

**POSITION PAPER**

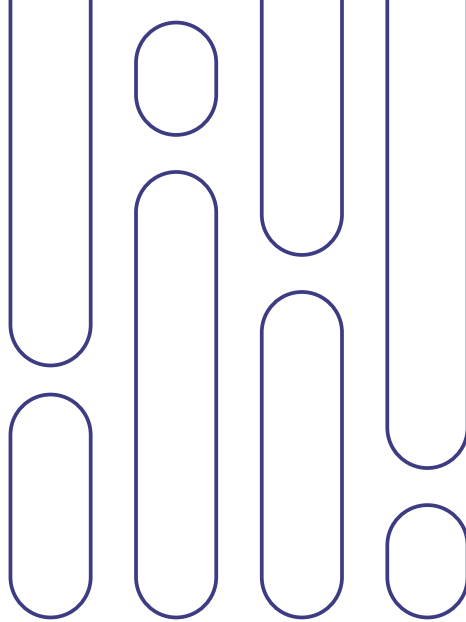
# **Iran's Parliamentary and Assembly of Experts Elections: Turnout Reaches Historic New Low**

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On March 1, 2024, Iranian voters participated in elections to select a new Parliament and Assembly of Experts. These elections served as a crucial barometer of the Iranian political system's standing on the global stage. Against the backdrop of mounting economic challenges and social restrictions, coupled with concerns over civil liberties, the electoral process reflected the growing levels of tension and discontent among the populace.

Iran's parliamentary elections unfolded across 1,218 electoral constituencies spanning 31 provinces in Iran. Approximately 59,000 polling stations facilitated the process, with around 15,200 candidates who competed for 290 parliamentary seats. Notably, Tehran, the largest electoral constituency, saw 30 seats contested. Additionally, 144 candidates contended for 88 positions in the Assembly of Experts, representing the clergy; each term lasts eight years.

In the lead-up to these elections, the Iranian government aimed to leverage a vast turnout to reinforce its legitimacy and bolster the hold of the "hardliners" on power. Consequently, this position paper examines the domestic and international landscape preceding the elections. It analyzes the key political factions, outlining their electoral agendas and the primary aspects of candidates' campaigns to rally the people. Ultimately, the paper concludes by scrutinizing the election outcomes, voter turnout figures, and their potential significations.

## **Domestic and External Landscapes**

The 2024 electoral landscape in Iran resembled that of 2020, marked by instability and the government's emphasis on voter turnout to assert its legitimacy at home and abroad. However, the current instability is exacerbated by severe economic, financial, intellectual, political, social and security crises that persisted throughout the previous parliamentary session. This challenging environment has raised concerns among decision-makers, reminiscent of pre-revolution times nearly 45

years ago. The government's efforts to maintain uncontested dominance amid these conditions heighten apprehensions about its future trajectory.

Amidst soaring tensions between Iran's dominant "hardliners" and the "reformists," the recent elections unfolded against the backdrop of efforts by the ruling system to solidify its grip on power by marginalizing opposing voices and ending dualism in governance — a formula that has allowed the government to let the "hardliners" and "reformists" to rule alternately — albeit preference is always given to the "hardliners" to dominate the military and security apparatuses. The Guardian Council's purported disqualification of former President Hassan Rouhani from seeking a new term in the Assembly of Experts underscored this preference, highlighting the widening gap between the two factions, particularly on socioeconomic issues. Sanctions, internal security challenges and border tensions with neighboring countries like Pakistan and Iraq have compounded domestic crises. Furthermore, Iran's foreign policies, including regional initiatives, alliances and nuclear talks, have added complexity to the domestic situation.

The domestic landscape ahead of the 2024 elections was marred by sharp divisions. These divisions went beyond the traditional "hardliner-reformist" binary, extending to divisions within the "hardliner" movement. Calls and speeches urging all the "hardliner" movement's wings and strands to close ranks and run in the election in a unified and harmonious fashion — encompassing traditional "hardliners" and those deemed more extremist — were unsuccessful. Each "hardliner" strand sought to present itself as the most important and influential in shaping the government's orientations and future. Also, each strand views itself as the most "representative" of the "hardliner" movement, thereby creating multiple rifts and divisions within it.

The aforementioned divisions exposed the lack of cohesion in the "hardliner" movement and demonstrated the fact that it

is not a monolithic bloc as often portrayed. Conflicting trends emerged, undermining the movement's unity. Notably, discussions surrounding the emigration of the current Parliament speaker's son Ishaq Ghalibaf to Canada amid the election fervor, shed light on the internal divisions among the "hardliners." Accusations of benefiting from state resources due to his father's position fueled efforts to thwart Ghalibaf's prospects of assuming the parliamentary speakership once again. The elections took place amid widespread criticism directed at the Guardian Council for disqualifying numerous candidates without explaining their exclusion. While some disqualified candidates requested reasons for their disqualification, certain members of the Guardian Council asserted that there was no legal obligation to provide explanations. This lack of transparency prompted many to question the elections' integrity, with many arguing that the candidate selection process had been engineered. The "reformist" faction went as far as advocating for a complete boycott of the polls. Notably, the Guardian Council not only disqualified individuals labeled as "enemies of the revolution" or "enemies of the Islamic government" but also sidelined candidates perceived as potential threats to the ruling elite, thereby paving the way for government-affiliated contenders. This pattern was evident in former President Rouhani's disqualification from participating in the Assembly of Experts elections. Similarly, the Guardian Council barred the head of the Sunni bloc in the current Parliament from running in the next session without providing any justification for its decision.

The controversy surrounding the Guardian Council's exclusion of numerous candidates, including former officials, led to accusations of bias and lack of independence. Some disqualified candidates even alleged external interference, with Russia being cited due to their past criticism of [Moscow's](#) policies. While this claim may not reflect reality, it underscores the prevailing perception of the Guardian Council among large segments of

the population. The failure of the Guardian Council to address the grievances of disqualified candidates and provide transparent explanations for their disqualification only fueled further speculation about the council's motivations, placing pressure on itself and the ruling elite.

Iranian officials acknowledged the gravity of public criticisms directed at the Guardian Council, prompting warnings against their escalation. Some even threatened legal action if these criticisms were perceived to threaten the integrity of the elections or if they morphed into widespread questioning of the electoral process. This apprehension stemmed from the ruling elite's fear of these criticisms diminishing the credibility of the polls, prompting the government to take preventative measures. Consequently, the government mobilized various tools, particularly religious and media platforms, to encourage voter participation. Ayatollah Alamolhoda, the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad, underscored the importance of electoral participation, stating that the future of Islam hinged on [it](#) rather than solely the fate of the Iranian revolution or the government. This campaign aimed to discourage any questioning of the election results and the decisions made by the Guardian Council, emphasizing the significance of a robust voter turnout. Simultaneously, the Guardian Council reversed its decision to disqualify several candidates upon their appeals, permitting some excluded individuals to contest the elections. This move sought to reinvigorate interest in the electoral process, counter calls for boycotts and dispel doubts regarding the elections' legitimacy (by those who said that the election results were a foregone conclusion or devoid of any significance).

The parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections were conducted against the backdrop of the government losing credibility and legitimacy, both domestically and internationally. Faced with growing widespread distrust in its ability to address internal and external challenges, the government saw the elections

as an opportunity to bolster its legitimacy and widen its margin of maneuver. However, the government remains trapped in the aftermath of recent incidents fueling public tensions and discontent toward it. Following a wave of protests sparked by the mysterious poisoning of schoolgirls, reminiscent of earlier unrest triggered by the death of Kurdish activist Mahsa Amini, criticism of the government and its symbols intensified. These developments compelled the government to reinforce its authority to control the narrative. Unlike previous protest cycles, recent demonstrations breached longstanding taboos by targeting revered figures such as Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian republic, and burning images and effigies of Qassem Soleimani across Iranian cities. Moreover, the desecration of religious symbols, including the religious turban, underscored the erosion of traditional boundaries and the deepening disillusionment among segments of Iranian society. The Iranian elections occurred against the backdrop of Iran's international isolation, the continuation of sanctions, the failure of nuclear talks and the eruption of regional conflict, especially in the Gaza Strip in the aftermath of Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Amid fears of a broader regional conflagration, armed groups aligned with Iran activated operations across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. These developments reverberated during the Iranian elections, with the "hardliner" movement leveraging these factors to bolster its electoral prospects across its support base.

## **Electoral Lists and Platforms**

The recent parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections in Iran marked a departure from the country's tradition of diversity in political representation since the establishment of the "Islamic Republic." The authorities employed various state security and administrative apparatuses, including the Ministry of Interior and the Guardian Council, to meticulously vet candidates, excluding those associated with the "reformist" move-

ment. This stringent vetting process rejected all “reformist” candidates, leaving only a handful of them across Iran’s provinces, as noted by the Reform Front spokesperson Javad Imam. Faced with limited options, the “reformists” were divided between boycotting the elections, participating reluctantly, or maintaining silence — an approach that aligned with those that advocated for a total boycott of the elections. Some “reformists” even formed committees to support moderate “hardliner” candidates.

In the Assembly of Experts, the religious affiliations of the candidates significantly limited their chances of participation, with clerics associated with the “reformist” movement excluded. Consequently, the competition was confined to “hardliner” candidates, both in the Assembly of Experts and the Parliament. With Tehran being of paramount importance, the focus of attention was directed to the competing lists there. Four main lists dominated the “hardliner” factions in the electoral landscape. These included the “Sobh Iran” list, prominently featuring figures like Mahmoud Nabavian and Hamid Rasaei, the “Devotees” list, the “Council of Islamic Revolution Forces” list led by Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Morteza Aghatehrani, and finally, the “Unity Council” list, headed by Manouchehr Mottaki, a former foreign minister under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. On the opposing side, “moderate” and “reformist” forces gathered under a unified list called “Voice of the Nation” in the parliamentary elections in Tehran. This coalition, led by Ali Motahhari, garnered support from some “reformist” parties, including the Moderation and Development Party, closely aligned with former President Rouhani.

In the lead-up to the Iranian parliamentary elections, candidates vying for the 290 seats unveiled their official campaign platforms, outlining detailed electoral programs and visions. These programs encompassed a range of ideas and proposals to address the state’s challenges. While there was consensus



among candidates regarding the assessment of internal and external pressures, variations emerged in their approaches to overcoming these challenges and their proposed plans for addressing them post-election. These platforms were undoubtedly designed to sway Iranian citizens' electoral decisions and shape their political affiliations.

In the period preceding the official commencement of the voting process, the predominant movement in Iranian politics, [the “hardliner” movement](#), showcased a plethora of slogans and programs to win the highest share of parliamentary seats. Central to their agenda was to direct the state's trajectory post-election such as prioritizing national security interests, upholding the authority of the Guardianship of the Jurist, perpetuating the struggle against perceived global hegemony, maintaining a level of political engagement through dialogue and negotiations with the West, and continuing the country's foreign policy pivot toward the East. Additionally, their agenda emphasized enhancing Iran's economic indicators, diversifying economic cooperation with regional nations, and mitigating the impact of international sanctions on the country.

While the declared agendas of [the “moderate” and “reformist” parties](#) and movements showed slight variations, they notably diverged in their approach to the country's foreign policy. Emphasizing a narrative of reducing international tensions, these factions aimed to recalibrate Iran's relations with the world. Economically, the Reformist Front underscored enhancing the country's macroeconomic metrics. This involved proposed revisions to existing economic legislation, including removing military sectors and semi-governmental institutions from the economy. Furthermore, there was a push to enact laws supporting the green economy and renewable energy development to address energy disparities. Socially, “reformist” and “moderate” candidates advocated for introducing new legislation catering to diverse societal segments, advancing freedoms and social

rights for women, and opposing legislation that would exacerbate domestic polarization.

While addressing economic imperatives such as enhancing living standards, tackling unemployment, ensuring justice and improving the education system, particularly in the capital Tehran and several major cities, [electoral campaigns in provinces outside Tehran](#) and [several provincial regions](#) were notably centered more on local issues. These issues primarily pertained to urban development challenges. In provinces like Isfahan, Tabriz and East Azerbaijan, candidates prioritized programs addressing labor rights and worker welfare alongside initiatives concerning water management, environmental conservation, healthcare, sports and culturally enriching local communities. Social media reflected a diminishing level of confidence among Iranian voters in candidates fulfilling their pledges once elected. This skepticism is based on past experiences, where previous parliamentary elections in Iran failed to yield tangible solutions or address real issues. Instead, these elections appeared to be mere electoral theatrics, with promises from various political factions unfulfilled once their candidates assumed office. Consequently, rather than witnessing improvements, the government's international isolation exacerbated the populace's economic, social, and political pressures.

Another factor that contributed to Iranian skepticism toward the electoral platforms and slogans was internal conflicts and the lack of unity among political factions. This discord extended to a failure to present a unified candidate list and an inability to reach a consensus on which pressing national issues to raise in Parliament. Moreover, the economic slogans put forth by each political party failed to present a novel economic discourse distinct from previous election cycles. This absence of innovative solutions to the country's current economic challenges fueled internal discontent and further undermined public confidence in the electoral process.

## **Election Results, Voter Turnout and Significations**

### **• Diminishing popularity of the frustrated “reformists:”**

The dominance of the “hardliners” over seats in the twelfth Parliament was certain, particularly with the exclusion of most “reformist” candidates by the Guardian Council, the boycott of the elections by some “reformist” parties, and the defeat of the majority of those who remained in the electoral race. Preliminary results from Tehran indicated that none of the candidates from the “Voice of the Nation” list, comprising “reformists” and “moderates,” managed to secure seats in the Parliament or garner sufficient votes to advance to the second round. Even Ali Motahhari, the head of this list, failed to secure a seat in the new Parliament. Consequently, this marked the first time in recent years that the “reformists” and “moderates” faced defeat in all electoral districts in the capital, Tehran.

This also signified a decline in the influence of the “reformists” and their role in public life or perhaps reflected voters’ disillusionment with all political currents. Notably, the government played a significant role in exacerbating the divide within the Reformist Front by barring their symbols and candidates from participating in the elections from the outset. It was striking that “reformist” leader Mohammad Khatami boycotted the elections, marking an unprecedented departure from his usual stance regarding the parliamentary polls. This move reflected widespread frustration among the “reformists,” including prominent figures and leaders.

**• A Parliament with a more radical makeup:** The final election results were disclosed in 18 out of Iran’s 31 provinces, with 48 deputies elected for seats in the Assembly of Experts and votes tallied in 190 electoral districts out of 208 for the parliamentary elections, as announced by Iran’s Election Commission Spokesperson Mohsen Islami. The outcome also indicated that the parliamentary elections would proceed to a second round following the victory of 201 members out of 290. In Tehran, [15 candidates secured their seats](#) in the next Parliament after winning the initial round, while another 15 progressing to the second round. Notably, members of the Resilience Front claimed the top three positions in the capital, with Mahmoud Nabavi-

an, Hamid Rasaei, and Amir Hossein Thabeti Monfared. At the same time, the outgoing Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, secured the fourth spot.

These developments served as a clear message to the fundamentalist factions, particularly the influential generals who were prominent figures in the 11th Parliament. As a consequence, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf may face the risk of losing his position as the Parliament speaker, given the significant discord between him and key members of the Resilience Front. Consequently, there is a likelihood that the Parliament will be led by radical right-wing elements, potentially leading to a more tumultuous tenure compared to the current Parliament. This situation could transform the Parliament into an arena of strife, with “hardliner” elements competing with one another, with each faction representing different orientations and outlooks.

• **The new Assembly of Experts’ mission:** Although there was no direct competition between the “hardliners” and “reformists” in the elections for the Assembly of Experts, the final results of its sixth session did offer surprises. Notably, Sadeq Amoli Larijani, the head of the Expediency Discernment Council, lost his seat in the Assembly of Experts, [ranking fifth](#) in Mazandaran Province. This outcome is seen as a referendum against Larijani and could potentially lead to his exclusion as a potential successor to the supreme leader. Conversely, President Ebrahim Raisi secured a significant victory in South Khorasan Province, garnering over 82% of the votes in his district, given the absence of strong competitors. With Raisi’s win and Larijani’s defeat, the path is cleared for Khamenei to restructure the assembly and select its leadership, laying the groundwork for his role in appointing the next supreme leader.

• **The lowest turnout since the revolution:** Voter turnout reached 41%, falling short of the government’s expectations for broader participation. The government had hoped for a higher turnout to mitigate concerns about its legitimacy and bolster its domestic and international image, portraying itself as popular at home and abroad. However, this turnout level marked a record low, even lower than the parliamentary elections in

2020, which recorded the lowest turnout since 1979. This continued decline in voter participation underscores the diminishing popularity of the Iranian government. As a result, international doubts about the government's legitimacy, particularly from the United States, have become more challenging to refute. Matthew Miller, a US State Department spokesperson, cast doubt on the fairness of the elections, especially criticizing the exclusion of thousands of candidates.

Despite efforts by the government, such as increasing the number of candidates per electoral district to 52 and extending voting hours, voter turnout remained relatively modest. While opponents of the Iranian government interpreted this low participation as a sign of declining legitimacy, the government viewed it positively. They attributed the low turnout to boycott calls from both internal and external sources. They argued that turnout rates in various countries, including Western democracies, often do not surpass those in Iranian elections.

Despite efforts to rationalize the situation, the ongoing decrease in voter turnout during Iranian elections indicates that encouraging popular participation is no longer a top priority for the government to maintain its legitimacy, which has significantly waned. Even as the “hardliners” retain control over all government institutions, this trend underscores the government's recognition of its diminishing popularity. Therefore, it has intensified its efforts to control institutions through various means.

• **Modest youth participation:** Observers monitoring the elections noted a conspicuous absence of young participants, reflecting a sense of disillusionment. This reluctance is understandable, considering the lack of genuine competition in the electoral process and the prevailing wave of public discontent that has surged in Iran in recent years. It is further fueled by the extensive involvement of young people in recent protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, which underscored the profound disconnect between this new generation and the Iranian government. The government has predominantly responded through repression and harsh security measures to quell dissenting voices.

## Conclusion

The Iranian elections failed to bring anything novel to the table, especially failing once again to integrate the aspirations and demands of the Iranian people into governance and politics. Instead, the government opted for a premeditated engineering process to ensure that its most loyal elements seized legislative authority while excluding all opponents, even those within the ruling elite's own ranks. This underscores the continuation of the current policies and their implications, suggesting that tensions and resentment will be left unaddressed, potentially leading to further social and political unrest in the future. Moreover, these elections serve the government's agenda of infusing decision-making centers with more loyal elements and facilitating a seamless power transition post-Khamenei, however, by sidelining a broad swath of the elite and the masses from the political process, including the elections, the government risks complicating any transition that may lie ahead.

