candidates from major Iranian political factions in previous presidential elections, and both in 1997 and in 2005 the outcome of the Iranian elections was unpredictable. The results of June 14 election may well be just as unexpected.

## **Erosion of power and prestige**

The recent election campaign has shown that despite his enormous powers, Ayatollah Khamenei has lost a great deal of his prestige and influence. Shortly before the election, in an important speech, he called on the heads of the government, the judiciary and the legislature to work together and not give an impression of disunity. He even said that those who gave rise to disunity under the present sensitive circumstances were guilty of treason. Still, shortly after that speech, the simmering rivalries between the heads of the three powers of the state came into the open in an unprecedented way.

Despite his frequent warnings to the Majles not to impeach government ministers during the last few remaining months in office, on 3 February 2013, the Majles decided to impeach

the Labour Minister. In a speech in support of his minister, Ahmadinejad played a tape of a secretly-recorded conversation between the notorious Revolutionary Prosecutor Saeed Mortazavi, who had been found responsible for the deaths of at least three anti-government protestors in a Tehran prison run by him, and Fazel Larijani, the brother of the Majles Speaker Ali Larijani and the Head of the Judiciary Sadeq Larijani.

In that conversation, Fazel Larijani is heard asking for a bribe in return for ensuring political support for Mortazavi both in the Majles and in the judiciary. This threw the session into chaos, also scuttling any chance of Ali Larijani, one of the early contenders for presidency, from running in the presidential election. Subsequently, both the Majles Speaker and the Head of the Judiciary strongly attacked Ahmadinejad, promising retribution in the future.

## **Disunity among the hardliners**

The Iranian political scene on the eve of the election can be divided into four main groups: The right-wing conservatives (who call themselves principalists), the Government Circle, the Reformists and the Centrists. The principalists who are strict followers of the Islamic system and above all its leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are divided into a number of subgroups. Chief among them are: The Principalist Faction and the Islamic Revolution Steadfastness Front. Each of those groups follows a particular ayatollah and supports a different religious organisation.

The Principalist Faction has been the main party in power for eight years. Their spiritual leader is Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, the chairman of the Assembly of Experts, which is theoretically in charge of appointing or dismissing the Supreme Leader. The three prominent members of this faction, the former Majles Speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, whose daughter is married to Ayatollah Khamenei's influential son Mojtaba Khamenei; Ali Akbar Velayati, the former Foreign Minister and special advisor to the Supreme Leader; and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the current mayor of Tehran, formed the so-called 2+1 Coalition and vowed that they would choose a single candidate to compete in the election. However, as the registration of the candidates started, they failed to keep their

promise and the three of them declared their candidacy, although Haddad-Adel, who consistently received the lowest figures in the opinion polls of all the eight candidates, withdrew from the race on June 11. Ali Akbar Velayati and Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf are still in the race and one of them might go into the second round.

The Islamic Revolution Steadfastness Front is the other major principalist group, which takes its lead from the extreme right-wing cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Tagi Mesbah-Yazdi. This faction put forward a number of candidates, including the former Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki, who fell out with President Ahmadinejad and a former Health Minister Kamran Bagheri-Lankarani, but none of them was approved by the Guardian Council. The members of this faction believe that the Islamic Republic is not Islamic enough and should move closer to the implementation of the Shari'a. Like the Taliban, they advocate much stricter observance of Islamic laws on dress and morality, and stress the need for resistance against the West.

The Government Circle is made up of the supporters of President Ahmadinejad. Despite the fact that the principalists had engineered Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 and 2009 elections, and also despite the fact that Ayatollah Khamenei put his full weight behind Ahmadinejad after the 2009 election, the two of them soon fell out. The first disagreement arose over Ahmadinejad's appointment of Esfandiar Rahim-Masha'i, his long-term friend and his son's father-in-law, as his first vice-president. Ayatollah Khamenei, in a letter to Ahmadinejad, ordered him to dismiss the vice-president, an order that he ignored until it was made public, and then he appointed him as Chief of Staff.

A group of principalists had criticised Masha'i over some of his unorthodox views. For instance, in a speech he said that the time of Islamism was over and he advocated "Iranian Islam", which according to him is the most perfect form of Islam. Like Ahmadinejad, he is a believer in the imminent return of the Hidden Imam, a concept that would undercut the authority of the clerics who rule in the name of the Hidden Imam. Ahmadinejad and Masha'i used messianic language in order to mobilise support for their radical ideology and revitalise public fervour. Ahmadinejad's provocative comments about Israel and the Holocaust also followed

the same agenda. However, their tactic backfired and resulted in their alienation from the ruling establishment.

During his time as the head of the Iran Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization, Masha'i was at the centre of a lot of controversy. At the end of 2006, various Iranian news agencies, including the hardline Fars News Agency, reported that Masha'i was present at a cultural ceremony in Turkey in December 2005 where women had performed a traditional dance. Conservative interpretations of Islam prohibit dancing by women. In 2008, Masha'i hosted a ceremony in Tehran in which several women played tambourines, while another carried the Koran to a podium to recite verses from the Muslim holy book. Hardliners viewed the festive mood as disrespectful to the Koran. Masha'i faced even harsher criticism following his remarks about the Israeli people. Speaking at a conference on tourism in Tehran, he said: "No nation in the world is our enemy. Today, Iran is friends with the people of America and Israel and this is an honour." [1]

Ahmadinejad's opponents began to call Masha'i and his supporters "the Deviant Movement," guilty of un-Islamic activities. Accompanied by Ahmadinejad, Masha'i registered on the last day of registration for candidacy in the current election, but was disqualified Guardian Council. The snubbing of Ahmadinejad's candidate shows that the Supreme Leader is determined to prevent him and his supporters from playing any significant role in the future. Although Khamenei has had a number of disagreements with former presidents, none of them have been like the one with Ahmadinejad, who has challenged the very basis of the power of the ayatollah and the ideology of the Islamic Republic.

Ahmadinejad's populist approach and slogans of bringing the oil money to people's tables and adopting a strong stance against the West also began to lose favour with the public. His uncompromising stance on the nuclear issue resulted in the Iranian file being sent to the Security Council and many multilateral and unilateral sanctions imposed on Iran. His economic policy was initially quite popular, with generous subsidies to poorer classes. But his mismanagement of the economy combined with crippling sanctions, resulted in massive unemployment and high inflation. His disagreements with the hardliners and especially with Ayatollah



Khamenei sealed his fate. Consequently, his expulsion from power seems to be complete and final.

The Reformist Movement was born with the victory of President Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 election; he was re-elected in 2001. The reformists remained faithful to the Islamic revolution and worked within the constitution of the Islamic Republic, but put forward a fresh interpretation of Islam and the Islamic revolution. President Khatami stressed the need to come to terms with the modern world and to interpret Islamic teachings in a way that was compatible with the realities of the time. He put forward the idea of the Dialogue of Civilizations and stretched a hand of friendship towards the West. He spoke eloquently about civil society, the rights of citizens, the equality of men and women, the rule of law, freedom of expression and respect for the private domain of individuals. These ideas attracted the support of a large number of young and educated Iranians, and he won nearly 70% of the votes against the establishment candidate Ayatollah Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri.

In the 2005 presidential election, the reformists had three main candidates who together received the majority of the votes. However, when the former President Ayatollah Rafsanjani competed against Ahmadinejad in the second round, the younger candidate won, and he started a campaign of vilification against the reformists. Many reformist publications were banned and a large number of reformist figures were jailed.

The Centrist Movement: After the 2009 election, the defeated candidates Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi were demonised as “the Seditiousists” who wished to bring about a revolution against the Islamic Republic. Although many reformists were hoping that former President Khatami would be a candidate in this election, from the attacks on him in the right-wing media it was clear that he would be rejected by the Guardian Council. Therefore, Khatami and the reformists pressed Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani to run. When Rafsanjani registered his candidacy during the last few minutes of the time allocated for registration, there was an unexpected wave of support and enthusiasm for him. Many thought that he could reverse the setbacks suffered by the centrists and the reformers in the 2009 election, and many opinion polls

showed that he would win an outright victory in the first round.

The repetition of the 2009 scenario terrified Khamenei and the hardliners, and quite unexpectedly the Guardian Council rejected his qualifications. By preventing Hashemi from running, Khamenei has shown how frightened he is of dissent and of having a rival. Hashemi-Rafsanjani has been active since before the Islamic revolution. He was closer to Khomeini than even Khamenei, and Khomeini appointed him as his representative in the Supreme Defence Council during the Iran-Iraq war. He was the one who persuaded Khomeini to accept the Security Council's resolution to end the war. He served two terms as the speaker of the Majles, and two terms as president. For many years he has served as the chairman of the Expediency Council that arbitrates disputes between the Majles and the Guardian Council. Up until just a couple of years ago, he was the chairman of the Assembly of Experts that is theoretically in charge of selecting or dismissing the Supreme Leader.

Above all, he was the person who helped Khamenei to be chosen as the Supreme Leader after Khomeini's death, by saying that he had heard from Khomeini that Khamenei would make a good leader, something that nobody else had heard. Hashemi-Rafsanjani's age (he is 78) was said to have been one reason for his disqualification, but Khamenei is only five years younger than Hashemi. When Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran and led the revolution, he was exactly the same age as Hashemi is now. Ahmad Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council who disqualified Hashemi, is 87, and Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, who is the current chairman of the Assembly of Experts, is 82. So if age is to be a bar against holding high office, then all these gentlemen should be dismissed.

The rejection of Hashemi's qualification has caused deep rifts in the establishment. Hashemi's daughter Fa'ezeh, who served a few terms as a Majles deputy, and who was jailed for supporting the Green Movement, said in an interview that some special envoys had been sent to the Guardian Council urging it to reject the qualifications of her father, and that some members of the Council had left the meeting in protest.

Zahra Mostafavi, one of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's

daughters, and Hassan Khomeini, the late revolutionary leader's grandson who supported the Green Movement in the last election, have both spoken in favour of Hashemi-Rafsanjani. In an open letter to Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Zahra Mostafavi called on him to use his position as the leader and order the Guardian Council to reinstate Hashemi-Rafsanjani. Pointedly she wrote: "On the day when I heard the Imam's [Khomeini's] statement about your leadership qualities, I also heard him confirm the leadership qualities of our brother Hashemi after mentioning your name." She expressed concern about a rift between Khamenei and Rafsanjani and pointed out that her father had said "it would be good when the two of them are together." [2]

In an open letter to Hashemi-Rafsanjani, referring to his disqualification by the Guardian Council, Seyyed Hassan Khomeini wrote: "The publication of this report has pained the hearts of all your friends and a large number of the friends of the illustrious Imam [Khomeini] and the honourable leader of the revolution." He added: "However, I am not very worried about the rejection of your qualifications, but to some extent due to the reasons that will be made clear in future I am optimistic and I have a great deal of hope for the future, and now my hope has increased." [3]

Hashemi-Rafsanjani's disqualification at first caused great disappointment, but two candidates picked up the banner, a reformist Mohammad Reza Aref who had served as vice-president under Khatami, and a centrist Hassan Rohani. Rohani is a cleric with a university education. He received a bachelor's degree in judicial law in 1972 from the University of Tehran. He continued his studies in the West and received his master's degree in public law followed by a doctorate degree from the Caledonian University in Glasgow. He is fluent in English and Arabic and has published a number of books in Persian, as well as in English and Arabic.

Although a centrist, in his election campaign Rohani has adopted many reformist slogans and has gone further than most reformist figures in the past. Ayatollah Jalaluddin Taheri, the Friday prayer leader of Isfahan, was one of the few prominent clerics who openly supported Mir-Hossein Mousavi in the last election, and was subsequently shunned by the rest of the establishment. He died at the beginning of June 2013 and tens of thousands

of mourners took part in his funeral. Rohani joined the funeral cortege where the crowds openly chanted slogans in support of Mousavi.

Speaking at a massive rally in Shiroudi Stadium in Tehran, Rohani asked: "Why do we have political prisoners in Iran?" and the crowd chanted: "Political prisoners should be freed". He then said: "I will never hide behind the fighters, the martyrs and the glorious name of those who sacrificed themselves for the country," and more pointedly he continued, "nor will I hide behind an old man." The crowd shouted: "We do not want a government that acts under orders." [4]

In another gathering, he said that this time it will be different and the suppressions that followed the 2009 election will not be repeated. In most of his public addresses, he has spoken favourably of the leaders of the Green Movement. His outspoken remarks have worried the hardliners to such an extent that some news agencies reported that the approval of his qualifications would be revoked, but the spokesman of the Guardian Council later denied those reports.

The live presidential debates further exposed the rift among the principalists. Many analysts had regarded Jalili as Ayatollah Khamenei's favourite candidate, but in the debates he was attacked both by Ali Akbar Velayati, Ayatollah Khamenei's special advisor, and by Qalibaf, another candidate close to the principalists. The debates showed that, contrary to expectations, Khamenei is not solely in charge of the nuclear file. Velayati criticized Jalili's negotiation techniques, accusing him of having missed many opportunities. He told Jalili: "You want to take three steps and you expect the other side to take 100 steps, this means that you don't want to make progress. This is not diplomacy.... We can't expect everything and give nothing." [5]

When Jalili angrily dismissed those charges, saying that he had won all the debates with the P5+1, Velayati contemptuously said, "Well, Dr. Jalili, speaking of diplomacy, it's not a philosophy class to say that our logic was strong." "You have been in charge of the nuclear issue, we have not made a step forward, and the [sanctions] pressure has been exerted on the people." Velayati further admonished Jalili: "Being conservative does not mean being

inflexible and stubborn.” Diplomacy, he added, does not mean to just “give a sermon to other countries,” hold press conferences, and “sit at the [negotiating] table and say something without doing anything else.”

Velayati also made some revelations. He had an unannounced, hour-long conversation in Paris with the then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and they had agreed on a number of centrifuges, and continued but limited enrichment for Iran. That deal fell through, along with another one that had brought Russian President Vladimir Putin to Tehran in 2007, which had become “somehow tarnished,” said Velayati.

He alleged that after his talks in Paris, Iran’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs under President Ahmadinejad had said that Velayati did not represent the Iranian government’s views. He also said that Ali Larijani had reached an agreement with the then EU’s chief negotiator Javier Solana, enabling Iran to retain a number of centrifuges, but that deal also fell through when Ahmadinejad replaced Larijani with Jalili. Speaking about where the current government went wrong, Hassan Rohani said: “All of our problems stem from this – that we didn’t make the utmost effort to prevent the [nuclear] dossier from going to the UN Security Council.” He added: “It’s good to have centrifuges running, provided that people’s lives and sustenance are also spinning.”

The interesting point is that all principalist candidates who shared the government’s philosophy and who were instrumental in Ahmadinejad’s two election victories openly attacked the economic and foreign policy record of the government. Hearing all those criticisms from his former allies, Ahmadinejad called on the state media to give him the right of reply, but was turned down.

In order to prevent the splitting of the reformist vote, on June 11, Aref, the reformist candidate, withdrew his candidacy in favour of the centrist candidate Rohani. Although many reformists would have preferred the U.S.-educated scientist Mohammad Reza Aref, who was the first vice-president in Khatami’s government, Rohani has a number of clear advantages over Aref. During the debates and the electoral campaign, he has shown that he is brave, articulate, intelligent and aware of domestic and international political realities. As a cleric and as Khamenei’s representative in

the Supreme National Security Council, he is more acceptable to the traditionalists whose votes will count in the election, and less open to their criticism as a radical anti-regime reformer if he wins. As a centrist he can open a dialogue both with the clerical establishment and the conservatives, as well as with the reformists.

In view of the violent campaign against the reformists in the last election, it seems that they have decided to opt for a moderate and centrist position, rather than an all-out confrontation with the hardliners. As a vice-president in the reformist government who adopted some clear and strong positions during the campaign, Aref would have been open to intense suspicion and opposition by the hardliners. On the other hand, as a former nuclear negotiator who had reached agreement with Britain, France and Germany to suspend enrichment for two years, Rohani is regarded as a safe pair of hands by moderate Iranians, as well as a viable interlocutor for the West, who can reach an agreement on Iran's nuclear programme.

Judging by all the opinion polls, Rohani has a good chance of success even in the first round, if the reformists who intended to support Hashemi-Rafsanjani or Aref vote for him. His election will bring a modicum of calm and moderation in the country and will help heal the rift with the West, especially on the nuclear issue.

It remains to be seen whether this time, Ayatollah Khamenei and the hardliners will allow people's votes to stand or if they choose someone they regard as a faithful servant of the Supreme Leader. But the waves of pro-democracy movements in the Arab world and now in Turkey show that any attempt to hold on to absolute power is bound to fail.

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