

REPORT

# Religious Elites and Iran's Sham Elections

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With each successive election, the Iranian government is keen to present Iran to the world as a democratic state upholding free and fair electoral processes. However, when looking at the government's practices when it comes to the way it exercises and engineers elections, as well as the theorizations of the founders and philosophers of the revolutionary government, we find different rationales and motives for the elections that are held. The upcoming elections, for the Parliament and Assembly of Experts, scheduled to be held in March, are of particular significance for the ruling elite in Tehran. There are two reasons for this. The first is the establishment's concerns about a potential low turnout driven by several factors, including its policy in the previous elections under which it had disqualified hundreds of "moderate" and "reformist" candidates, a move that had caused significant voter apathy. Yet the establishment has pursued the same policy for these elections, disqualifying hundreds of candidates from the electoral race. Additionally, a segment of Iranian voters could shun the elections due to the repression inflicted on Iranian protesters after the killing of Mahsa Amini in Sep-

tember 2022. The second reason is the establishment's preparations for the post-Khamenei era. And here lies the significance of these elections, of the Parliament and Assembly of Experts, for the establishment.

In this report, we will shed light on some of the real motives for holding these elections and their purpose based on the accounts and opinions of the theorizers and philosophers of the "Islamic Republic of Iran." The report will also discuss whether those theorizers believe that the people should genuinely participate in choosing their rulers or it is a false hope that is given to the people, shedding light on the Guardian Council's policy of engineering the elections. The report will also spotlight the establishment's aims for holding elections and why it is keen to hold them in a timely manner.

## **Context and Confessional Environment**

First, we should be aware that there are huge differences in contemporary Shiite political jurisprudence on the issue of choosing and electing a ruler. Shiites initially embraced the notion and belief in appointment and investiture — the ruler is invested by God. As for choosing, the well-established Shiite jurisprudential tradition views it as an issue intrinsic to the Sunni jurisprudential tradition. Khomeini had been committed to the general line of the well-established traditionalist Shiite heritage and did not abandon it until his death. Nonetheless, he added to this tradition or made central to its jurisprudential corpus the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) theory. Therefore, he succeeded in drawing the investiture theory from Shiite traditionalist jurisprudential and theological heritage. As regards his guardianship over the Shiite community, he drew this from the absolute Wilayat al-Faqih theory. The irony is that the quietist Shiite jurists — embracing the idea of abandoning politics and waiting for the reappearance of the Hidden Imam — also embrace and believe in investiture and choosing the rul-

er. They regard the Infallible Imam as the ruler. But during the occultation of the Infallible Imam, no jurist could be deemed infallible — nor could there be investiture or appointment of any ruler. Rather, a group of them has remained quiet, totally abandoning involvement in politics. Others have opted to participate, based on the community's right to choosing and investiture, until the Infallible Imam reappears. However, Khomeini, in his political philosophy, adhered to the notions of investiture and divine appointment even during the occultation of the Infallible Imam.

Therefore, Khomeini and the backers of Wilayat al-Faqih theory believe that the people have no right to genuinely choose their rulers — nor do they make the community the center of the political process. Thus, the community and the general public are ineffective, which appears evidently and impacts the nature of the elections. This could be clarified in detail as follows:

- **Rejecting democracy and the people's right to choose:** The founders of the Iranian republic do not believe in democracy, choosing or the opinion of the majority. Tabatabai had criticized Western democracy and the prevalence of the opinion of the majority on several occasions in his philosophical works such as his book titled *Foundational Essays on Islamic Thought*. However, Tabatabaei does not believe in the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih in its current form, which has altogether excluded any facet of the people having a say in choosing their ruler. The establishment's philosophers — ironically students of Khomeini and Tabatabaei — reject the principle of elections in their entirety in that they reject elections as a means to settle disagreements among disputants. First, they do not believe in the prevalence of different opinions, meaning they do not accept the concept of pluralism. Second, the absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih runs counter to the principle of elections, as argued by Misbah Yazdi, Haeri and other theoreticians.

At the same time, elections are still being conducted in Iran. They have not been suspended at any point. Therefore, the theoretical arguments of the religious elite could be viewed as purely philosophical dicta not relied on or embraced by the Iranian government. Ayatollah Misbah Yazdi himself has answered this question, saying that “resorting to democracy and accepting the opinion of the plurality is only necessary for ending differences on a very limited scope. But it doesn’t constantly possess the legitimacy of making the opinion of the majority prevail over that of the minority.” Therefore, elections are something close to meaningless rituals and ceremonies in order to avoid any embarrassment the Iranian republic could face internationally. This has been recently referred to by some “reformists” in the context of their denouncement of the government’s measures during the upcoming elections.

▪ **In the face of Najaf:** The majority of scholars from the Najaf seminary believe in the “believers’ approval” theory. This was first laid out by Mirza Naini in his book *Tanbih Al-Umma wa Tanzih Al-Milla*. Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani continues to embrace and propagate this theory. But the Iranians supportive of Wilayat al-Faqih do not believe in this theory nor do they grant the Muslim individual the right to confer legitimacy upon the government. The people have nothing to do with the public sphere. Moreover, Misbah Yazdi went as far as drawing a separating line between legitimacy and approval. According to him, there could be a legitimate — legally sound — government but lacking approval by the people and vice versa. There could be an acceptable, or approved, government but yet illegitimate. Therefore, the legitimacy of the government, Parliament and state institutions does not originate from the people but directly from the guardian jurist. The latter in turn derives his legitimacy from God rather than the people. This is the essential bone of contention between the Qom and Najaf seminaries, which featured prominently during the tenures of Khomeini in Najaf and

Khomeini in Iran. And it is still the main moot point between the two seminaries. Iranians want Najaf to be subject to Iran's Wilayat al-Faqih while Najaf's clerics continue to resist, seeking full independence from the Iranian government. They believe that it is a historical advantage for them that they are independent. Yet they believe in the state based on *shoura* (consultation) and constitution, a principle rejected by Iranians who embrace Wilayat al-Faqih. Furthermore, Khomeini had sought to fully abandon the constitutional heritage of the Constitutional Movement.

### **Engineering The Elections And The Role Of The Guardian Council**

According to many philosophers and theoreticians, elections in Iran, in their reality and essence, are merely political rituals and ceremonies to avoid any embarrassment the Iranian government could face on the international stage. The role of the Guardian Council is to make the elections something close to a ceremonial measure rather than a substantial electoral process. The council deprives the electoral process of its true essence by disqualifying powerful candidates.

Not only does the council disqualify what it calls "enemies of the revolution" or even "enemies of the Islamic government," the council now disqualifies candidates that it fears would emerge victorious to pave the way for candidates deemed qualified by the council. This is evident in the exclusion of former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani from the Assembly of Experts election. Yet the Guardian Council has disqualified the current head of the Sunni parliamentary bloc, barring him from running in the [next](#) parliamentary term. The council stopped short of mentioning the reasons behind these disqualifications. When asked about the reasons for these disqualifications, the Guardian Council members asserted that there are now legal provisions which authorize such sweeping disqualifications. Indeed,

the Guardian Council seeks to vet candidates, engineer the elections and deprive them of their core essence by accepting the candidacy registration papers of those loyal to the revolution, constitution and the supreme leader's ideology. Furthermore, they exert pressures on all members of the elected assemblies to refrain from any true opposition or criticism leveled against the ruling elite. Those who dare to challenge the ruling elite could find themselves deprived of running in the next election even as a mere [candidate](#). There is another aspect related to the independence of the Guardian Council. Some disqualified candidates have argued that external actors, such as Russia, have intervened in the decisions of disqualification due to their constant criticism of Iran's Moscow policy. If true, this will further widen the gap between the Guardian Council and cultural and religious figures who seek more space for opposition actors and independent political activism. If untrue, this will also serve as an indication of the perceived image of the reputation of the Guardian Council due to its exclusionary policies and its role as an instrument of the state. This situation of the council was criticized by Ayatollah Montazeri. Consequently, the Guardian Council does not leave it up to the people to freely choose and elect, but it preemptively vets the electoral process, for the people to elect the candidates deemed credible only by the council. This is totally consistent with the theorization of the founders of the revolution and the republic.

There is a more important factor to note here. It seems that the Guardian Council, by pursuing this policy, fears that the true motivations of the establishment would be directly exposed before the Iranian people — accordingly affecting the election results. If the Guardian Council qualified all candidates and gave people the freedom to elect, the election would become a referendum on the political system's legitimacy. The people could head to the polls to vote for the establishment's opponents and critics whom the Guardian Council could disqualify, which the ruling

elite remains fearful of. Therefore, it could be said that the establishment has avoided putting its legitimacy or popularity to the test since the revolution. In fact, this situation has remained unchanged since the early 1980s. However, the religious elite is keen to urge people to head to the ballot box to preserve the establishment's image and prevent any embarrassment that it could face. It wants to bring together two contradictory objectives: popular participation and robbing the elections of their true essence at the same time.

▪ **Urging people to vote:** The ruling elite expresses concerns over potential voter apathy toward the elections due to the Guardian Council's policies. Simultaneously, they fear political opponents, labeled as "reformists" and "moderates," gaining control of the Parliament and the Assembly of Experts if exclusionary tactics are not employed through the Guardian Council. Consequently, the Guardian Council's policies have gained acceptance from the ruling religious elite and even the supreme leader himself. Attempts have been made to conceal these exclusionary practices of the Guardian Council, despite criticism from several clerics. Those advocating for boycotting the elections have been accused of betraying the revolution and the nation, despite the fact that boycotting is a legitimate political act and a voter's right in democratic processes. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei denounced boycotting elections as "hostile acts... that contradict [Islam](#)." Additionally, Khamenei alleged that Iran's enemies aim to "instill [despair](#) and foster voter pessimism" in their attempts to deter participation and voting.

▪ **Robbing elections of their true essence:** Certain political factions have launched strong criticism against the Guardian Council, accusing it of stripping elections of their true essence. Former President Hassan Rouhani expressed his frustration at attempts to manipulate elections, stating, "If people believe their participation in elections will affect their lives, they will engage, but they won't if they perceive no difference [whether they par-](#)



[ticipate or not.](#)” Rouhani emphasized that intellectual diversity, not merely the quantity of candidates, is crucial for elections. He cautioned against the populace losing faith in the efficacy of voting, warning of potential turmoil if the ballot box is neglected, leading to “bloody unrest.” Rouhani stressed the importance of recognizing that there is no alternative to the current system and advocated for reform as the only viable way forward.

Despite warnings and advice from figures like Rouhani and other politicians and clerics, the establishment remains unmoved. It views its actions in this regard as its prerogative, aligning with the philosophical and jurisprudential principles articulated by the state’s founders and theorists. According to this perspective, elections are perceived as primarily symbolic and ceremonial, consistent with the doctrine of the absolute guardianship of the jurist, which grants the supreme leader the authority to suspend duties and obligations “if deemed necessary for the public welfare of the community,” as articulated by Sheikh Haider Hoballah. The legitimacy of the supreme leader is believed to be derived from God and the Infallible Imam, rather than from electoral processes. Consequently, his decisions are considered beyond the realm of public opinion and scrutiny.

### **The Establishment’s Objectives and Messages**

One might ask: what are the establishment’s objectives for holding elections if it does not view them as a mechanism for initiating change or resolving disputes in public affairs? Despite being characterized as a sham and manipulated, the establishment’s insistence on conducting elections on time and without disruption hints at underlying and concealed motives.

▪ **Influencing the West:** The Iranians are aware of the key issues that bring them close to the West. They send messages to the West and the United States in particular that the Iranian establishment is democratic and close to the Western order in terms of its philosophy and structure. Thus, Iran reiterates its

metaphysical and pragmatic philosophy as one of the aspects of its soft power; and it is well-aware of the impact of this on the Western mind, given that it is one of the commonalities between them. The West has interests in and with Iran. Although it is aware of the farcical nature of the elections in Iran, the West views Iran as a state with whom it seeks to build ties in case it modifies its behavior to be compatible with Westphalian principles, according to Henry Kissinger. Therefore, the Iranians view the elections as a means to repair the state's image in the West. It shapes, or contributes to shaping, the general impression and perception of Iran in Western quarters. This is reiterated by the Iranian theorists supportive of Wilayat al-Faqih. They reiterate both the necessity of holding the elections while at the same time asserting that they should be ceremonial. According to them, elections must be held in order to avoid any potential embarrassment for the Iranian establishment before the world. Iran, by holding elections, could avoid pressures, distortion campaigns and criticisms. Yet they insist that the elections should remain purely ceremonial so as not to run counter to the basic tenets of the absolute version of the Guardianship of the Jurist, which marginalizes the masses in the process of choosing the supreme leader. This gives precedence to Wilayat al-Faqih inspired rulings at the expense of essential rulings and exceptional (secondary) ones.

▪ **Enhancing legitimacy:** The establishment asserts its legitimacy both domestically and internationally based on elections, positioning itself as a credible and accepted authority by the majority of Iranians while countering internal opposition from factions like the “reformists and “moderates.” Externally, it seeks legitimacy within the Shiite community, leveraging the concept of the all-encompassing Guardianship of the Jurist, extending its influence to believers across the Islamic world, notably in strategic spheres such as Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. However, there exists a fundamental disconnect between the legitimacy perceived

by the establishment and that acknowledged by the public and the international community. While the establishment claims that its legitimacy stems from divine sources, public and external observers view legitimacy as emanating from the people and electoral processes. This disparity underscores the fundamental disagreement between the two notions of legitimacy, rooted in differing foundational beliefs held by individuals.

▪ **Comparison with regional rivals:** The establishment often touts Iran as the sole nation in the region conducting elections, frequently drawing comparisons with Arab countries, particularly those in the Gulf. However, Tehran's ruling elite appears to overlook or dismiss several critical facts. Firstly, they neglect to address the credibility of Iranian elections and their actual capacity to effect meaningful change in state policies and strategies. They also fail to establish robust oversight institutions capable of holding the ruling elite accountable when necessary. Secondly, they disregard the fundamental differences in both the form and substance of the social contract between "Islamic Iran" and neighboring countries, particularly prominent among them the Arabian Gulf states, with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia at the forefront. In the Gulf states and notably in Saudi Arabia, the social contract has remained stable and widely accepted for centuries. This enduring stability is evident in the ongoing renaissance and modernization initiatives across various sectors, showcasing the populace's collective support for national leadership. The commitment to and application of this well-established social contract is evident in the region's high levels of growth, industrialization, infrastructure development and advancements in education and healthcare. Consequently, this stability significantly influences the soft power and perceived image of Saudi Arabia and the other Arab Gulf states in the contemporary global landscape. In Tehran, the social contract mandates the establishment of a republic with direct elections to select officials, a process that has yet to occur in a trans-

parent and genuine manner. This discrepancy is reflected in the frustrations of citizens who intermittently take to the streets in demonstrations and protests, often met with security force interventions that yield little to no change in policies or approaches. Iranians have struggled to maintain a rational monarchy and simultaneously failed to establish a genuine republic akin to modern democratic systems, resulting in tangible deficiencies across various sectors such as education, healthcare, and production. Consequently, tens of thousands of Iranians opt to emigrate annually to Europe and the United States in pursuit of a better, safer and more stable life.

## **Conclusion**

The ruling religious elite may well understand that excluding candidates could lead to widespread voter abstention, as witnessed in past elections, potentially eroding the establishment's legitimacy and tarnishing its reputation. However, faced with this dilemma, the ruling elite feels compelled to permit candidate participation. Yet, it recognizes the risk of encountering formidable opposition within the Parliament and Assembly of Experts, potentially finding itself in a minority position against its adversaries. Consequently, Iranian authorities are left with two options: firstly, to engineer the elections by filtering candidates prior to the official commencement, a method commonly employed since the early 1990s. Secondly, to allow all candidates to participate and then manipulate voter preferences within the electoral process itself. The Iranian government has opted for the first model, deeming it less detrimental to the establishment's stability. This decision stems from the recognition that the second model, allowing all candidates to run and then manipulating the electoral process, could potentially provoke unrest, reminiscent of the turmoil following the disputed 2009 presidential elections, which opponents claimed were marred by electoral fraud. Nevertheless, the chosen policy of candidate

vetting is likely to result in voter apathy, a scenario which the establishment seeks to mitigate by employing intimidation tactics through religious figures, including jurists and clerics, issuing religious edicts (fatwas) condemning boycotts and emphasizing the necessity of participating in elections. The forthcoming election results will indicate whether the populace heeds officials' calls or opts to ignore the elections altogether.



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