

POSITION PAPER

The Guardian Council's Disqualification of Iran's Presidential Election Candidates: Dimensions and Outcomes

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Introduction

The Guardian Council issued its decision regarding the vetted presidential candidates, and it was unexpected concerning the individuals disqualified and their political affiliations. This is in addition to providing no justification for those disqualified.

Over the past 12 presidential elections, the Guardian Council's decisions have always been met with vehement opposition at home. The most vehement opposition was expressed by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani following the vetting of the 2020 parliamentary election candidates. He said: "This isn't an election. Rather, it's the appointment of Parliament members."

These remarks were followed by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei criticizing Rouhani. He said: “When you lie and say that this is a charade election and nothing but appointments, you cause the people to be frustrated with the election...you shouldn’t speak in a way that allows the enemy to dampen the morale of the people.”

The Guardian Council faced criticism at the international level. This resulted in former US President Donald Trump imposing sanctions on members of the Guardian Council in February 2020 for undermining the Iranian parliamentary electoral process.

However, the Guardian Council’s decision to disqualify parliamentary candidates was accompanied by reasons such as candidates “lacking loyalty to the principles of the revolution, being unfit for the post,” and “daring to breach the revolution’s foundations and principles.” These justifications were cited to disqualify former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the late Hashemi Rafsanjani from Iranian presidential elections.

This time, the Guardian Council didn’t bring forth justifications for disqualifying presidential candidates, which is unprecedented in the history of Iran’s presidential elections.

1. The Reasons Behind the Guardian Council’s Decisions and the Repercussions

The Guardian Council approved seven candidates out of 590 presidential hopefuls. They are:

- A. Ebrahim Raisi, the chief justice.
- B. Alireza Zakani, head of the research center in Iran’s

Parliament.

C. Amirhossein Qazizadeh-Hashemi, deputy speaker of the Iranian Parliament.

D. Mohsen Rezaee, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council.

E. Saeed Jalili, former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council.

F. Mohsen Mehralizadeh, president of International Zurkhaneh Sports and member of the board of Kish Free Trade Zone.

G. Abdolnasser Hemmati, governor of the Central Bank of Iran.

The following candidates were disqualified:

A. Ali Larijani, former speaker of the Iranian Parliament.

B. Eshaq Jahangiri, first vice-president in Rouhani's government.

C. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former Iranian president.

D. Masoud Pezeshkian, former vice speaker of Iran's Parliament.

E. Brigadier Saeed Mohammad, former commander of the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, whose disqualification was surprising.

Except for former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, all the disqualified candidates expressed satisfaction with (did not show opposition to) the Guardian Council's decision and called on the Iranian people to vote in the election. Eshaq Jahangiri, first vice-president in Rouhani's government, in his statement said the Guardian Council had transgressed the redlines. Jahangiri added that the Guardian Council will bear the political and social consequences of disqualifying him.

He said that he was concerned that disqualifying many candidates who have merit would impact voter turnout and impede fair competition among the political currents, especially for the “reformists.” Raisi announced that in coordination with the government’s senior leadership, a term always alluding to the supreme leader, there are ongoing attempts to approve some more candidates.

Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad announced on Wednesday, May 26, 2021 that he would boycott the election if he was disqualified and would not support any presidential hopeful.

Ahmadinejad asked: what is the reason behind vetting me? What is the reason to disqualify me? I was elected president on two occasions with the majority of the people’s vote, were there any shortcomings in my performance? Or did I show weakness while running the country’s affairs?

He indicated that his disqualification was an insult to the people and breached the Constitution. He vowed to push back against the move.

But amid these extensive disqualifications, the idea of boycotting the election has gained more traction, with public opinion indicating that the Iranian people are dealing with a referendum not an election.

Sadiq Larijani, one of the disqualified candidates, former chief justice and brother of former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani, voiced opposition to the decisions of the Guardian Council, and blamed those in the intelligence agencies who submitted reports to the Guardian Council. He said the Guardian Council’s decisions cannot be justified this time, hinting that the council conspired to disqualify his brother as well as other candidates.

2. The Guardian Council's Decisions and Khamenei Announces the Essential Qualities of the Next President

Over the past few months, the Iranian supreme leader has repeatedly spoken of the features and characteristics of the next president of Iran. Most recently in March, the supreme leader plainly said that the next president should be revolutionary, young, anti-corruption, and should work to save Iran from its economic crises and support domestic production.

Many thought at the time that the characteristics announced by Khamenei were consistent with the personality and experience of Brigadier Saeed Mohammad, the former commander of the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters. But they were also consistent to a large extent with the personality and experience of Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's chief justice.

The final list announced by the Guardian Council was in line with the expectations of Khamenei and the leaders of the "conservative" camp. They have been planning for months to win the presidential election which will be held on June 18.

If we look at two of Khamenei's characteristics for the presidential hopefuls: being "revolutionary," and "fighting corruption," we realize that they both fit Raisi's profile, the chief justice. He does not enjoy a high level of popularity which would qualify him to become Iran's president for the next four years. However, he enjoys the supreme leader's confidence and has the "revolutionary" attitude he wants.

Raisi led a massive campaign, with the blessing and support of Khamenei, to fight the rampant corruption in Iran after

he became Iran's chief justice in March 2019 replacing Sadiq Larijani, the chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council and one of the members of the Assembly of Experts, a body tasked with overseeing the performance of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The campaign was conditioned by the "limits" set by the supreme leader, thus he nor his son Mujtaba were targeted.

Khamenei's criterion related to youth cannot be met given the ages of the approved presidential candidates. Having a quick look at the ages of the candidates who survived the vetting process of the Guardian Council, we find that their ages range from 50 years old (Amirhossein Qazizadeh-Hashemi, the deputy speaker of the Iranian Parliament), and 65 years old (Mohsen Rezaee, the former IRGC commander and the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council).

However, the final list announced by the Guardian Council includes younger candidates compared to the previous election. However, the frontrunners and those close to Khamenei and the "conservative" camp like Raisi, the chief justice, who is above 60, and perhaps Saeed Jalili, the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, who is 56, are not younger than former presidents like Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who took over the presidency when he was under 50 or Mohammad Khatami who was 54 when he won the presidency in 1997. This in effect means that efficiency, loyalty and obedience are the main criteria adopted by Khamenei, not the belief in the necessity of letting younger candidates contest the race and pump new blood into the revolution's arteries torn apart by divisions and crises.

3. Disqualifying IRGC Candidates

Perhaps it was expected that the candidates affiliated with the IRGC would have a bigger presence in the 2021 Iranian presidential election given their close proximity to the supreme leader.

But the final candidate list defied the wishes and expectations of IRGC candidates like Hossein Dehghan, military advisor to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Brigadier Saeed Mohammad, former commander of the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters. The former was previously the chairman of the Martyrs Foundation under the government of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and was defense minister from 2013 to 2017. The latter was appointed commander of Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters affiliated with the IRGC. He was appointed to this position after he was the chairman of Iranian Atlas Construction Companies, a subsidiary of the IRGC Cooperative Foundation, Bonyad Taavon Sepah. He resigned from this position on March 7 in preparation for the election.

Perhaps the justification for disqualifying the IRGC-affiliated candidates can be understood in the context of the checks and balances which the supreme leader and the intelligence agencies seek to strike through the Guardian Council. The aim is to sustain the revolution, with the IRGC as its protector without sliding into the likelihood of military commanders taking over the supreme leader's decision-making powers.

On the other side, perhaps the government took into consideration the possibility that the Iranian people will

not accept candidates with military careers entering the presidential race. Some believe that electing a military commander to the presidency has negative consequences with comparisons drawn with military regimes such as Turkey and Pakistan where the people have struggled to end military interference in political affairs. Furthermore, the Iranian collective mind still remembers the military crackdown unleashed on demonstrators on multiple occasions in addition to the recent leaked interview of the foreign minister concerning the IRGC's control over Iran's decision-making.

In addition, there may be concerns about potential rifts within the military establishment and Iran's military commanders not favoring the military candidates. Their intention to contest the race was met with opposition from a number of military commanders, especially in light of the junior rank of Brigadier Saeed Mohammad compared to other IRGC commanders. It was feared that their candidacies would have future ramifications on the IRGC as hierarchy is critical and governs the behavior of military commanders. Hence, the military candidates may have been disqualified for these reasons, keeping only Mohsen Rezaee, the former IRGC commander and the secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council who is to some extent linked to the military establishment as he was a former military officer. In addition, in case an IRGC candidate was to become Iran's next president, this will deepen the already existing divisions between the IRGC and the army.

Despite the disqualification of IRGC candidates from the presidential race, the IRGC will attempt to maintain its support and influence. The aim is to continue its dominant

role in the region, which is deemed by the Iranian government to be critical to deter enemies and guard against external threats.

4. The “Reformists” Boycotting the Election

It was expected that the “reformists” would have a strong candidate who represents them in the presidential election. But disqualifying Eshaq Jahangiri, first vice-president under Rouhani’s government, and the former deputy Parliament speaker Masoud Pezeshkian as well as Mohammad Reza Aref, the Hope bloc’s head in the latest Iranian Parliament, strongly indicates that the Iranian supreme leader no longer desires a bipolar “conservative-reformist” political equilibrium in Iran. He is now exerting tireless efforts to create a political system devoid of political currents. Perhaps the motive behind this is his expectation that the scale of the confrontation with the regional and international spheres is likely to increase. Hence, he believes that unifying the home front and ensuring the “conservatives” take control over all branches of power will make Iran stronger in the face of Western pressure.

However, this vision will provoke popular discontent and increases the likelihood of popular protests flaring up, which will lead to the exact opposite of Khamenei’s intended goal i.e, a unified home front.

For their part, the “reformists” believed that Eshaq Jahangiri’s candidacy, first vice-president under Rouhani’s government, provided a strong motivation to partake in the election or at least the candidacy of the former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani. For them, Larijani met their basic

demand to participate in the elections, as he is considered a “moderate fundamentalist” who has always aligned himself with “reformist” candidates in Iran’s presidential and parliamentary elections. Through him, the “reformists” always captured seats on Iran’s parliamentary committees. But disqualifying both Eshaq Jahangiri, first vice-president under Rouhani’s government and former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani from the presidential election meant that there is no benefit for the “reformists” to participate in the election other than making the election appear to be democratic which is inconsistent with the reality.

The “reformist” current did not announce its official boycott of the presidential election. But the “reformists” announced their endorsement of Mohsen Mehralizadeh, President of International Zurkhaneh Sports and member of the board of Kish Free Trade Zone as their favored candidate. This endorsement will make it difficult to entice the “reformists” to partake in the election. Mohsen Mehralizadeh has a history which could possibly make him a dark horse in the presidential election. He is a “reformist” who enjoys the supreme leader’s support. Looking at the main points in his career, we find that he presided over a revolutionary committee in the city of Maragheh and the IRGC unit there. He maintains popularity in a number of Iranian provinces such as East Azerbaijan and the rest of the Azeri-majority governorates as he is a member of the Azeri ethnic minority. He also enjoys popularity in the province of Esfahan where he was elected governor, but he did not take over the position due to administrative issues. He was appointed the governor of Khorasan Province under Mohammad Khatami. He also chaired several economic

institutions such as the Kish Free Trade Zone and the auto company Saipa. In addition, he managed several nuclear reactors and projects to desalinate the water of the Arabian Gulf and transfer it to the industrial zones in southeastern Iran. He also entered the 2009 presidential race but was not approved by the Guardian Council. But he was later approved after the supreme leader intervened.

Nevertheless, the mere participation of Mohsen Mehralizadeh in the election will be insufficient to woo “reformist” voters. Hence, the hashtag #Won’tVote has emerged as one of the most trending hashtags on social media platforms, which forebodes a widespread boycott by “reformist” voters in case Mehralizadeh fails to woo them to vote in the election.

Anyway, the list announced by the Guardian Council was a huge shock to the “reformist” camp, as well as to some “hardliner” groups. Several political activists and social media users mentioned over the past two days that Raisi, Iran’s chief justice, is the early winner of the election.

5. Popular Turnout Forecasts

Before announcing the final list, all the estimates and forecasts pointed to the possibility of repeating the scenario of the parliamentary election held in February 2020 when the “conservatives” captured the majority of seats. The 2020 election saw the lowest turnout in the history of Iranian parliamentary elections since the Iranian revolution in 1979. But the final list announced by the Guardian Council revealed again the confusion and contradictions surrounding the Iranian government.

After Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called for the biggest possible turnout in the election, he closed all the paths that could lead to Iranian voters turning out in mass on Election Day. Despite the importance of a huge turnout in the election to prove the political system's legitimacy, it seems that Khamenei is aware of his government's declining popularity and the likelihood of voter turnout being lower than the 2002 parliamentary election. This prompted him to change his priorities and prepare a new lineup of leaders and fully support Raisi, Iran's chief justice, who is expected to be docile and to fully submit to Khamenei in all his directives and policies over the coming four years. It is not inconceivable that the supreme leader is planning to prepare Raisi politically and ideologically to be his successor who adopts his intellectual and ideological orientations.

However, to address public sentiment regarding the presidential election, the supreme leader, in his most recent meeting with lawmakers, made important remarks about the Guardian Council and his concerns about low popular turnout, as well as his absolute support for the legal approach pursued by the Guardian Council. He believes that the participation of strong candidates, particularly those possessing considerable capabilities to solve the problems facing the Iranian people, would increase voter turnout.

6. The Impact of the Guardian Council's Decision on the Ongoing Negotiations in Vienna

The countries participating in the negotiations with Iran are certain that the next Iranian president will be from the "hardline" movement. The Iranian president will most likely be Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi, who the Europeans

have condemned and Washington issued sanctions against him in 2011 for his role in the 1988 executions and his involvement in cracking down on Iranian protesters in 2019. This likelihood means that these negotiating countries have only two courses of action. First, accelerate efforts to reach a final agreement before a new Iranian president takes office even if they do not achieve sufficient guarantees to prevent Iran from turning into a nuclearized country. Second, in case the “conservatives” win the presidency, the negotiating parties will engage in faltering negotiations, whereas the Iranian government will continue to reject a new agreement and dismiss talks over its missile program and the Quds Force, thus, sabotaging the overall negotiations.

So far, the US administration has not commented on the decision of the Guardian Council, meaning that the United States is keen to ease tensions with Iran to ensure that the Vienna negotiations continue, and it will not criticize the electoral process, unlike Trump.

In case the status quo persists, it is likely that the countries negotiating with Iran will accelerate efforts to reach an agreement with the current Iranian government, which will ensure nothing but a few Iranian concessions.

7. Forecasting Iranian Political Life Over the Coming Four Years

In light of the indications suggesting that the “hardliner” Ebrahim Raisi will win the presidency, especially if several currents back his candidacy and taking into consideration that he will possibly replace Ali Khamenei in the future, as he is in harmony with the supreme leader’s revolutionary line, there will be no significant changes to Iran’s revolutionary nature.

There are also forecasts that tensions will continue to mar relations between the Iranian government and the Iranian street, and between the Iranian government and the world.

Having a “hardline” Iranian government points to the continuation of extremism over the next four years and maybe the next eight years. This also means the tensions gripping US-Iran relations will continue, the time needed to return to the nuclear deal will be prolonged, and the chaos in Yemen, Syria and Iraq will continue. In addition, the tensions in the Arabian Gulf will continue and the Iranian government will continue to militarize and acquire weapons.

This may make it much more difficult for a thaw to appear in Saudi-Iran relations. Some hoped a “reformist” Iranian government would be elected that works to establish relations with Iran’s neighbors as was the case during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami and during the tenure of the late Hashemi Rafsanjani. There appears to be an Iraqi mediation attempt to plug the gap in relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran, which will positively impact the region’s stability.

This does not mean that one can predict the behavior of Iran’s future president. This will be governed by a host of approximations, mainly the measures that will be taken by the US government to change the behavior of the Iranian government, and the effectiveness of its pressure which could lead to the Iranian government adopting pragmatic positions that are consistent with its needs and capabilities. This is in addition to the approximations of the Iranian government in case the sanctions and ban on oil exports, which plunged Iran into a severe crisis, continue. These

approximations are sufficient to test the ability of the incoming Iranian president.

Conclusion

The decision of the Guardian Council to disqualify a number of outstanding candidates, including “reformist” and “moderate fundamentalist” figures as well as personalities from populist movements reflected the government’s inclination to enable the “hardline conservative” movement to take control of all the branches of power in Iran.

It also reflected the Iranian government’s heedlessness towards voter participation and Khamenei’s interest in having a president that shows more obedience to his decisions and directives without triggering the faintest media uproar. It is no wonder that the atmosphere of the Iranian presidential election is described as “deeply cold” and spiritless due to the extensive economic problems, the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic and the Iranian collective memory concerning the crackdown on the January 2018 and November 2019 protesters, let alone the unfairness in the electoral process.

These orientations by the Iranian government and the supreme leader strongly indicate that the Iranian political system is going through a delicate juncture at all levels. It seeks to produce leaders with “hardline” positions while it undergoes the process of identifying a new supreme leader of the Iranian revolution. The cutthroat competition between the IRGC commanders prevented one of its commanders from participating in the elections, leading to the clerics strengthening their leadership over the Iranian

government at this critical stage.

Despite the dangers of a lower voter turnout and popular protests breaking out in the coming period, the supreme leader prefers to amass all power in the hands of the “hardline” movement. The amassing of power by the “hardliners” is also likely to impede the ongoing nuclear negotiations in Vienna.



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