

STUDY

THE PRACTICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE ELECTORAL PROCESS IN IRANIAN POLITICS

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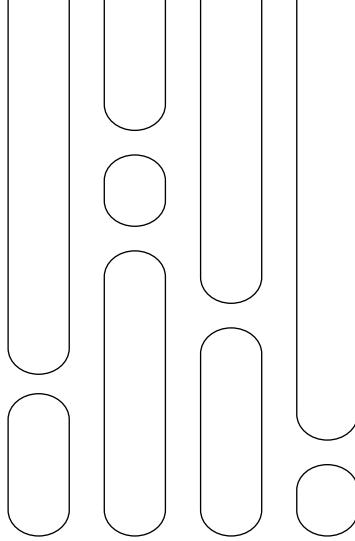
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Introduction

The Iranian presidential elections on June 28, 2024 feature six candidates approved by the Guardian Council out of 80 applicants, excluding many prominent figures. The ruling establishment appears to be focused on creating the illusion of a competitive atmosphere in a bid to overcome the unprecedented voter apathy witnessed in the 2021 elections in which the late President Ebrahim Raisi lacked any credible competitor. However, the introduction of a “reformist” among the “hardliner” contenders reopens the debate about the role of elections in the Iranian political system. This unique system blends traditional and modern values, rooted in Shiite Islamic and Western republican traditions. This has impacted and generated tension regarding power and political legitimacy in the system and the mechanisms for shaping its structure.

Over the past four decades, Iran’s ruling establishment has consistently organized general elections to shape its governing institutions, including the presidency, Parliament and local councils. These elections have witnessed substantial popular participation, averaging around 60%, which is seen by the establishment as an indication of broad legitimacy.

At first glance, considering the level of popular participation, which has declined in recent years, it may seem logical that these elections play a role in renewing the regime’s legitimacy. However, none of the past elections have fundamentally changed the regime’s policies or structure, as there has been no real transfer of power over 40 years. All government and presidential programs failed due to the overarching authority of the supreme leader and affiliated institutions, or “parallel institutions.” Stricter restrictions were imposed on the rise of certain factions to power, even when new political factions emerged with fresh perspectives on social and political issues. Ultimately, elections are revealed to be a mechanism for role exchange within the elite, with the regime holding firm to its own principles and perceptions, not allowing changes through the ballot box, and controlling who competes in the elections.

One of the most prominent indications of the gap between the regime’s claim that the elections are evidence of its legitimacy and popularity and the stark reality is the broad social movement and mobilization that Iran has witnessed in recent years. This movement has directed extensive criticism at the regime as a whole, including its leaders, structure, ideas, ideology, and domestic and outside orientations.

This paper aims to analyze the practical aspects of the elections within Iran’s idiosyncratic political system by examining several key elements: the role

of democratic elections, the main structural factors influencing their effectiveness, the ways in which the Iranian regime utilizes elections along with its core objectives, and the impacts of limited electoral effectiveness on the country's political landscape.

The Mechanism of Elections and the Dilemmas Facing the Iranian Political System

The dominance of Khomeini and the religious elite following the 1979 revolution profoundly shaped the country's political dynamics. This influence significantly altered the context within which elections occur, reducing them to symbolic formalities rather than meaningful democratic processes. This is evident in the following aspects:

A Constitutional yet Undemocratic Reality

The issue of elections in Iran is intricately linked with the debate over democracy in the country's Constitution following the 1979 revolution. By early 1979, a committee comprising jurists and judges had prepared an initial constitutional draft awaiting approval.

This draft included several notable provisions: (1) A parliament elected by the populace with sole authority to enact legislation. (2) Absence of "supreme leaders" or similar overarching constitutional bodies. (3) Adherence to Sharia laws. (4) The establishment of a Guardian Council composed of six jurists and six scholars tasked with reviewing the compatibility of bills with Sharia principles.

Initially, Khomeini endorsed this constitution and on several occasions informed journalists that he did not aspire to participate in governing Iran, but rather intended to serve as a spiritual leader to the nation. At that time, his stance mirrored the position jurists had taken during the 1906 Constitutional Revolution. According to his representatives, the jurists did not seek an expanded role in the new constitution, fostering the belief that it would be democratic and reflect the popular will.⁽¹⁾

Shortly thereafter, it became evident that Khomeini's initial endorsement of the first constitutional draft was superficial and a political maneuver. Just two months after the shah's overthrow, Khomeini organized a popular referendum to determine whether Iran's future state form would be a theocratic republic. This marked the true beginning of the jurists' push for a more significant role in the post-revolution power structure, transcend-

(1) S. Waqar Hasib, "The Iranian Constitution: An Exercise in Contradictions," *In Al Nakhlah*, (Boston Ave, Medford: The Fletcher School-Tufts University, Article 1, spring 2004), 3.

ing from merely overseeing legislation as granted in the 1906 Constitution to asserting complete guardianship over the Constitution. The referendum saw exceptionally high participation, with 98.2% of voters approving it, reflecting the ardent revolutionary fervor of the time.

The newly formed Assembly of Experts actively undermined the initial draft and instead adopted a revised version that significantly enhanced the authority of Khomeini and the jurists, consolidating political power under the concept of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*Wilayat al-Faqih*). Unlike the first referendum, widespread accusations of procedural irregularities marred the subsequent referendum on this new draft.⁽¹⁾

In the amended version, the Assembly of Experts, dominated by over 80% jurists, revised the Constitution in ways that did not meet the criteria for establishing a genuine democracy. The Constitution failed to ensure the necessary conditions for a fair electoral process, creating significant hurdles instead. As a result, elections within this system have become more of a symbolic formality to confer legitimacy on power rather than a mechanism characterized by integrity and transparency. This shift has transformed elections into practical tools serving authoritarianism and oppression.⁽²⁾

The Theocratic Nature of the Political System

The approval of the referendum endorsing the Islamic Republic by 92% provided the basis for Khomeini's political (general/absolute) theory of Guardianship of the Jurist to assert its legitimacy in governance. This involved establishing a government led by the Guardian Jurist, tasked with implementing Islamic decrees until the anticipated return of the 12th Imam (the Mehdi). Khomeini viewed the formation of this government as essential to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* doctrine, making it a communal obligation for jurists to uphold. According to Khomeini, obedience to this government by its followers was mandatory,⁽³⁾ as enshrined in the Constitution mandating its establishment.

Thus, according to the *Wilayat al-Faqih* mode of governance, the conditions for theocratic rule are fulfilled once the jurist, as the representative of God or viceregent of the imam, presided the new regime. In the constitutional document, the titles bestowed upon Khomeini, the supreme leader, reflect the constitution's endorsement of a style of individual rule. Khomeini was

(1) Ibid, 4.

(2) Constan Armingon Hashem, *The Shiite Doctrine and the State: Clergy and the Test of Modernity*, trans. Muhammad Ahmad Sobh, 1st ed. (Damascus: Nineveh Publishing House, 2015), 131-132. [Arabic].

(3) Muhammad Al-Sayyid Selim, "The Guardianship of the Jurist in its Contemporary Image," *Al-Shorouk*, August 1, 2009, accessed December 26, 2018, <http://cutt.us/XmPdj>. [Arabic].

hailed as the Supreme Leader of the Revolution, the Founder of the Islamic Republic, and the Inspirer of the Oppressed, Imam of the Islamic Ummah, among other titles, some of which have been passed down to his successor, Ali Khamenei. According to his constitutional role, he holds absolute authority and oversight over all branches of government. He is regarded as an eternal ruler, with no checks on his decisions or directives by the people or institutions. In his work *The Islamic Government*, Khomeini states, “The Islamic government during the occultation [of the twelfth Imam] has a divine mandate to carry out its duties, as it was for the Prophet and the Imams after him.”⁽¹⁾

It has become increasingly challenging to discuss genuine elections within the context of the Iranian regime, characterized by authoritarianism and a system of governance centered around one-man rule. Democratic elections are not feasible in such an environment, where the rule of law is absent, and there is no constitutional framework that governs both rulers and the ruled. The authority of the supreme leader transcends constitutional limitations, rendering political accountability virtually nonexistent. Real power resides in unelected bodies, and there is no independent judiciary to ensure individual rights and oversee law enforcement impartially. The person who appoints the head of the judiciary wields ultimate authority, consolidating control over elected leaders who remain subject to the oversight of unelected bodies. The supreme leader’s status and legitimacy are often considered divine, making his decisions unchallengeable and beyond review.

The Jurists’ Custodianship

Under the Iranian Constitution, citizens lack the right to participate in political decision-making. The jurists, in the name of religion, exercise full guardianship over the system and public sphere. The supreme leader, positioned at the apex of the political hierarchy, serves as the guarantor of both the Constitution and religious governance. He alone determines the regime’s adherence to true Islamic teachings, crafts policies, and oversees all institutions. Possessing absolute authority, he stands above the law and popular will. His authority stems from acting on behalf of the Imam and being appointed by God, embodying an absolute version of Wilayat al-Faqih. He reserves the right to overrule decisions made by elected bodies and claims exclusive knowledge of truth, with the prerogative to define what is morally correct. As a religious leader, he views his role as sacred until the return of the Imam.

(1) For more details, see: *Khomeini, The Islamic Government*, 3rd ed. (Tehran: Shabakat al-Fikr, 1389 HS), Introduction 7-22. [Arabic].

In alignment with Khomeini's agenda, the Iranian Constitution states, "In accordance with governance and Imamate, it establishes conditions conducive to the leadership of a jurist who meets all criteria and is acknowledged by the people as their leader...Thus, the Constitution ensures that various institutions adhere to their authentic Islamic roles."⁽¹⁾ This sentiment echoes the principles outlined in *The Islamic Government*, where it is stated, "Law serves as a tool to achieve justice in society, refine individuals morally, ideologically, and practically, and guide them towards happiness in both this world and the hereafter. Jurists are entrusted with the judiciary and the implementation of legal provisions."⁽²⁾

In the absence of a principle of power rotation, the right to compete for access to power is effectively nullified. Political competition is reduced to a formal contest between two factions from within the ruling elite: the "reformists" and the "hardliners." These two factions are part of the ruling class that supports Wilayat al-Faqih. This situation violates a fundamental constitutional principle: that all authority derives from the people. This principle is undermined by the Guardian Council, which prohibits citizens from running for office and participating in electoral contests based on religious, cultural, and political criteria. These restrictions serve to consolidate the dominance of a specific political faction in power.

In Iran, ideology has eclipsed constitutional and legal considerations. The legitimacy of the Constitution itself derives from religious interpretations and metaphysical beliefs concerning the return of the Imam. As a result, true authority does not stem from the people but rather from a hierarchical order: beginning with God, then the Imam, and finally the Guardian Jurist, who wields absolute authority, even over the executive branch. The Constitution mandates specific qualifications for the head of the executive branch, requiring him to be "a religious, political figure of probity and piety," and an adherent of the principles of the Islamic Republic and the official doctrine of the country, which is Twelver Shiite Islam.

Furthermore, the functioning of all branches of power in Iran is circumscribed by the authority of the religious leadership, which oversees their operations and possesses mechanisms to render their policies ineffectual. Elected legislative bodies lack legitimacy and autonomy, as they are constrained by the directives imposed by the Guardian Council, thereby limiting their ability to act independently.

(1) *Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Association for Islamic Culture and Relations*, (Tehran: Directorate of Translation and Publishing, 1997), Preamble, 14. [Arabic].

(2) Khomeini, *The Islamic Government*, 80.

The Wilayat al-Faqih mode of governance extends its influence throughout society via the “principles of the Islamic Revolution” and the state’s roles and missions enshrined in the constitution. The state ceases to function as a vehicle for expressing the interests and aspirations of its citizens or as a representative of its communities. Instead, society is compelled to uphold and defend the revolution’s principles, bearing the ramifications of this religious ideology that has become a foundational pillar in the structure, culture, and institutions of society.

In the context of democracy, which typically allows for the expression of competing programs, values and individuals, Wilayat al-Faqih eliminates any semblance of competition. The system’s theoretical underpinnings position the supreme leader as the ultimate authority, akin to a guardian of the populace, imposing his singular interpretation of truth on reality. This occurs despite the presence of formal electoral competitions, which are overshadowed by the monopoly of truth upheld by the supreme leader.

Excluding Society From the Political Equation

The Iranian Constitution fails to establish a social contract that reflects the will of the nation or guarantees the rights to participation and representation. Instead, it institutionalizes minority rule, reducing citizens to mere subjects in relation to the government. Crafted primarily by and for the dominant clerical establishment within the hawza and along ethnic and sectarian lines, the Constitution marginalizes religious and ethnic minorities, denying them full rights and representation.⁽¹⁾ This exclusion undermines state cohesion and loyalty, as marginalized groups face systemic discrimination and deliberate political exclusion. Many rights ostensibly granted by the Constitution are effectively suspended or unenforced, particularly for those who do not adhere to the Twelver Shiite doctrine or reject Wilayat al-Faqih. As a result, minorities experience severe limitations on their political, economic, and social freedoms, enduring pressures, discriminatory policies, marginalization, and political exclusion.

The Parallel Institutions Controlling Decision-making

The idiosyncratic nature of the Iranian political system has led to the establishment of parallel institutions through which the supreme leader dominates and undermines elected bodies. Chapter Nine of the Constitution outlines exceptions that limit the executive branch’s ability to wield effective power and fulfill its responsibilities. While the president holds significant

(1) Rania Makram, “The Aspiration of Minorities and the Future of the State in Iran,” *Journal of Iranian Studies* 2, no. 6 (March 2018): 41-43.

authority, the supreme leader can supersede his powers, rendering them effectively null.⁽¹⁾ Participation in the electoral process for the presidency or the Consultative Assembly requires candidates to undergo an indirect vetting process prior to submitting candidacy registration papers. This process ensures that only individuals acceptable to the ruling establishment can participate in national and local political representation. The supreme leader's role is embodied specifically by the Guardian Council, half of whose members are directly chosen by the supreme leader, with the remainder nominated by the head of the judiciary, who is appointed by the supreme leader. Even the legislative authority is circumscribed by the powers of the Guardian Council. According to Article 93 of the Constitution, the Islamic Consultative Assembly lacks legal legitimacy without the approval of the Guardian Council, except in matters pertaining to issuing membership credentials for representatives and selecting six jurist members of the council itself.⁽²⁾

In the 1980s, when the Guardian Council's right of appeal against legislation issued by the Consultative Assembly led to a deadlock, the supreme leader resolved the impasse by establishing a powerful third body. Comprising 39 specific political, religious and social figures, this body is known as the Expediency Discernment Council. It holds the authority to arbitrate disputes between the two institutions. Since 2005, the council has also served as a supervisory body over all government branches and advises the supreme leader, effectively adding an additional layer to the legislative process and limiting the Consultative Assembly's authority and the government's ability to implement reforms.

The Authoritarian Engineering of the Competition Among the Political Forces

The attempt to imbue the Iranian Constitution with a balanced, modern character has resulted in glaring contradictions and a significant gap between its text and the reality of the political system. The system is characterized by two opposing poles: Sharia (Islamic law) and republic (representing the will of the people). While elections symbolize the republic and the concept of popular sovereignty, Sharia represents the religious aspect of the political structure, which upholds the rule of jurists and diminishes the role of the people in governance. If "republic" implies a modern democratic state based on popular sovereignty, representation, participation through universal suffrage, and the separation of powers into executive, legislative

(1) Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 113.

(2) Ibid, 91-92.

and judicial branches, the Islamic Republic of Iran starkly diverges from these principles. Instead, the concept of the Islamic Republic aligns more closely with traditional Shiite structures, where religious authority holds significant sway over political and social affairs.⁽¹⁾

From this traditional structure have emerged political currents in Iran defined by “hardliner” and “reformist” Islamists. “Conservatives” strictly adhere to Wilayat al-Faqih, with variations between those advocating more stringent interpretations and those adopting more moderate stances. “Reformists,” on the other hand, advocate for a more adaptable religious model that aligns with contemporary times while remaining within the broader policy framework set by the supreme leader. The “hardliners” uphold the supreme leader’s hegemony and prioritize preserving religious ideology in politics, while the “reformists” advocate for increased freedoms and democratic reforms within the theocratic framework. This division is crucial in understanding Iran’s electoral dynamics for two reasons: firstly, it underscores the paramount role of religion in shaping Iran’s political landscape; secondly, it reflects that Iran’s political structure and Constitution post-revolution do not accommodate secularism and liberal political parties widely. Instead, the political spectrum is largely occupied by various strands of Shiite Islam, with only a minority representation of leftist and liberal ideologies.⁽²⁾

This reality has transformed elections in Iran into a spectacle that seems vibrant in form, regardless of its limited impact on political dynamics. Elections often highlight ideological divisions among political factions, which in turn stimulate public participation in a noteworthy manner.⁽³⁾

Therefore, over the span of 40 years, the electoral landscape and the interactions among competing forces have appeared contradictory and exclusionary. Despite the presence of multiple factions, these all generally support the existing theocratic system. This understanding helps explain the limited influence of the electoral process on Iranian politics and decision-making both domestically and internationally.

The Role of Elections in Iranian Politics

The Iranian regime strategically leverages elections to ensure its survival through:

(1) Mehrdad Vahabi, Mohajer Nasser, “Islamic Republic of Iran and Its Opposition,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 31, no. 1 (2011): 20.

(2) Ismail Kurun, “Iranian Political System ‘Mullocracy,’” *Journal of Management and Economics Research* 15, no. 1 (January 2017): 125.

(3) Kulsoom Belal, *Elections and Political System in Iran, IPS Situational Brief* (Islamabad: Institute of Policy Studies, 2016), 4-5.

Keeping Elections as a Formal Mechanism for Political Representation

The decisions made by the Iranian state are ostensibly legitimized under the premise that they reflect the fundamental interests of society, with power derived from the people as the source of authority. However, since Khomeini's ascent to power with his Wilayat al-Faqih ideology, he undermined the notion of popular sovereignty.⁽¹⁾ Instead, he subordinated the popular will to divine mandates, consolidating power in his role as the Imam of Ages and the sole representative of a higher authority. The supreme leader, as an unelected and perpetual ruler, wields unchecked authority without oversight or accountability. This includes the ability to dismiss elected representatives, regardless of their positions — a significant departure from the principles of governance based on jurist rule rather than Sharia law, thereby elevating clerical authority above popular will.⁽²⁾

Therefore, the lines between the figure of the supreme leader and his authority, originally intended to be based on popular rather than divine mandate, have blurred significantly. This authority is wielded without the consent or acceptance of citizens. Parallel institutions exert direct influence⁽³⁾ over the electoral processes, including presidential and parliamentary elections, as well as the selection of the Assembly of Experts which appoints the supreme leader. These processes are guided by sectarian and ideological criteria, stripping elections of their democratic essence and denying the elected ruler legitimacy derived from the ballot box. Over time, this reality has widened the gap between voters and those in power, reducing citizens to mere recipients and implementers of decisions rather than active participants or representatives in governance.

Furthermore, the Iranian regime utilizes elections to demonstrate popular support, yet these elections lack integrity. The regime actively mobilizes and coerces voters to participate, employing political funds throughout the electoral process. Material and moral incentives, particularly in light of the clientelism inherent in the regime's political model, reinforce traditional Shiite structures. This includes leveraging relationships between Shiite authorities and followers, as well as resource distribution where *khoms* (Islamic tax) plays a pivotal role in gaining support, loyalty, and voter direction. Consequently, Iranian elections do not genuinely reflect the collective or individual will of citizens. Instead, they signify the nature of citizens' re-

(1) Pakinam al-Sharqawi, "Political Change in Iran Between Variables and Issues," *Center of Civilization*, n.d., accessed December 24, 2018. <http://cutt.us/KRwe4>.

(2) *The Iranian Revolution at 30*, (Washington, The Middle East Institute, January 2009), 25-26.

(3) * Parallel institutions mean the non-elected institutions that the supreme leader relies on to control the elected institutions, such as the Guardian Council, the Expediency Discernment Council, the House of the Supreme Leader and others.

relationships with authority, often characterized by intimidation or inducement rather than genuine satisfaction. This undermines governmental legitimacy by failing to foster widespread approval or consent among the populace.⁽¹⁾

Undoubtedly, one of the primary factors contributing to the weakening of state legitimacy in Iran is the state's prioritization of its own interests over those of society at large. Controlled by jurists who advance their ideological agenda through state mechanisms, Iran has seen a disregard for broader societal interests. With elections lacking integrity and effectiveness as a democratic consolidation tool, the state's legitimacy has suffered significant harm.

Sham Competition and Recycling the Elite

In Iran, the electorate participates in choosing their representatives for the Parliament and presidency. However, the regime, through the Guardian Council, conducts a pre-screening process for candidates, determining how far they are qualified⁽²⁾ based largely on ideological commitment to Wilayat al-Faqih. The criteria for validity lack specificity, often leading to disqualification of candidates perceived as disloyal to the regime.⁽³⁾ Consequently, voters are left to select from a limited pool of pre-approved candidates. This process raises doubts about the principle of popular mandate, as elected officials do not owe their legitimacy solely to the electorate. Instead, their loyalty is primarily to the ruler who permitted their candidacy in the first place, undermining the direct accountability to the people in the electoral process.

Moreover, these regulations fail to ensure genuine pluralism; instead, they preemptively suppress dissenting viewpoints and restrict political competition to ideologically aligned factions. The majority of political factions either operate on the periphery or are excluded from the political arena altogether. Ideological conformity is a prerequisite for assuming senior positions within the state, exemplified by Article 115 which mandates that a presidential candidate must be a "religious political man who enjoys probity and piety" who adheres to the principles of the Islamic Republic and Twelver Shiism, the country's official doctrine.⁽⁴⁾ Furthermore, minorities

(1) "To Agree to Accept Their Nominations for the Elections, Iranians Pay \$300,000 in Bribes," *Al-Hurra*, January 28, 2020, accessed June 24, 2024, <https://2h.ae/vsWI>. [Arabic].

(2) Belal, *Elections and Political System*, 3.

(3) Kurun, "Iranian Political System," 124-125.

(4) This text is consistent with what is stated in the Constitution that the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Jaafari sect, and this principle remains in place and cannot be changed forever (Article 12).

lack meaningful representation in the Consultative Assembly and provisional and local councils. These elected bodies often face challenges and weaknesses when confronted with parallel institutions that wield significant influence.

The issue of engineered competition in Iran remains contentious and is consistently renewed with each election, prompting questions about the regime's intentions behind manipulating the competition among political factions. The motives are debated: whether to promote greater political participation or merely to create a facade of a powerless faction within the ruling structure tasked with bearing the political cost during times of crisis. Regardless of the intent, this engineered competition typically results in the recycling of elites from both the "reformist" and "hardliner" camps, all operating under the overarching authority of the supreme leader and his robust institutions. Thus, while elections may suggest political diversity, ultimate power and decision-making remain centralized and firmly controlled.

Ensuring Longevity and Preventing the Diffusion of Power

In Iranian elections, the transfer of power is not a viable outcome, thus failing to fulfill their intended role of easing internal tensions and political strife. Instead, elections primarily serve as a platform for competition among members of the religious elite aligned with the Guardian Jurist. This dynamic is starkly evident in the political conflicts that arise, characterized by superficial competition devoid of substantive discussions on pressing political and economic issues.⁽¹⁾ Furthermore, the legitimacy of election results is often contested, exemplified by the Green Movement following the 2009 presidential elections. Mass protests erupted in response to perceived electoral fraud, leading to widespread government crackdowns on demonstrators.

In Iran, elections do not facilitate a shift in the political landscape or the redistribution of power among elite factions. This stagnation is not due to the fixed preferences of voters, but rather stems from the authoritarian control exerted over the electoral process, which manipulates its trajectory through coercive or incentivizing measures. While elections in Iran may occur, and some may even appear relatively fair, they do not afford the populace the opportunity to alter or influence the composition of the ruling elite within the confines of the current electoral framework.

(1) Mohammad Bashandi, "The State of the Jurist and the Dilemma of Partisan Institutionalism in Iran," *Journal of Iranian Studies* 1, no. 3 (June 2018): 16-18. [Arabic].

Despite occasional successes of “reformist” figures coming to power in Iran, their influence remains constrained by the broad supervisory powers vested in institutions affiliated with the Guardian Jurist or the Guardian Jurist himself, as outlined in Article 99 of the Constitution. This article mandates the Guardian Council to oversee elections for the Assembly of Experts, the presidency and the Consultative Assembly, as well as public referenda. This constitutional setup often leads to governmental paralysis due to inherent contradictions between theocratic governance and semi-democratic principles. The tension lies in the discrepancy between elected representatives of the people and unelected representatives claiming divine authority. “Reformist” leaders like Mohammad Khatami, despite rising to prominence with more progressive agendas, found their initiatives curtailed by the regime’s entrenched institutions. This cycle perpetuates the authoritarian regime in varied, and at times more stringent, forms, limiting the potential for substantial reforms within Iran’s political framework.

Renewing the Regime’s Political Legitimacy

Although the Iranian regime maintains an authoritarian grip, it relies on elections to derive legitimacy. These elections are also crucial for masking the regime’s dual nature, where executive and legislative authorities are ostensibly elected through popular votes at various levels, including the presidency and local councils. Therefore, electoral processes aim to portray the Iranian system as democratic, suggesting that the government represents the will of the people and is accountable through competitive and periodic elections. In reality, however, elected officials have limited authority to address citizen demands. Unelected institutions wield significant control over the country’s political processes at both national and local levels. This creates a crude and unbalanced system where accountability and checks on power are lacking, undermining the effectiveness of elected representatives and perpetuating the regime’s authoritarian structure.

Accordingly, under the post-revolution political system, elections have become a formal mechanism to superficially impart a democratic veneer to an inherently authoritarian system. These elections have been stripped of their substantive content, failing to ensure genuine voter representation. The system fundamentally precludes the emergence of any legitimacy that could rival that of the Guardian Jurist. Whether through elections or other means, the Iranian regime’s periodic electoral process serves primarily to fulfill a need for formal legitimacy, rather than a genuine renewal of popular legitimacy.

Within these elections, the regime uses its threatening ideology and stance against external pressures, particularly its hostility towards the United States and its narrative of conflict between Islam and the West, as central themes to mobilize the masses. These issues serve both as a rallying cry for popular support and as an alternative to competitive democratic elections. The regime leverages external conflicts and ideological positions to legitimize its survival.

However, these elections take place within an environment lacking public freedom and freedom of association. Despite Article 26 of the Iranian Constitution allowing for the formation of political parties, associations and bodies under certain conditions, including for religious minorities, these freedoms are heavily constrained. Organizations must adhere to guidelines that prevent them from violating national unity or threatening the foundations of the Iranian republic, and Islamic values.

It is clear that in Iran, discussions about elections cannot ignore the severe limitations on freedoms such as the right to assembly, as outlined in Article 27. This article permits public meetings and marches only if they do not disrupt Islamic foundations. However, in practice, these rights remain largely theoretical, as subsequent laws have robbed them of substance.

Moreover, the rights of minorities, including their full citizenship and women's participation in political life, have been ambiguous. Later legislation imposed strict limits on the participation of non-Muslim minorities in state affairs and significantly curtailed women's political rights. Members of non-Jaafari (non-Twelve Shiite) Islamic confessions also face obstacles in participating in government and political decision-making processes.⁽¹⁾

The Repercussions of the Lack of Electoral Effectiveness on the Iranian Political Reality

The authoritarian orientations of the Iranian state profoundly have influenced the function and role of elections within the political system, impacting the legitimacy of the regime in different ways:

Rebelling Against the State Rather Than Easing Political Tensions and Disputes

The lack of integrity in Iran's electoral process and restricted political competition contribute significantly to internal tensions and social and political discontent among citizens. This situation deprives people of meaningful

(1) Abdul-Ghani Imad, "Navigating Tradition and Modernity: Iran's Complex Transition," *Journal of Iranian Studies* 1, no. 4 (September 2017): 16-20. [Arabic].

participation in political decision-making and undermines the legitimacy of the government in their eyes. Historically, this discontent has manifested in various forms of protest and unrest, including:

- **Minority Revolts (1980s):** Rebellions by ethnic and religious minorities dissatisfied with the regime's policies.
- **Student Protests (1999):** Demonstrations primarily led by students calling for political reform and greater freedoms.
- **2009 Protests:** Known as the Green Movement, sparked by disputed presidential election results and demanding electoral transparency and political reform.
- **2017 Protests:** Nationwide demonstrations over economic grievances, including unemployment and inflation.
- **Fuel Protests (2019):** Protests erupted after the government announced fuel price hikes, reflecting economic hardship.
- **Water Protests (2021):** Demonstrations over water shortages and mismanagement, particularly in rural areas.
- **2022 Protests:** Protests following the suspicious death of Mahsa Amini, highlighting concerns over human rights and police brutality.

These incidents illustrate a pattern of widespread dissent and dissatisfaction with the political, economic and social conditions imposed by the regime. The increasing frequency of large-scale protests in Iran in recent years suggests a notable decline in the government's legitimacy. Simultaneously, there has been a rise in factional protests, highlighting various facets of the legitimacy crisis faced by the Iranian regime. These demonstrations encompass a wide range of issues spanning politics, economics, and social motivations.

Suppression Instead of Containment

In Iran, where there is a political deadlock and dissent is suppressed, the government has increasingly resorted to repression rather than meeting public needs or fostering civic engagement. The state's legitimacy is undermined by its failure to uphold fundamental democratic principles and establish inclusive legal frameworks for political participation. This lack of commitment to democratic values hampers efforts to promote citizenship, achieve economic development, ensure social justice, and fairly distribute wealth and power. As a result, the government struggles to effectively represent all citizens equally, jeopardizing national stability, territorial integrity, and the legitimacy of the regime.

Thus, the absence of accountability and responsibility has enabled authorities to wield repression without facing political or legal repercussions. Iranian politicians and leaders prioritize loyalty within an authoritarian framework rather than responding to public demands. As such, decision-making often revolves around pragmatic choices and mutual interests in a system marked by a lack of transparency.

Clientelism and the Diminished Legitimacy of Institutions

The Iranian political system is characterized by one-man rule, leading to political clientelism, which is evident in elections that have shifted from a competitive process to a pre-determined ascent to power orchestrated by the ruling elite. The jurist is the central figure, with all institutions revolving around him and a narrow group of beneficiaries surrounding him. This centralization blurs the lines between the state, regime, and authority. The legitimacy crisis of the Iranian political system subsequently draws on the legitimacy of its institutions, which suffer from an incomplete and immature structure which lack independence. These factors undermine the legitimacy of both the state and its institutions at the popular, political, and legal levels.

Local and regional governors appointed by Iran's elected president are heavily influenced by jurists and Friday imams, who represent the supreme leader in these areas. Despite not being official government officials, these figures wield significant local power due to their social and religious standing. The processes and outcomes of electing candidates for legislative and executive positions are also controlled by unelected clergy. Even the president must consult the supreme leader when selecting cabinet members. Additionally, members of the Consultative Assembly often seek approval from religious leaders in Qom before introducing legislation, knowing it will not pass without their endorsement.⁽¹⁾

The supreme leader's authority in Iran extends through approximately 2,000 representatives embedded across all sectors of government, acting as agents of the religious leadership. These representatives often wield more power than government ministers, with the ability to intervene in any matter on behalf of the supreme leader.⁽²⁾ Notably, Iran stands out as the only country where the armed forces are not controlled by the executive branch but are directly under the authority of the supreme leader.

(1) The Iranian Revolution at 30, 109.

(2) "The Structure of Power in Iran: An Overview of the Iranian Government and Political System," *Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)*, n.d., accessed December 16, 2018, <http://cutt.us/dl165b>.

Iran's so-called democracy and elections have failed to foster an innovative spirit to affirm state legitimacy. Instead, the regime has used its monopoly on state power as a tool for political, economic, social, and cultural domination. The legitimacy of performance has, therefore, vanished, replaced by oppression and repression. The centralization of power under the supreme leader has resulted in political and social nepotism, marginalizing dissenting opinions and fostering political corruption due to a lack of accountability. This has led to the absence of social justice and entrenched authoritarian and individualistic values throughout the social structure. Two key issues underpin this situation. Firstly, the state's relationship with citizens emphasizes "mobilization" over genuine "participation," leading to weak voluntary popular participation. Secondly, there is an imbalance in institutional development, with governance, administration and security institutions expanding far more than those for participation and expression of opinion and interests.

Weak State-society Relationship

Elections are supposed to be the primary mechanism for society's political participation in shaping state policy. However, in Iran, the authoritarian nature of the regime renders this participation largely symbolic. The regime exercises complete guardianship over society, and even the electoral process, which it promotes as a modern feature, is merely a formality. Election processes are dominated by authoritarian tendencies, limiting options to those who pledge allegiance to the supreme leader's guardianship. Consequently, political representation is confined to the religious current, encompassing both "conservative" and "reformist" factions, which do not offer significant policy differences. The regime uses elections to mask the wholly dictatorial nature of its actions. As a result, politically and socially marginalized groups often turn to alternative means of participation, whether legitimate or illegitimate, including ongoing protests or, in some cases, political violence to express their demands. This violence is primarily a reaction to political isolation and the state's violence and repression towards society and its political, social, and civil forces.

Lack of Self-criticism

The election process in Iran operates within a tightly controlled framework, limiting competition, programs, ambitions, and criticism of authority. The system, centered on individualism, revolves around one person and one idea, making self-criticism merely a formality. Serious criticism is marginalized, distorted, and persecuted, remaining temporary and partial. As

a result, there is no strategic vision for evaluating the state project, nor a comprehensive vision for the reform process.

Much of Iran's wealth and resources have been squandered through corruption, negatively impacting development efforts and contributing to unbalanced growth. This has created an environment conducive to violence, crime, extremism, and unregulated migration. Corruption has also affected social relations, hindering the growth of democracy and anti-corruption mechanisms. This situation has been exacerbated by the absence of a critical environment to correct the mistakes of successive political systems.

Negatively Impacting Foreign Policy Choices

Despite the popular backing of officials calling for foreign policy reforms and movements advocating for better international relations, the Iranian election process is largely symbolic in this context. True political power resides with the authoritarian religious authority rather than elected representatives. As a result, Iran has isolated itself from the global community, facing sanctions and external threats. Instead of achieving independence, it has become a perceived threat to global security and stability. Decades of sanctions have diminished its international standing despite its rich history, resources, and strategic location. Iran's revolutionary state and expansionist ambitions have led to multiple regional conflicts, strained cooperation with neighbors, and increased regional instability.

The Iranian regime's focus on its expansionist project has hindered domestic political, economic, and social development. By exporting the revolution, the regime attempts to create internal legitimacy and obscure its failures. The electoral process, which disregards popular demands to reconsider this external project, has led the regime to ignore "reformist" voices from within. Instead, it continues to prioritize ideological expansion at the expense of the well-being and quality of life of Iranian citizens.

The Iranian republic, ostensibly committed to serving national interests and playing a significant role on the global stage, has failed to fulfill its mandate on both fronts. Consequently, it faces opposition from both domestic and international actors, perpetuating material and moral violence in its internal and foreign interactions.

Undermining the Reform Process

The regime's sole purpose is to ensure its survival. Elections have shifted from being a tool for change to a mechanism for maintaining the status quo. Since 2009, the regime has been deploying its tools to obstruct any

internal change through elections that could threaten it or the position of its leader. This is done by staging an electoral spectacle that removes reformist figures like Mohammad Khatami, Mehdi Karroubi, and Mir Hossein Mousavi, whom the regime denounces as part of the “seditious faction,” or any movement with questionable loyalty, such as Ahmadinejad’s current, which the regime calls the “deviant faction.”⁽¹⁾

Therefore, obstacles to reform in Iran go beyond rejecting electoral change to including the dominance of political institutions that curtail any government with reformist tendencies. The Guardian Council’s role extends beyond vetting candidates to supervising legislation, stifling parliamentary reform efforts.⁽²⁾ The judiciary is wielded against opposition media and “reformist” figures. Additionally, bodies like the Expediency Discernment Council influence government policies, alongside security and military forces aligned with the supreme leader.⁽³⁾

Therefore, the reform agendas of several Iranian presidents, from Hashemi Rafsanjani to Hassan Rouhani, particularly in economic and foreign policy spheres, have faced frustration due to constitutional barriers that grant parallel institutions the authority to veto and annul governmental decisions. For instance, during Khatami’s presidency, the Guardian Council wielded its veto power over 111 out of 297 bills in the sixth Parliament, controlled by the “reformists.” These legislative proposals encompassed issues such as civil liberties, political participation, women’s rights, torture prohibition, freedom of the press, workers’ rights, and public welfare.⁽⁴⁾

In the context of these dualities and contradictions, the Rouhani government faced challenges in controlling the state budget, as the executive authority lacked the ability to allocate budgetary resources according to its priorities. This limitation stemmed from undisclosed items and allocations directed to higher authorities and bodies, alongside the strong influence and protected status enjoyed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) within the regime. Additionally, on the foreign policy front, the IRGC’s significant role remains difficult for the government to curtail.⁽⁵⁾

(1) Hosein Ghazian, “The Ninth Parliamentary Elections in Iran: Challenges and Perspectives,” *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung*, February 21, 2012, accessed February 2, 2020, 4-6, <https://cutt.us/dv6bz>.

(2) Belal, *Elections and Political System*, 3-4.

(3) Al-Sharqaw, “Political Change in Iran,” 289.

(4) *The Iranian Revolution* at 30, 39.

(5) “Jahangiri: During the Unveiling Ceremony of 10 Technical Achievements: the State Budget Turned Into Sacrificial Meat,” *ISNA*, December 19, 2018, accessed December 24, 2018, <http://cutt.us/4pY8j>. [Persian].

Shutting Down the Public Sphere for New Generations

Elections in Iran fail to foster mobilization or meaningful participation due to their inherent unfairness. The pre-filtering of candidates prevents elections from serving as a political training ground or a means to cultivate and qualify new elites aspiring to engage in politics. Despite attempts to introduce new faces and engineer competition between “reformists” and “hardliners,” these elections have not resulted in significant changes in the power hierarchy over the past 45 years. They have not facilitated real representation or meaningful contributions to decision-making and policy development, crucial for the vitality and effectiveness of the political system.

Conclusion

It appears that the electoral process in Iran is merely a procedural formality lacking substantive content. This is evident in the fact that the Constitution fails to ensure the separation of powers, freedom of political participation and representation, and fairness in political mobilization within the system. Additionally, it does not guarantee the rule of law and limits the authority granted to elected officials. Consequently, the transfer of power is essentially a process of role-sharing among the dominant forces within the system. Even the credibility and integrity of the elections have been questioned over the past 45 years. During this time, power has remained concentrated in the hands of the early revolutionaries led by the supreme leader, and this situation persists. The regime, under the leadership of the supreme leader, aims to maintain its path and operational mechanisms, including elections, through what is termed the “second step of the revolution.” This involves empowering a new generation within the corridors of power to ensure the regime sustains its revolutionary approach and operational patterns.

It raises an urgent question: Can the Iranian regime still use elections to affirm its approach and renew its legitimacy? Recent parliamentary and presidential elections since February 2020 suggest growing disillusionment among significant segments of Iran’s elite and populace with the electoral process. Voter turnout has dwindled to around 40%, starting notably with the parliamentary elections in February 2020. This trend has influenced the current presidential elections, where popular participation has become a pivotal issue overshadowing the specifics of candidates and their agenda. While there is a noticeable movement advocating boycotts, questioning the effectiveness of participation, another faction seeks to present a “reformist” candidate to embellish the electoral landscape, despite widespread understanding that such elections primarily serve to distribute roles rather than empower decision-making on critical domestic and external issues. Regardless of whether the elected president is “reformist,” “hardliner,” or

“moderate,” expectations remain low for significant shifts in Iran’s policy trajectory. These dynamics suggest that democracy in Iran faces a precarious state, potentially declining rather than progressing.



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