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Iran's Presidential Election: Problematic but Important

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The outcome of the upcoming Presidential election in Iran has been sealed by the Guardian Council's decision to exclude candidates at will and to favor the Supreme Leader's trustees. The current appointed body has prevented Rafsanjani and Mashaei, along with several other hundreds, from running for the seat, while the Green Movement has been prosecuted. But even though none of the remaining eight candidates can be labeled as pure reformers or as liberals, they do have different approaches on important matters that have significant impact on the country and the region, such as their stances on the nuclear program and on the economy.

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Iran will hold its 11th presidential election after the 1979 Islamic Revolution on June 14th, 2013. The President of Iran holds significant power and is considered to be the second in authority only to the Supreme Leader. The outcome of the elections is important since the winner will have to face major external and internal challenges that will affect both the Islamic state and the surrounding region. Pressing issues on the external front include the nuclear program and the country's problematic relations with the West while internally the new leader will need to address a failing economy and the country's frustrated youth population. The election process' legitimacy is weakened by an electoral system which grants authority to the Guardian Council, controlled by the Supreme Leader, to decide who is qualified to run for the seat. The eight approved candidates are considered to be close to the conservative camp of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei¹. However, all of the final candidates are important figures in Iranian politics and as the rifts between former Presidents and Khamenei have proven in the past, the next President might try to differentiate himself in certain issues as well.

Western reactions towards the integrity of the electoral system have caused the Iranian regime to strike back in fear of minimized legitimacy. Under Iran's electoral law, the Guardian Council is responsible for reviewing hopefuls for the Presidency. The Council is composed of 12 members, half of whom are clerics nominated by the Supreme Leader, and the other half of whom are lawyers nominated by the head of the judicial system. The head of the judicial system is also appointed by Khamenei. This tight control over the members of the Council means that French and American reactions towards the non-elected body that controls the candidacies are not groundless. Recently, the US Secretary of State and the French Foreign Ministry spokesman lambasted the electoral system of Iran for disqualifying potential candidates on vague criteria². The Supreme Leader himself, as well as some prominent Iranian officials such as MPs, clerics, prosecutors and the Foreign Ministry, responded by castigating foreign powers for meddling in Iranian affairs and organizing a plot to discourage people from voting³. However, a significant portion of the urban classes have already lost trust in the election process, after the dubious 2009 Presidential election and the repression of the protests that followed. In reality, the ruling elite have repeatedly called the Iranian people to participate massively in the elections out of fear of a low turnout, which would further reduce the legitimacy of the results in an already problematic process.

Among nearly 700 candidates who have been blocked from running for Presidency by the Guardian Council, there were two prominent figures, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei⁴. Rafsanjani is a founding member of the Revolution and former President of the state, who still has significant popularity in Iran and is considered to be a centrist politician capable of improving the country's relations with the outside world. For many, he was the last hope for the reformist camp to challenge the ultra conservatives in power, since the main leaders of the reformists have been put aside by the hardliners after the 2009 disputed elections. Mashaei, on the other hand, is the brother in law and close confidant of Ahmadinejad but also a persona non grata for the Supreme Leader's circle. The rift between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei was actually deepened when the Supreme Leader ordered Mashaei's abrupt removal just a week after he was appointed First Vice President in 2009⁵. Mashaei's nationalistic and sometimes even liberal views, as well as his possession of the full backing of his candidacy by the retiring President, virtually guaranteed the continuation of Ahmadinejad's legacy if he had the chance to win the position. However, the traditionalist forces would not risk the chance to have an independent President with deviant ideas.

All eight candidates are considered to be close to the clerical and military

establishment but a closer look reveals essential differences among them. The candidates can be categorized in two broad groups; the hard-line conservatives and the modest reformers⁶. The conservative coalition, also known as “2+1”, is made up of Ali Akbar Velayati, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Mayor of Tehran, and Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, former speaker of the Parliament. This coalition changed its agreed upon position of uniting behind one of the aforementioned candidates before the elections, since all three of them are now running for the seat. All of them are considered to be part of the inner circle of the Supreme Leader. Velayati is an advisor to Khamenei on international affairs and has been labeled as a hardliner. Ghalibaf, an ex-Chief of the air force and the police, appears to be the most charismatic among the three as his managerial skills and popularity during his term in Tehran’s municipality prove. Haddad-Adel’s daughter is married to Khamenei’s son, Mojtaba. In addition to the “2+1” group, another two ultra conservatives run for the Presidency, Saeed Jalili, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council which negotiates the country’s nuclear policy, and Mohsen Rezaei, former head of the Revolutionary Guard. Furthermore, Mohammad Gharazi, Minister of Petroleum and Post in the 1980s and 1990s, is considered to be the most independent among the candidates. The most moderate candidates appear to be Hassan Rowani, former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, and Mohammad Reza Aref, Mohammad Khatami’s Vice President.

The influence of the President on shaping the foreign policy of the state is relatively limited compared to that of the Supreme Leader, but the upcoming elections are still important to pressing international issues such as the nuclear program and Iran’s relations with the West. Discussions around the uranium enrichment program are a significant factor to be considered since it constitutes a source of both pride and suspense for Iranians. All candidates agree on the country’s right to continue the program, but differentiate themselves on their diplomatic approaches. Two of the candidates, Jalili and Rowani, have previously been in charge of the powerful Supreme National Security Council and their terms had signaled significant policy shifts. Rowani’s pragmatism and openness to talks had allowed Iran to continue working on its nuclear program without facing either a threat of war by the USA or the threat of economic sanctions⁷. However, hardliner Jalili questions Rowani’s past agreement with the EU that had briefly suspended the uranium enrichment process in exchange for recognition of Iran’s nuclear rights and accuses him of being too soft in negotiations. Hence, Rowani stresses the need for openness and negotiations towards the West while Jalili perceives the nuclear program as being a nationalistic act of resistance⁸. Moreover, candidate Gharazi has explicitly stated that Iran should not try to build a nuclear bomb because religion, regulations, and national interest stand against it. Ali Akbar Velayati made the issue a central part of his campaign as well and argued in favor of the country’s right in clean nuclear energy but at the same time favored better relations with the West in order to ease the country’s economic and diplomatic isolation. Candidate Aref also promised to focus on improving relations with other nations. Both Rezaei and Haddad-Adel do not dismiss talks with the West but point out that this process should advance Iran’s national interest implying a continuation of Tehran’s hard line in diplomacy.

Another issue of top priority in the election is the Iranian economy, which has deteriorated significantly due to the international sanctions and governmental mismanagement⁹. With inflation at 25.2% (official Iranian estimate) and unemployment at 15.5% (official Iranian estimate), the population, businesses, and industries have been badly hurt. All candidates have admitted the dire economic situation of the country and accused Ahmadinejad’s government and the international sanctions for the current outlook. Aref has castigated corruption which allows the military and its affiliated companies to

dominate the economy, probably referencing the Revolutionary Guard's business interests. Indeed, the involvement of the Guard in the Iranian economy has reached an unprecedented level after Ahmadinejad's 2005 election. Construction, manufacturing, charitable foundations, media, oil and gas, black-market enterprises, real estate, and almost every important economic sector in the country has a link to the powerful group¹⁰. It is therefore likely that Aref wanted to draw attention to other candidates' connections with the Revolutionary Guard and the military through his statement. Aref also shared with Jalili the view on reducing the economy's dependence on oil revenues. In fact, Jalili went further to argue that the sanctions should be seen as an opportunity to dissociate Iran's economy from oil. Mohammad Ghalibaf promised more independence for the central bank and an attempt to empower the service sector. Moreover, Rezaei has pointed out the need to fight corruption and wealth inequalities in order to fulfill the promises of the Islamic Revolution.

Many other elements will shape the final outcome of the elections such as the youth vote and the candidates' alliances. High unemployment rates and lack of freedom are major concerns for younger voters (18-35) who constitute about half of the 50 million Iranians eligible to vote. Socio-economic factors such as urbanization (70%), a significant rate of unmarried youth (33% of women and 50% of men), and divorced citizens (1 out of 7 marriages) as well as the increasing number of women who are main breadwinners (12.1% of all families in the country) put demands like cultural freedoms and women's rights higher on the agenda of the electorate¹¹. Although most of the candidates are labeled as traditionalists, those who are more moderate might try to appeal to the youth. However, neither the hardliners nor the less conservative ones have managed to present a sole candidate¹². There are various scenarios discussed concerning the traditionalist camp where Ghalibaf and Jalili appear to be the most prominent choices but it is unlikely that the other candidates will withdraw in their favor. In addition, Rowani and Aref have been struggling to get the support of popular and influential people like Rafsanjani, but have failed to unite under a common banner¹³. If there is a second round of voting, closer cooperation and alliances should be expected among the candidates. Finally, a last minute sign of favor towards one of the candidates by the Supreme Leader might ultimately change the picture.

The upcoming Presidential election in Iran has been accused of lacking credibility and of offering no options other than the Supreme Leader's trustees. Although the general process' reputation suffers from a dubious result in 2009 and a problematic system which disqualifies hundreds of candidates, the election results are still far from certain. Candidates are part of the ruling elite but at the same time, they present differences on issues of top priority such as the nuclear program, its implications on the country's foreign affairs, and the way by which to handle a declining economy. The next President has the ability to leave his mark, whether it is a hard-line stance or a more moderate one, on important decisions that will affect both Iran and the region. In general, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei should probably expect smoother cooperation with the next President, while keeping in mind that his past experiences prove that the opposite may also be true.

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