

Study

**The Relationship Between the Supreme
Leadership and Presidency
and Its Impact on the Political System in Iran**



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Executive Summary

The Iranian political system's extraordinary nature still imposes competitiveness among its institutions. The mutual interactions between the supreme leadership and the presidency are evidence of this conflictual nature. An example of this conflicting relationship emerged when conservatives suggested a constitutional amendment to replace the presidency with the prime ministry. In contrast, some reformist perceptions to reduce the powers of the supreme leader were revived. The reformist activist Mustafa Tajzadeh called to merge the supreme leadership and the presidency, where the leadership position would be assumed by an election in a system where the leader would be vested with sole executive authority, thus addressing the contradiction and duplication within the Iranian political system, and ending one of the most significant rivalries among its most important institutions.

Nowadays, the proposals to re-establish the relationship between the two institutions have implications for the crises within the Iranian political system, and for the attempts made by political parties to put the ball in the other party's court and to absolve themselves of political responsibility for the current deteriorating internal and external conditions.

These deliberations are also important given that the political system will be facing a challenge in the post-Khamenei era, especially with regard to the future form of the political system and the redistribution of central positions of power, . New generations also aspire to achieve a necessary modernization of the political system, a partial or comprehensive change in order to push it towards greater efficiency and vitality away from the current state of religious guardianship, which has become a heavy burden on the system and the state as a whole.

What is the nature of the relationship between the supreme leadership and the presidency in Iran, what are the powers vested in each party, and does the supreme leadership seek a constitutional amendment to retain more influence within the political structure? Has the presidency in Iran reach its endpoint, and become a burden on political institutions? Could a constitutional amendment address the crisis within the political system, or is it just a circumvention of

reality and an attempt from the supreme leadership to distance itself from the current crisis after 40 years? Can the current facts lead to a process of real change that influences the political system and the structure of power within it? Or, does this just represent political maneuvering and the redistribution of roles to give the system more time to survive and achieve sustainability.

The imbalance and overlapping of powers between the two institutions have led to differences and crises since the inauguration of the system after the revolution in 1979.

1- The Iranian political system is suffering from real problems and obstacles due to the ongoing differences between the two institutions [the supreme leadership and the presidency].

2- Undermining the presidential system and returning to the parliamentary system may increase the supreme leader's control over the whole system when he chooses the prime minister.

3- It may be possible that the relationship between the two institutions is rewritten based on a set of internal and external facts that may threaten the political system's survival.

Based on the stated assumptions, the paper is divided into four main parts as follows:

I- The Status and Role of the Supreme Leadership and Presidency in the Iranian Political System

II- Problems in the Relationship Between the Supreme Leadership and the Presidency

III- The Consequences of the Conflict Between the Supreme Leadership and the Presidency for the efficiency of the olitical System

IV- The Future of the Relationship Between the Supreme Leadership and the Presidency

I- The Status and Role of the Supreme Leadership and the Presidency in the Iranian Political System

The following elements can determine the relationship between the supreme leadership and the presidency in the Iranian political system:

1- The Extraordinary Role and Power of the Supreme Leader

The supreme leader is the head of state and the highest religious and political authority in the country. The supreme leader's role and his central position within the Iranian political system have been set according to the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* [supreme leadership]. Khomeini adopted this theory based on his political thought which became the premise upon which he established the new republic political project. In line with the *Velayat-e Faqih* theory, the supreme leader directs the *ummah* [Islamic society] until the emergence of the *Twelfth Imam* and assumes his political and religious roles.

The Assembly of Experts elects the supreme leader, who enjoys broader authority than the president of the republic, and has more respect within the system as a whole. The supreme leader appoints many bureaucratic high-ranking personalities in the army, judiciary, and government. The head of the judiciary holds the position for eight years, and members of the Expediency Council hold their positions for five years.⁽¹⁾ The supreme leader also appoints six out of the 12 members of the Guardian Council for six years; he appoints the head of the Radio and Television Corporation, the Friday *imams* [leaders] in each province for life, as well as commanders of the armed and security forces.

According to the Iranian Constitution, the *Vali-e Faqih* [supreme leader] represents a guarantee to prevent various organs of the republican system from deviating from their original functions. The *Vali-e Faqih* has to be fair, pious and brave. He must also possess knowledge and have administrative and leadership characteristics. The Council of Experts chooses the supreme leader according to the aforementioned characteristics and qualities; two senior leaders have held the position, the first was the founder of the Iranian political system Ayatollah Mustafa Ahmad Khomeini 1979-1989, and Ali Khamenei from 1989 until now.

2- The Secondary Position of the President of the Republic in the Pyramid of Power

The presidency is one of the nine most significant institutions at the core of Iran's political system, and the president is Iran's highest popularly elected political authority. The Iranian president has to be

elected by a majority of Iranians for a four year term and can only stand for two terms. He is accountable to the supreme leader. He signs agreements with other states and international organizations, ratifies the budget, appoints the vice president and ministers and submits them to Parliament for approval. However, the president does not have absolute powers over the armed forces and foreign policy. The supreme leader has the final say in these areas. The president of the republic is the head of government, the second position in the Iranian political system after the supreme leader, the head of the Iranian National Security Council, and the head of the Cultural Revolution Council. Constitutionally, the elected president has to be an Iranian political cleric that has administrative capabilities and proper management skills. He must also have an excellent reputation and be honest and pious; he also has to believe in the basic principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official doctrine of the country, which is the Shiite sect.

Compared to the supreme leadership institution, the institution of the presidency seems less important within the political system, even with some of the powers granted to it by the constitution. While popular sovereignty reflects the nation's inherent right to govern,⁽²⁾ the Iranian constitution has undermined this principle through the marginalization of elected institutions, including the presidency,⁽³⁾ and has limited popular will. The unelected supreme leader holds unlimited powers without accountability has the right to isolate elected public representatives, regardless of their position.⁽⁴⁾

From the beginning of the selection process, the head of the executive branch can only reach his position with the approval of the *Vali-e Faqih* [supreme leader], because constitutionally he is selected in accordance with his affiliations and beliefs. The president has to be an Iranian political cleric who has the characteristics of honesty and piety and believes in the principles of the Islamic Republic and the official doctrine of the country [Twelver Shiism]. Here, it seems that the election is a selective process, ultimately determined by jurists who restrict the competition between some of the candidates. Moreover, the election procedures between candidates who hold the same religious principles seems to be a vicious circle where only names change but policies and ideas remain the same.

The political mechanism of electing the president of the republic is merely a process of guaranteeing competition within a framework determined by Iran's dominant institutions. Candidates for the presidency are vetted, according to strict religious and sectarian rules. The election process is still a mechanism for competition between elite figures that are affiliated to the supreme leader.

3- Missions and Responsibilities of the Supreme Leader and the President

The constitution strengthened the power of clerics and amassed political power in their hands according to the theory of *Velayat-e Faqih*.⁽⁵⁾ Indeed, Khomeini's solution to the political problems faced by cleric's was to consolidate their power by establishing an absolute version of *Velayat-e Faqih*. This, in turn, placed the supreme leader above the law, constitution and all institutions.⁽⁶⁾

According to Article 57 of the Iranian constitution, all authorities have a ceiling on their work, which hinges on the ceiling determined by the religious leadership represented in the supreme leader. He has the tools to make their policies ineffective. The elected institutions have no legitimacy, nor do they have the capacity to express their independence in light of the restrictions imposed by the Guardian Council.

Based on the provisions of the constitution, the supreme leader has the prime responsibility for outlining the general policies of the Islamic republic and overseeing it. This means that he determines domestic and foreign policies given the fact that he is the supreme commander of the armed forces and controls security and intelligence operations. He alone has the power to proclaim peace or war.

4- The Role of the Supreme Leader in Choosing the Representatives of Sovereign Institutions

The supreme leader has the power to appoint or reject leaders of the judiciary as well as the heads of the state-run radio and television networks. He is the supreme commander of the armed forces, including its three divisions: the army, IRGC, and internal security forces. He also appoints six out of the 12 members of the Guardian Council, a powerful body that oversees the activities of the Parliament and determines candidates suitable for running for public posts.

The scope of the power of the supreme leader is expanded via

his representatives, 2,000 of which are spread across different government sectors and work as deputies of the religious leadership. Sometimes the representatives of the supreme leader become more powerful than the ministers appointed by the president. They have the power to intervene in any issue on behalf of the supreme leader.⁽⁷⁾ Moreover, Iran is the only country in the world where the executive authority and its head do not have control over the armed forces, which is subject to the direct authority of the supreme leader. Nobody could have imagined that the first Supreme Leader Khomeini, who led the revolution against the Shah's authoritarian political system, could enjoy powers, while at the apex of the political system, which surpassed that of the Shah himself at the height of his rule.

5- The Supreme Leader's Responsibility for the Three Branches of Power

The constitution gives the guardian jurist the power to oversee the three main branches of government. Article 57 stipulates, "The powers of government in the Islamic Republic are vested in the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive powers, functioning under the supervision of the absolute *Velayat-e Amr* and *Imam-e Ummah* [the leader of the nation]."⁽⁸⁾

With these superior powers granted to the supreme leader, one of the most important and well-established constitutional principles vanish, which is the independence of and the balance among the branches of government, that maintains some sort of interchangeable responsibilities for the political system and ensures that there will be no deviation or incursion by any branch of power against the other.

All attempts to curb the powers of the supreme leader have failed. He oversees the three branches of government, appoints the head of the judiciary, approves/ dismisses the president, appoints jurists in the Guardian Council, and appoints members of the Expediency Discernment Council. His power extends over almost everything. In the constitution, these powers are enshrined in several articles in addition to 11 paragraphs in Article 110.

6- The Role of the Supreme Leader in Forming Parallel Governance Institutions

The supreme leader contributes to creating parallel political institutions through which he can undermine other institutions. The

exceptions stated in Chapter 9 of the constitution deprive the executive authority of the actual capacity to exercise its duties and assume its responsibilities. The president has extensive powers, but the powers of the supreme leader can override these powers.⁽⁹⁾ Selecting the president as well as members of the three branches of government is done through a process of filtering by councils dominated by the supreme leader and jurists. This means that political representation within the system at the national and local levels is open only to individuals acceptable to the supreme leader. The Guardian Council, of which the supreme leader chooses half of its members, plays this role, and the head of the judiciary, who is appointed by the supreme leader, nominates the other half of the Guardian Council's members.⁽¹⁰⁾

There is no doubt that the constitution, through permitting parallel institutions in the political system, gives the supreme leader the ability to restrict the policies of any president and government that may have reformist inclinations. He uses the judiciary to clamp down on opposition newspapers and hunt down reformist figures and political activists. This is in addition to the military and security apparatuses which are directly controlled by the ruling authorities led by the supreme leader.⁽¹¹⁾

The supreme leader shall remain in office forever until he reaches old age, becomes unable to perform his duties, or passes away. At the time, the Assembly of Experts picks an alternative supreme leader as fast as possible.⁽¹²⁾ The one who examines the Iranian constitution will find a clerical ideological republic governed by the supreme leader, with the other branches of government spinning in his orbit.

7- Dismissing and Appointing the President

The constitutional amendments made in 1989 gave the supreme leader the right to control the various institutions of the Iranian political system, from the powers given to the supreme leader, the so-called decree formalizing the election of the president of the republic, or the decree to take and assume the office of the presidency of the republic. According to Article 110, paragraph 9 of the Iranian Constitution, this decree falls within the powers of the supreme leader. If not enforced, the president-elect will not be able to take his oath and exercise his duties as president of Iran.

The philosophy of this decree springs from the fact that

the supreme leader is the representative of the Infallible Imam in the age of occultation. Therefore, the head of the executive authority should take permission or approval from him before assuming his duties as president of the republic, lest he will be deprived of legitimacy and capacity.⁽¹³⁾ As to dismissing the president of the republic, the Iranian constitution grants the supreme leader this right in two ways:

First: Measures are adopted in accordance with Article 89 of the Iranian constitution. In the event that at least one-third of the members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly interpellates the president concerning the affairs of the country; the president must be present in the Assembly within one month from the tabling of the interpellation in order to address the matters raised. In this situation, after hearing the statements of the opposing and favoring members and the reply of the president, two-thirds of the members of the Assembly declare a vote of no confidence, the same will be communicated to the supreme leadership.

Second: Paragraph 10 of Article 110 of the constitution gives the supreme leader the right to dismiss the president of the republic after a ruling from the Supreme Court that he breached his constitutional duties. According to Article 130 of the Iranian Constitution, the president shall submit his resignation to the supreme leader and shall continue performing his duties until his resignation is accepted. Based on the preceding, it is clear that the Iranian Constitution is designed to enable the supreme leader to limit the executive powers and purviews of the president of the republic.

According to several articles of the constitution, the supreme leader can intervene directly or indirectly in all matters relating to the presidency of the republic. Institutions overseen by the supreme leader, such as the judiciary, the Revolutionary Guards, the Guardian Council, the security forces, and radio and television institutions, play a significant role in limiting the powers of the president. As a result of this situation, most of the presidents in post-revolutionary Iran were at odds with the supreme leader. Although they did not explicitly object to the supreme leader's control, they did so by demanding that they were given sufficient powers to carry out their executive duties.

II- The Problems Involving the Relationship Between the Supreme Leader and the Presidency

The interactions between the supreme leadership and the Iranian presidency reveal the extent of the problems facing the Iranian president in light of the political system established after the revolution.

1- Conflict Over Powers

Over the past four decades of the Iranian political system, most presidents in Iran have raised the issue of limits imposed on their actual powers. Most of them demanded more powers in order to actively participate in decisive policies, decisions, and domestic and external strategies outlined by the Iranian political system. The demand of Iranian presidents to be granted additional powers started during the era of former President Abu Al-Hassan Banisadr, who took office in February 1980 and was overthrown in June 1981. Banisadr repeatedly demanded his powers be increased. In May 1981, Banisadr proposed a referendum to resolve the crises Iran was facing at the time.

Banisadr's proposals and liberal views conflicted with those of the founder of the Iranian political system, Ruhollah Khomeini, who removed him from office after Parliament withdrew confidence on the pretext of political incompetence.⁽¹⁴⁾

The second president of the Iranian political system, the current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, also demanded additional powers. In 1987, he asked Khomeini to grant the "Council of War" additional powers during the Iran-Iraq war to unify the decision-making body and enable the president to make extraordinary decisions against the law. This had already happened when Khomeini agreed to give the council the necessary powers to manage the problematic circumstances that Iran was going through during the war with Saddam's government.⁽¹⁵⁾

As for the former President Mohammad Khatami, he also sought during his second term to increase his powers and limit the powers of the Guardian Council, in order to implement the political reforms promised during his election campaign. In 2002, he submitted two bills to the Iranian Parliament for ratification: "Amending the Electoral

Law” and “Increasing and Defining the Powers of the President.”

The reformists having a majority of seats in Parliament led to the two bills being passed, but those bills had to be vetted by the Guardian Council, which was accustomed to rejecting anything that ran counter to the position of the supreme leader and the conservatives. The Guardian Council ratifying those bills would have curbed the scope of the council’s work and its role in overseeing all laws issued by the Islamic Consultative Assembly. This is in addition to supervising all the elections held in Iran, including the parliamentary, presidential, and the Assembly of Experts elections and vetting candidates. The Guardian Council’s rejection of these two bills was about to trigger a crisis after Khatami, and a large number of lawmakers threatened to submit their resignations. However, Mohammad Khatami withdrew the two bills from Parliament before the Guardian Council implemented Article 113 of the constitution, which gives the Expediency Discernment Council the right to decide the fate of any bill approved by Parliament but rejected by the Guardian Council. This step was justified by the reformists due to Khatami’s desire not to see the Expediency Discernment Council amend the two bills. However, it seems that Khatami took the step after the reformists lost their parliamentary majority, which supported his reformist project after the parliamentary elections held on February 20, 2004. 32 years after Ali Khamenei demanded an increase in the powers of the presidency to address the problems which Iran faced as a result of the war with Iraq, President Rouhani called on Khamenei, the current supreme leader of the Iranian political system, to give him special powers to resolve the economic crisis that Iran is facing, which he deems to be akin to wartime.⁽¹⁶⁾

After Rouhani failed to acquire powers that would enable him to face up to the crisis, he asked the supreme leader to manage the economic war waged on Iran himself. He added, “I told the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei that the situation through which Iran is going is like wartime. Since the country needs a leader who leads the battle, I suggest that you lead it in your capacity as a head of the political system and leader of the revolution. All the political system’s officials will be under your leadership. The supreme leader was supportive of my description of the ongoing economic situation in Iran as war.

However, he believed that the leader of the front entitled to lead the battle which Iran is facing should be the president of the republic himself, not anybody else.”⁽¹⁷⁾

This request was an indirect objection by President Rouhani of the supreme leader’s powers, which curb the ability of the president to perform his duties. It is as if Rouhani said, “Either you give me the required powers which presidents always enjoy, or you can run the country on your own.” This also indicated the president’s desire to get some powers from the supreme leader to overcome successive crises.

In addition, it was an opportunity on the part of Rouhani to defend his economic record and to emphasize that the economic crisis in Iran was primarily due to US sanctions described by President Rouhani as an economic war. It could also be considered an attempt by President Rouhani to throw the ball in the court of the Supreme Leader Khamenei and to shift part of the blame on to him for the worsening economic situation and the flight of foreign investment and the imposition of US sanctions.

In May 2019, President Rouhani reiterated his call to the supreme leader to grant him more powers, arguing that in order to solve the crises facing Iran he must have the necessary powers given to him because some of the solutions do not fall within the scope of his powers.

After Rouhani’s call to increase his powers,⁽¹⁸⁾ 14 activists issued a statement demanding the resignation of the supreme leader and a change in the constitution. They considered that the presidency is an honorary position, but the powers granted to the president are nominal because they can be vetoed by the supreme leader. “The president of the republic is not the only one who does not have sufficient powers in the Iranian political system. The Parliament is also a figurehead, and the judiciary is not independent,” the statement said.⁽¹⁹⁾

Some reformist leaders, such as Mohammad Reza Khabbaz and Mehdi Hashemi Taba, did not stop at the point at where President Rouhani compared the current economic situation to wartime. They even went on to assert that the current situation was worse than the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq and demanded that Rouhani and his government be given special powers.⁽²⁰⁾

2- Restricting the Role of the Presidency in Choosing Ministers

Although the Iranian constitution does not oblige the president to consult with the supreme leader to choose ministers, the supreme leader has, in recent years, intervened in the selection of ministers for a number of departments such as foreign affairs, interior, defense, security, culture, and guidance. In order to prevent the supreme leader from being accused of interfering with the powers of the president of the republic, it was pointed out that this process takes place in “coordination with the leader to choose the new government.”

The conservative Parliament member Hamid Reza Haji Babaei, who was then a member of the presidential body of the Iranian Parliament, revealed in August 2009 that the process of selecting foreign, interior, security, defense, and cultural ministers is through direct coordination⁽²¹⁾ between the president and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The first Vice President of Iran, Eshaq Jahangiri, said Hassan Rouhani had referred his choices to the supreme leader during the formation of the government in 2017.⁽²²⁾

The issue of the supreme leader’s intervention in picking some ministers was raised for the first time when media outlets spoke of it during the era of Mohammed Khatami. The supreme leader recommended Atallah Mohajerani to be appointed as a minister of guidance under the Khatami government. However, the relationship between the supreme leader and Mohajerani worsened due to the latter’s insistence on refusing to shut down some newspapers. The disagreement between them led to Mohajerani submitting his resignation, which was accepted by Khatami in 2001.⁽²³⁾

Despite Ahmadinejad’s strong support from Khamenei, who described him as the closest to the principles of the revolution among his predecessors, as well as his unlimited support for Ahmadinejad in the 2009 presidential election, in which there were widespread accusations of rigging in favor of Ahmadinejad, Khamenei intervened directly in forming the Ahmadinejad government.

After being re-elected for a second term in 2009, Ahmadinejad chose his brother-in-law Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei as his first vice president. However, this appointment was quickly rejected by the conservatives. The supreme leader sent a letter to President Ahmadinejad asking him to cancel this appointment, saying that the appointment of Mashaei

is detrimental to the interests of Ahmadinejad and the interests of his government and will divide his supporters,” he was forced to resign just eight days after his appointment. ⁽²⁴⁾

Another spat between the supreme leader and Ahmadinejad erupted in April 2011 when the latter decided to dismiss Intelligence Minister Haidar Moslehi, but Khamenei ordered Moslehi to be reinstated. This caused a great deal of embarrassment to President Ahmadinejad, who skipped two meetings attended by Moslehi and stayed at his home for 11 days. However, he received stern warnings from the conservatives who pressured him, leading him to resume his duties. ⁽²⁵⁾

After the completion of the final list of government ministers presented by President Rouhani after his victory in the presidential elections in 2013, it was reported that the supreme leader rejected ministers proposed on the list, including Ali Younsi, a candidate for the Ministry of Security. This was in addition to Ahmed Jamei for the Ministry of Guidance, Jaafar Tawfiqi for the Ministry of Science, and Hussein Alayi for the Ministry of Defense.

In October 2013, Iranian parliamentarian Ali Motahari confirmed the news of the supreme leader’s rejection of the proposed candidate for the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology, after Motahari revealed that President Rouhani was determined to choose Jaafar Tawfiqi for the Ministry of Science. But the supreme leader rejected this nomination. ⁽²⁶⁾ The decision to reject Tawfiqi came even though the Ministry of Science is not among the five ministries that the president must coordinate with the supreme leader on to obtain approval, which means there is the possibility of the intervention by the supreme leader in the selection of several other ministers.

III- Applying Pressure Through Power to Dismiss the President

In the nearly four decades of the dominance of the current Iranian political system, only one president, Abu al-Hassan Banisadr, was dismissed in June 1981. Since then, the supreme leader’s power and the domination of conservatives over decision-making have remained a threat over the heads of Iranian presidents. Therefore, Khamenei did not abandon threats to dismiss any president whose positions were not in harmony with his or those of the conservatives whom he represents. Recently, Khamenei hinted at the possibility

of dismissing Rouhani in case his policies caused division within Iranian society.⁽²⁷⁾ The threat came due to the reform program which Rouhani was embracing, which included reducing the economic role of the IRGC and restructuring the economy in a way that leads to ceasing the increasing role of parallel institutions in wresting control over the economy. Moreover, Rouhani has been interrogated by the Islamic Consultative Assembly and has faced criticisms, which forced him to abandon some of his policies, making them more harmonious with the aspirations of the conservatives.

1- Obstructing Reform Programs

During the past four decades of the Iranian political system, most Iranian presidents have adopted diverse and ambitious reform projects, including economic, political, cultural, and social projects. However, the Iranian leader or his institutions have undermined them all. For instance, Abolhassan Banisadr had adopted a project to reform the Iranian political system by restructuring power centers and eliminating the IRGC and Revolutionary Courts gradually and integrating them into official government institutions. He also sought to limit the role of clerics and develop the Iranian economy. These reforms were contrary to the revolutionary spirit that dominated the Iranian political scene back then.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's reform efforts were more economic than political. His first presidential term coincided with Iran's reconstruction after the destruction to its economy and infrastructure caused by the war with Saddam Hussein's government. The reform program, which Rafsanjani strived to implement, was known as "economic reform." It was based on stabilizing the economic system by addressing fundamental crises. These crises included the gap between government income and expenditure, supply and demand, as well as exports and imports. The program aimed to create a shift in foreign trade by turning Iran's closed economy into a dynamic one that could adapt to global market developments. The reform program aimed to promote the export of Iranian products instead of raw materials, and to focus on the market instead of the role of the president in determining the optimal allocation of resources, economic liberalization, and privatization. Rafsanjani believed that economic reform required openness to the world and

the establishment of normal relations with other countries. This position was opposed by the the supreme leader, who turned down any economic reforms based on dealing with the outside world.

President Mohammad Khatami was one of the most active Iranian presidents who called for embracing the idea of reforming the Iranian political system. However, the supreme leader and conservatives fiercely opposed his reform project. There were also impediments in implementing this project. Khatami himself also said that his government was always facing a new crisis every nine days,⁽²⁸⁾ including serial killings, the storming of the Tehran University campus, the closure of newspapers, the arrest and prosecution of political activists, the repression of students, professors, parties, and lawyers, as well as scientific, research and cultural institutions.

President Hassan Rouhani announced from the very beginning that he was in the process of conducting economic and political reforms. To achieve this goal, he adopted several ideas and visions of the reformist movement, which led reformists to vote for him and his winning of the presidency of the republic. However, after more than six years of his presidency, evidence indicates that he failed like other former presidents who vowed to implement similar promises of reform.

The circumstances, in which the Rouhani government operates, aligned with the reformists, led the first vice president of Hassan Rouhani's government Eshaq Jahangiri to talk about the government's power in approving the state budget and the obligatory allocations for some state institutions regardless of the budget approval.⁽²⁹⁾ He also raised questions about the institution responsible for budgetary allocations. This reflects the internal conflict between the president and the government on the one hand and the supreme leader and his organs, the IRGC, and other institutions that operate in isolation from government control on the other. He also inquired about these institutions and their role in making public policy and deciding the prioritization of the budget against the presidency's will.

The supreme leader and the parallel institutions in which he controls the decision-making have been an obstacle to any reform project that is incompatible with the direction of the supreme leader and his institutions. Therefore, this has led to consequences for

economic performance, political effectiveness, and the legitimacy of the political system as well, which has eroded over time. The country's economy has been administrated without a comprehensive vision but under the names of the 'economy of resistance' and 'self-sufficiency' while forgoing external assistance. This eventually led to the deterioration of the internal situation. As a result, the government is now facing public anger and protests, most recently large-scale demonstrations in early 2018, and ongoing factional protests in many cities due to failure at different levels since then. Significantly, the state of development in Iran has been overlooked. The government hides its failure under the cover of external pressures and sanctions. Meanwhile, the government turned a blind eye to structural impediments, including the conflict between its institutions, most importantly, the conflict between the supreme leader and the presidency.

2- Threatening to Change the Presidential System to a Parliamentary System

Khamenei played a decisive role in changing the form of the government at the time. There were two people at the top of the government, the president and the prime minister. He abolished the post of prime minister, after changing the Iranian constitution in 1989. Khamenei's desire to change the existing political system to the presidency emerged after he was president through several disputes between him and Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi over the way the government administered things.

In 2011 after two years of post-presidential violence in 2009, Khamenei stated again that he would not mind if there was a return to the parliamentary system⁽³⁰⁾ that existed in Iran until 1989. This system was abolished in constitutional amendments, and the authority of the prime minister was delegated to the president.

Khamenei's talk of his willingness to change from a presidential to a parliamentary system has provided a suitable platform for some fundamentalists. It has been seen as a green light to move forward on calling for changing the political system. One of the most prominent fundamentalists advocating the idea of replacing the political system in Iran is Ahmadinejad's former Minister of Culture and a current member of the Expediency Council, Mohammad-Hossein Saffar-

Harandi. He called for making the supreme leader's proposal a reality⁽³¹⁾

Although Iranian Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani believes that the presidential system has many advantages, he considers that the parliamentary system will lead to cohesion among the three branches of government and create more discipline within political institutions. The Parliament will facilitate the relationship with the prime minister and can reduce his powers.⁽³²⁾

Despite this support for the parliamentary system, several fundamentalists have rejected this proposal, including the former head of the Radio and Television Corporation, Ezzatollah Zarghami. He considered that the parliamentary system would undermine the republican government. However, he did say that he would not mind if it was decided to switch to a parliamentary system.⁽³³⁾

The reformist current has opposed a change in the political system. It believes that the issue of replacing the presidential system is a new war used by the fundamentalists to remove Rouhani and bring a hardliner government instead that can rule the country with an iron fist and remove reformers from the institutions of government.

In addition to the positions of supporters and opponents of the proposal to change the nature of the political system, other voices have emerged, expressing some concerns about abolishing the post of president which may undermine the concept of the "republic." This view was sponsored by the late Hashemi Rafsanjani, who believed that "the republic and Islam" are the main pillars which the Iranian political system depends on. These two pillars are immutable while changing them is against the law and requires an amendment to the constitution.⁽³⁴⁾

3- The Absence of Political Responsibility

The president reflects popular sovereignty as power is delegated to him through direct popular elections, and thus, he has full political responsibility since he is the head of the executive authority and responsible for decisions, plans, programs, and projects of his government. However, due to the domination of the supreme leader over the political system's levers and centers of power, we cannot hold the president responsible of the political situation in the country, except for a margin, the ceiling of which is determined

by the parallel institutions with which the supreme leader runs the political system. As mentioned earlier, all presidents have had their reforms blocked, and their ambitious programs have collided with the will of the supreme leader who has always held the president and his government responsible for failures, although he is the actual guide of all policies.

The nuclear agreement signed in 2015 reflected this situation as an exemplary model. The Rouhani government embarked on signing the agreement under the auspice of the supreme leader and the approval of the entire political system's institutions. He would not have been able to make such a move without the approval of the political system's institutions, which is run by the supreme leader, the Expediency Council, and the supreme leader's institutions. After the deal suffered a setback following the US withdrawal from the deal in May 2018 and US President Donald Trump's strict policy toward Iran, the supreme leader himself disassociated himself from this failure and held Rouhani and his government responsible for this failure. He also evaded political responsibility for the deterioration of living conditions and the public protests that erupted as a result of the consequences of this failure. Rouhani himself and his government have been held accountable and forced to abandon their calls for economic reform. Instead, the IRGC has obtained more economic gains rather than having its economic role reduced.

The supreme leader's institutions have managed to sustain the political process and manage its interactions through the duality of decision-making bodies, which has created a similar dual political responsibility. Under this duality, the supreme leader remains immune to making mistakes due to his sacred status, while the already constrained government bears a great deal of responsibility.

IV- The Implications of the Conflict Between the Supreme Leader and the Presidency on the Effectiveness of the Political System

Based on the nature of the unbalanced relationship and the conflict between the supreme leader and the presidency, several conflicts emerged within the Iranian political system, including the following:

1- The Weakening of the Republic's Values and Principles

The attempt to amend the Iranian constitution in 1979 in order to make it modernized created a mass of contradictions, as well as a large gap between the Constitution's script and the implementation of its articles on the ground. The political system consists of two opposing poles: Sharia (Islamic law), represented by the supreme leader, and the republic (the will of the people) represented by the president of the republic. Meanwhile, the elections symbolize the republic (the rule of the people), and Sharia is the religious pole of the political structure, which guarantees the rule of the clergy and undermines the role of the people.

According to Article 4 of the constitution, all decisions must be Shari'a compliant as determined by Iran's jurists. It stipulates, "All civil, penal financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, and other laws and regulations must be based on Islamic criteria. This principle applies absolutely and generally to all articles of the constitution as well as to all other laws and regulations, and the jurist of the Guardian Council are judges in this matter."⁽³⁵⁾

If the word "republic" means "modern democratic state" based on the sovereignty of the people, representation, and participation through universal suffrage, and the separation of powers (executive, legislature and judiciary), the Islamic Republic is clearly contradicting this, and clearly fits in with the meaning of the Islamic Republic of Iran in its traditional Shiite structure.⁽³⁶⁾

Thus, after the revolution, the Iranian political system was not republican in the traditional sense of republican political systems. It was not presidential, parliamentary, or a mixture of both. The Islamic nature of the government, as perceived by Khomeini, was more theocratic than democratic. The basic rules and principles associated with the structure, values, tools, and mechanisms of modern governance were absent, including the separation of powers, popular sovereignty, the rotation of power, freedom of opinion, and transparency. They do not exist within the republican nature of the Iranian government, which is closer to religious rule, despite the perception and impression that the government has always tried to propagate.

2- Limiting the Role of the Presidential Institution in Guiding Public Policy

Although the president is at the head of the executive power, setting domestic and foreign policy priorities and making vital decisions on war and peace fall within the competence of the supreme leader. He is also the commander-in-chief of the armed forces as well as of the IRGC, and the Internal Security Forces. He directly supervises the Radio and Television Corporation and has a role in electing the head of the judiciary.

In order to dominate the presidency, the supreme leader seizes all the executive powers of the president as acknowledged in contemporary political systems. The supremacy of the supreme leader does not cease at his spiritual and religious status, but the constitution also granted him all powers to become the sole ruler who dominates the entire political system.

The remaining presidential powers clash with the dual system which dominates Iranian political life because it remains the biggest obstacle for Iranian presidents. This dualism means that some institutions in the Iranian political system are elected by the people, such as the president of the republic, members of Parliament, and the Experts Council. On the other side, there are institutions whose members or presidents are elected through direct or indirect appointment by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. They are granted broad powers, such as the judiciary, and members of the Expediency Council and the Guardian Council. Over the past 30 years, Khamenei has been at the top of the Iranian political system. The designated institutions have been one of the essential tools of the supreme leader to control the institutions of the Iranian political system. Unless an amendment is made to the Iranian constitution, especially to the items relating to this duality, presidential demands for seeking additional powers will remain in vain.

Based on this reality, some reformists believe that President Rouhani should have worked on amending the constitution and strengthening the elected institutions to confront the designated institutions instead of demanding special powers during the six years starting from 2013. The reformers here would claim that even if Rouhani gets the extraordinary powers he demands, there are

influential institutions within the Iranian political system that will prevent him from taking advantage of these powers.⁽³⁷⁾

3- Disabling the Democratic Mechanism

The word “republic” means that all people participate in establishing the government play a role in managing society and government through electing government officials and participating in the people’s assemblies. Apparently, the presidential institution has flaws in reflecting the principle of popular sovereignty in Iran.

Formally, reformists and conservatives compete, but this competition does not have a realistic and institutional impact on the social level. The political system under the supreme leader does not allow political currents to work freely except for those which believe in the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. The public sphere and the competition for the presidency are entirely dominated by a group of people and ideas who are formally diverged.

On this basis, although some reformist figures came to power, the constitution itself restricted their ability under the extensive supervisory authority of the supreme leader and his institutions. Therefore, governments are disabled due to the constitutional contradiction that stipulates for both religious and quasi-democratic rule. There is a contradiction between the elected representatives of the people and the unelected representatives of the Imam. Notably, although the Iranian constitution allowed reformers such as Mohammad Khatami to rise politically based on more progressive ideas from within the political system’s institutions, the political system itself eventually restrained this movement, where the authoritarian political system is reproduced in different ways, and perhaps with more robust versions.

4- Manipulating the Constitution and the Nature of the Political System

The demands of the radical movement for the adoption of the parliamentary system in place of the presidential system are escalating. The advocates for changing the presidential system to a parliamentary system are probably seeking to abolish the presidential elections and the post of president of the republic. This limits the role and participation of the people in power. If the transition to the parliamentary system was realized, the supreme leader would play a

more significant role in electing the prime minister. Meanwhile, the parliamentary system requires a real multi-party system, which is already present in Iran.

Through this project, the supreme leader aims to tighten his grip on the political system and choose a prime minister who backs his policies and directives and is obedient in implementing internal and external policies. If the president were elected, he would have to endure him for four years, which may extend to eight years, as was the case with most presidents: Ali Khamenei, Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani who has two years left to complete his second term. However, replacing the political system will enable the supreme leader to replace the prime minister whenever he deems him incompetent, weak, or opposing his directives and policies.

5- Distortion of the Development Pattern and Widespread Corruption

As a result of the failure of successive presidents in implementing their reform programs, the existing development pattern has been distorted. The economy was governed by a combination of statist policies and some economically liberal that would operate under the international sanctions imposed on the government. This has forced the political system to adopt economic policies led by the state. This, of course, has increased corruption in a way that has made Iran one of the most corrupt countries in the world.

Iran suffers from widespread corruption. According to Transparency International's 2017 Report, Iran ranks 136 out of 175 countries in terms of corruption.⁽³⁸⁾ A University of Maryland poll of more than 1,000 Iranians found that 63.3 percent believed that domestic corruption is the biggest obstacle to the economy.⁽³⁹⁾ Also, Iran ranked first globally for the fourth consecutive year out of 146 countries in the list of money laundering and financing of terrorism.⁽⁴⁰⁾ This is expected in the absence of transparency and the weak accountability rulers within the Iranian political system. Jurists value personal relationships over legal written obligations. The actions and choices of clerics and officials, therefore, are free from accountability and oversight. Family patronage has brought special interests and privileges to family members and has facilitated access to loans and job opportunities while some social groups struggle to find a job,

especially young people.

6- *The Widening Gap Between the Masses and the Elite*

There is a gap between the reformists and the masses, especially the youth. The street is increasingly opposing the political system and calling for political, social, and economic reforms. The public is looking for a broad reform process. However, the reforms are only working under their only identified roles within the political system. The slogans heard during protests reflect the widespread distrust over the past year in all Iranian political currents such as the slogan that came out during the protests in early 2018: “Reformists and fundamentalists. The game is over now!”⁽⁴¹⁾ Therefore, the reformists movements within the political system are nothing more than acrobatic movements in the circus of Iranian politics. Their participation gives more legitimacy to the political system and shows that it respects competition and democracy. The street is aware of this role and cannot see any difference between a conservative and a reformist under the rule of the jurist.

There is a widespread popular belief that the political system is made up of an incompetent status quo. The concept of the “Iranian republic” has become an alternative to the “Islamic Republic” as a result of the failure of the state model Khomeini introduced after the revolution.

Due to severe living conditions coinciding with a reformist representative heading the government – Rouhani – and the conservatives’ political strategy of blaming failures on ‘ policies pursued by reformists, the latter were held responsible for Iran’s deteriorating conditions. The situation has reached a crisis level. Various segments of society are suffering from severe economic and living conditions. I have concluded that the electoral game of the reformists and fundamentalists is merely “repeated cycles of deception.”⁽⁴²⁾ The protesters, based on their belief in the legitimacy of the raised slogans and their confidence in their pro-demand supporters, are calling for a referendum through the slogan “referendum, referendum, this is the slogan of the people.”

7- *Insufficiency and a Cracking System*

The formal nature of the post of president has further weakened the

Iranian political system. The lack of the rule of law and the absence of dividing lines between the authorities have led to the failure of any attempts to reform the system from within, and thus, it creates tension and conflicts between its pillars. Some reform attempts have been rejected by influential institutions and leaders of the political system, and have been undermined as amounting to treason with the exchange of accusations relating to corruption and bribery. Ahmadinejad's letter to the supreme leader on several corruption files, especially in the judiciary, is an expression of this rift. Ahmadinejad accused officials in the judiciary, in particular, the Larijani family "of using their power to oppress, loot, embezzle and rob the state and the people's money." He did not only make accusations but also called on the masses to confront "the **bands** in decision making positions", who he held responsible for the deterioration of the political and economic situation.⁽⁴³⁾ Ahmadinejad's publication of "Documentation revealing the confiscation of land, property and real estate for Larijani, his family and their entourage"⁽⁴⁴⁾ confirms that this family is involved in corruption without any accountability and shows the extent of the differences in the Iranian political system. The reiteration of concern about these rifts is the involvement of Qasem Soleimani, the late commander of the Qods Force in the crisis, in which criticism has also affected the supreme leader himself following the protests. He cautioned internal currents "that attempt to play the role of the opposition" about escalating the tone of criticism in this way.⁽⁴⁵⁾

V- The Future of the Relationship Between the Supreme Leader and the President

The growing disagreements between the supreme leader and the institution of the presidency raise fundamental questions about the future of their relationship, especially in light of the mounting demands for amendments to the political system. This may eliminate this contradiction and establish unilateral decision and responsibility within the system. This can lead to several scenarios, as follows:

1- Reinforcing the Hegemony of the Supreme Leader

It means here that the supreme leader is planning to change the nature of the political system from a presidential to a parliamentary system, which may, therefore, increase the hegemony of the supreme

leader over the political system.

This change the supreme leader seek to implement may not bring the benefits as those in the current supreme leader's system —who leads the political system without assuming direct responsibility. Instead, he uses the existence of the presidency to absorb any failure facing the political system. The supreme leader continues to lead through extraordinary commandments, through which he directs policies without incurring their liabilities.

This dualism maintains the respect of the political system religiously and politically since the supreme leader holds a special status and sanctity. The presidency thus provides a cover for the political system's political sins. The retention of the presidency achieves a fundamental interest in maintaining the survival of the Iranian political system despite all the criticism.

Although the supreme leader could bring about this change, he has not implemented it yet. This affirms the political system's desire to maintain this dualism.

However, direct criticism of the supreme leader and mounting demands from within the political system to limit the powers of the leader may change the policy compass towards changing the political system to get rid of the burden of criticism flooding from the presidency and the constant demands for an increase in powers. The criticisms also affect the legitimacy of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist. At the same time, there is growing criticism against it since it is ultimately responsible for the poor status of the country both internally and externally.

The absence of the current leader may also lead to a change in the current political system in light of many proposals, which may lead to unify the center of the power. Thus, the next supreme leader or a council of jurists will assume only a symbolic and religious responsibility. A prime minister will hold the whole political responsibility.

The IRGC may play a prominent role in the post-Khamenei era (since it is the real, better equipped and most penetrating force among the state institutions) in restructuring the relationship between the authorities in its favor, especially if there are signs of change to its disadvantage led by elite reformists that are critical of its broad

political and economic role.

2- The Presidency's Elimination of the Burden of Dualism and Absence of Responsibility

This scenario means dismantling the duality that the political system currently suffers from, taking into consideration the requirements of the presidential system; with regard to political responsibility, the non-interference of the supreme leader in the presidential office, and providing sufficient space for people to implement their electoral programs and reform policies, without facing any hindrance or oversight by unelected parallel institutions. This requires a fundamental amendment to the existing system through a constitutional amendment, leading to a new system away from the Guardianship of the Jurist. This could be similar to the ideas proposed during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution to have supervisory authority for jurists on particular laws of *Shari'a*.

This change may occur within the political system. Although the dividing lines between the political currents in Iran are not clear, and all seem to stem from the same source and have the same direction. The reformist movement, its symbols, and representatives in the presidency and Parliament expose the imbalances of the political system openly. This is due to the constraints imposed by the political system of the guardianship of the jurist, the failure of the administration in combating corruption, the penetration of some institutions and the expansion of their roles, and the limited powers conferred elected individuals for the benefit of the supreme leader and his followers.

Public anger and electoral legitimacy may also be exploited to weaken or diminish the hegemony of the supreme leader; especially as the ideology of the political system is facing widespread criticism. There is a concern within the political system that the guardianship is losing its popular legitimacy, and that the current political system may be exposed to a revolution that might overthrow it as was the case with the Shah's government. Notably, the proponents of the revolution's ideals, after 40 years, face many challenges in achieving its goals both internally and externally.

3- Coexistence Scenario

This is meant to maintain the status quo as it is, and the current state of coexistence, which is prone to a type of push and pull from time to time, without change which may lead to the dominance of one of the two institutions over the other.

40 years of this coexistence can confirm the continuation of this type of relationship because it achieves functional objectives, including the renewal of the political system's speech and the reiteration of its legitimacy through elections, but without making concrete changes in policies and trends. The supreme leader has been able to maintain his status through the cover of the presidential institution, which bears formal responsibility before the public for executive decisions. The dualism contributes externally in the circumvention and evasion of commitments and agreements. To this extent, there is a party representing Iran abroad, concluding agreements, and performing the missions of the state externally. Realistically, there is a hidden supreme power for managing all external files.

1- *Changing the Political System*

This aims to change the political system partially or entirely, due to a revolution in Iran against the existing political system, or a coup within the political system after Khamenei's death. The coup could be led by the military elite of the IRGC, who have broad economic and political interests and will seek to preserve their gains. The IRGC may lead the political system and control power by reproducing a modified model of the Guardianship of the Jurist political system through which it may dominate the political landscape completely. The strategy of confrontation of the government against the United States may lead to a change as a result of its unpredictable involvement in a military confrontation which the government may lose. The pressure may lead to surrender, thereby eroding the political system's legitimacy and reducing its chances of survival due to its current extraordinary status.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the exceptional nature of the Iranian political system has provided it with some flexibility to deal with internal and external challenges and to manage the political process for its survival and

continuity. However, it is one of the real obstacles to the transition from authoritarianism to genuine democracy and trusteeship to responsibility. The exceptional nature of the Iranian political system is also one of the factors for declining development indicators at all levels.

With the escalation of challenges facing this political system under the absolute dominance of the supreme leader over the power of the president as well as the demands within the political system itself and at the grassroots level for the need to address these problems, and the critical phase expected after the Khamenei era, an inevitable change will affect the relationship between the institution of the supreme leader and the presidency

The future of this relationship will be determined through several interrelated factors, most importantly: the acceptance of the political system to change and reform from within, the relationship between its components and wings, the momentum of the popular movement calling for change and its limits, the extent of the IRGC's ability of directing internal interactions in its favor in the post-Khamenei period and external pressures and sanctions against the system. Under specific stressful circumstances, these factors can lead together towards a real process of change in order to control the relationship between the two institutions. Otherwise, the political system will maintain its exceptional nature, whether by maintaining the current situation or through a formal change until it faces a sudden change.

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