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CASE ANALYSIS

The Path to Iran's 2013 Presidential Elections*

Dr. Rachid Yalouh | May 2013

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Abstract

With preparations for Iran's 11th presidential election well under way, the Iranian political scene is preoccupied with the upcoming electoral conflict, a conflict that could write a new chapter of political practice in the country, or entrench the hegemony of the ruling regime throughout the state's centers of power and decision making. In this context, this article attempts to determine the most important factors that will influence the electoral process, including Ahmadinejad's presidential experience; the challenges candidates will face during the elections; the risks embedded in Iranian politics; and the primary motivations of Iranian political blocs as they go to the polls.

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Ahmadinejad's Track Record

Given the deep political and economic impact of Ahmadinejad's eight years in power, the outcomes of his rule now form the backbone of the discussions on the eve of the presidential elections. The present analysis shall limit itself to a broad overview of the most important end results of Ahmadinejad's presidency in the realms of both economics and politics, with the aim of making the Iranian setting more comprehensible to readers at this much anticipated juncture.

Political Outcomes

Ahmadinejad began his time in office in 2005 by undertaking structural modifications to government administrations, which resulted in the removal of a large number of administrators and technocrats associated either with his foes in the reformist movement, or those close to former president Ali Hashemi Rafsanjani. He attempted to use the same methods during his second term, this time turning them against officials close to Supreme Guide Khamenei.² This policy was the direct cause of increased tensions between the Iranian president and the supreme guide, the parliament and the Revolutionary Guard. As a result, governmental affairs became mired in repeated crises over the past eight years, crises that reached a climax when Ahmadinejad was brought before parliament for questioning in March 2012.³ In February of the following year, his Minister of Labor, Abdolreza Sheikholeslami, was impeached after questioning before parliament.⁴ In addition, Ahmadinejad's presidency was wrought by tumult because a number of high-level officials appointed by the president during his term in office were dismissed, including 13 governmental ministers and 14 presidential advisers,⁵ as well as clashes that pit the president against a number of political opponents, influential religious leaders, and the judiciary.⁶ A relevant example of behavior that led to conflict

² Under governmental pretexts, President Ahmadinejad attempted to intervene in the Revolutionary Guard's economic activities, but his attempts were in vain due to the influence and power of the guard. The president also failed to make Iran's Intelligence Services subservient to the government.

³ Dehghan, "Iran's president Ahmadinejad," 2013.

⁴ This parliamentary hearing was the scene of a confrontation between President Ahmadinejad and Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larijani, following the former's presentation of a video showing one of Larijani's brothers (Fazel Larijani) offering to use his family's power and influence to provide a business man with lucrative privileges. See: Farid, "Iran: Will Thieving Officials," 2013.

⁵ Yalouh, "Why was Mottaki Dismissed?," 2011.

⁶ Erdbrink, "Iran's political infighting," 2013.

was Ahmadinejad's bombastic use of language during a speech in which he referenced the role of the "Awaited Mahdi"⁷ in his government, and his excessive use of Iranian street language in official speeches and statements.⁸

Ahmadinejad failed to change some of the fundamental choices made by the regime, whether in terms of domestic or foreign policy, though he did manage to deeply impact Iranian governmental and political practices. Some may choose to view his changes positively, seeing them as an attempt to restore the importance of "popular leadership" in rhetoric and public administration, taking the presidency away from the elite.⁹ Similarly, this outlook can be used to understand his attempt to unsettle the hegemonic grip supporters of the Revolutionary Guard and Khamenei have on power and decision-making.

However, there is another prism through which the president's rule can be observed that shows Ahmadinejad's desire to entrench popular power and transform it into the practice of *political populism*. His confrontational political behavior has also led to the president's loss of partners and allies in the state apparatus and decision-making centers, a fact that has gravely impacted the implementation of his governmental plans, leading the country into a state of financial and administrative crisis.

Economic Outcomes

In terms of Iranian public debate today, the economic outcomes provide the most important negative indicator of Ahmadinejad's rule. When the president came to power in 2005, replacing Mohammed Khatami, Iran's currency was valued at 9,004 Iranian Riyals to the US Dollar. With Ahmadinejad's departure from office, the official exchange rate is now 24,747 riyals to the dollar, a devaluation of roughly 270% during his term.¹⁰ Likewise, the official inflation rate was 21.1% when Khatami left office,¹¹ rising to

⁷ Swails, "Ahmadinejad awaits," 2006.

⁸ Yalouh, "The Iranian Presidency," p. 98.

⁹ "Popular leadership" as a concept is one of the main pillars on which Iranian political discourse has been based following the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

¹⁰ According to figures published on April 8, 2013, by the Center for Currency Exchanges, a body established recently with the aim of limiting the deterioration of Iran's national currency, the Iranian Riyal went from 9,004 to the US Dollar in 2005 to 24,747. Details can be found online (in Farsi):

<http://alef.ir/vdcf0jdytw6dcca.igiw.html?184825>.

¹¹ Iran's official Fars New Agency, published online on April 22, 2013 (in Farsi):

<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8502020391>.

31.5% by March 2013,¹² according to the Statistical Center of Iran (SCI).¹³ The official unemployment level has also risen during Ahmadinejad's rule, from 11.5% at the end of Khatami's term to 12.2% today.¹⁴ Ahmadinejad, meanwhile, views his handling of the economy as a success given the circumstances imposed by the strict economic sanctions placed on Iran since 2010, and because institutions associated with the Revolutionary Guard and Khamenei interfered with his process of implementing economic plans. Reductions in government subsidies for foodstuffs and energy, economic liberalization promoted by foreign investment, and the creation of free trade zones and new industrial zones are examples of Ahmadinejad's most significant economic accomplishments. In 2012, the Western embargo on Iranian oil exports also allowed Ahmadinejad's government to achieve real growth in its non-oil exports. During 2012, non-oil exports were valued at 34 billion Iranian Riyals, an increase of 20% compared to 2011.¹⁵ Meanwhile, media sources report that Iranian crude oil exports declined to 1.1 million barrels per day in 2012, one-half of the 2011 figure.¹⁶ However, the National Iranian Oil Company's managing director, Ahmad Ghalebani, has suggested that these figures are inaccurate, and that the government is reluctant to publicize the true level of Iranian oil exports.¹⁷

The state of embargo Iran is witnessing, and the unsurprising attendant media war, has doubtlessly had a substantial impact on the veracity of the data being cited. The lack of (reliable) government statistics has also impacted experts' forecasts within financial and economic institutions. This is made abundantly clear by the conflicting estimates for Iran's rate of economic growth during 2012.¹⁸

Despite a negative overall appraisal of Iran's economic growth, contained in the IMF's findings on Iran, experts from within the country contend that this data contains

¹² This period is between March 2012 and March 2013, which happens to be on 1384 according to the official *Hijri* calendar used in Iran.

¹³ Report from the Amar Center (Statistical Center of Iran), published online on March 30, 2013 (in Farsi): http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/0/Files/reports/r2_tavarrom_86-91.pdf.

¹⁴ Report from the Amar Center (Statistical Center of Iran), published online on April 13, 2013 (in Farsi): http://www.amar.org.ir/Portals/0/Files/abstract/1391/ch_niru_91.pdf.

¹⁵ FARS News Agency, "Sanction lower oil dependence," 2013.

¹⁶ DiPaola, "Iran's crude exports decline, 2013."

¹⁷ Published on Khabar Online, April 21, 2013 (in Farsi): http://khabaronline.ir/detail/288115/economy/energy#Scene_1.

¹⁸ The reference here is the diversity and incompatibility of the data and analyses provided on Iran's economic growth—in terms of their source and accuracy—in light of the lack of a single, authoritative statement on Iran's economic growth in 2012.

positive projections for the coming three years.¹⁹ These experts believe the data confirms that Iran has been steadfast in the face of tight economic sanctions.²⁰ The report’s findings on Iran’s Real Gross Domestic Product (Real GDP), beginning at the time Ahmadinejad assumed power until the present day, with a Real GDP growth of 3.9%, are reproduced below.

| Year | Real GDP | | | | | | | | Projections | | |
|-----------------------|----------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|-------------|------|------|
| | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 | 2009 | 2010 | 2011 | 2012 | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
| Annual percent change | 4.7 | 6.2 | 6.4 | 0.6 | 3.9 | 5.9 | 3.0 | -1.9 | -1.3 | 1.1 | 2.4 |

While official Iranian rhetoric is optimistic about the limited impact the Western economic blockade has on their country’s economy at present, the average Iranian citizen is suffering gravely because of price inflation affecting basic goods, medicines, and medical supplies. This places a solution to the economic issue at the top of voters’ list of priorities when selecting candidates.

General Outcomes of Ahmadinejad’s Presidency

Considering the depth of the impacts on the Iranian political scene, and the formation of preparations for the now-underway Iranian elections, it is imperative to examine what Ahmadinejad’s term in office has led to. Some of the fundamentalist camp’s members blame Ahmadinejad, as well as his government, for the political and economic failings Iran has suffered. The deputy speaker of the Iranian parliament, Mohammad Reza Bahonar, has said that external sanctions are causing 50% of the current economic difficulties, with the rest being the consequence of weak political decisions and structural issues.²¹ Other Fundamentalists have taken Ahmadinejad’s poor performance as a president as an excuse to verbally attack him, accusing him of having the worst attributes. For several months now, President Ahmadinejad has been

¹⁹ IMF, “World Economic Outlook,” April 2013.

²⁰ Colucci, “EU sanctions to Iran,” p.7.

²¹ Interview with Bahonar on Iranian television. Aired on October 29, 2012, as cited on p. 12 of: http://www.niacouncil.org/site/DocServer/Never_give_in_never_give_up.pdf.

the object of a vitriolic media campaign that—indirectly—used the official TV station associated with the supreme leader.

Likewise, Ahmadinejad's own threats against members of the ruling regime have also intensified. The most prominent example is in a speech Ahmadinejad gave in southern Iran on April 22, 2013, in which he accused certain individuals within the state of threatening him to know his limits. The president addressed these critics, adding: "[I]f I were to reveal only a small fraction of their [the critics] deeds, there would be nowhere left for them among the people of this country."²² On the following day, this statement resulted in a direct response from the armed forces Chief of Staff Major General Hassan Firouzabadi in which he asked the president to refrain from inflaming the political situation in the country.²³

The narrative presented above serves to illustrate the difficulty of Ahmadinejad's situation during the final weeks of his time as president. The best way for him to defend his track record, and ensure the survival of his political party at the present time is to attack his opponents. The current situation also reveals the extent of the deep transformation affecting the relationship between Ahmadinejad and proponents of the Fundamentalists.

A large number of reformists admit that the errors they made during their time in power, from 1997 to 2005, and during the 2005 presidential elections, paved the way for Ahmadinejad's rise to power. According to this view, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his entourage bear the responsibility for Ahmadinejad's poor performance as president. Reformists' maintain that the Fundamentalists, with the supreme leader's support, brought Ahmadinejad to power at a time when they were politically isolating Ahmadinejad's reformist opponents. Given the president's inability to realize economic promises, strike a balance with the supreme leader, and find a consociational role for the presidency within Iran's political system, an examination of his eight years in office paints a bleak picture. Some opponents of the Iranian regime hold out this legacy as a further example of tyranny by the supreme leader and his acolytes in their managing of the country's affairs.

²² Video uploaded onto Youtube, April 22, 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34Hq-054huY&feature=player_embedded.

²³ Fars News Agency, published online on April 23, 2013 (in Farsi): <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920203000165>.

These failures provided a powerful indication of the blundering state of Iran's current political affairs, and turned Ahmadinejad into an easy target for his political opponents. Even so, it would be unfair to place all of the blame for these presidential failures on Ahmadinejad and his government. While Iran's constitution and political realities endorse the president as the head of the executive authority, this only forms part of a complex network of interconnected institutions, all of which strongly influence decision making in the country. All of these are, in turn, under the command of the supreme leader, who alone has the right to control the Islamic Republic's strategic policies.

Despite this peculiarity, which obscures the issue of governance in Iran, the departure of Ahmadinejad's government became a pressing demand by most political actors, leaving open the question of an alternative. Who would become the next president, capable of pulling Iran out of its present economic suffocation? How could such a president balance his own obligations while reaching a compromise with Supreme Leader Khamenei?

Challenges of the Electoral Battle

While the election of a new president is a question of great significance in Iran, it is not an event that necessarily entails fundamental changes to the country's strategic agendas—the nuclear question, in particular—and regional affairs, nor would it impact relations with the US and Europe. Thus, it is difficult to expect any real changes to these issues after the 2013 polls, especially as Supreme Leader Khamenei has emphasized the necessity to remain above political partisan bickering, ordering all of the contesting parties to avoid this type of engagement.

The results of the Iranian presidential elections will have no great influence on the strategic decisions taken by the Iranian regime in terms of foreign affairs. Likewise, their impact on domestic matters the supreme leader deems "off limits," particularly with regards to security and cultural matters, will be negligible. Nonetheless, the incoming president might be able to arrive at a set of appropriate conciliations with both the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guard on a number of issues. The new president may also contribute policy practices that endeavor to direct the regime's strategic choices. It is expected that these elections will also provide is an important turning point in Iranian politics, which have thus far been shaped Ahmadinejad's eight years in power.

Arguably, one of the most important initial differences of the 2013 presidential elections in Iran is that they will take place under a new, amended electoral law. The amendments to the new law include a provision that candidates must be politically perceptive and religiously observant. It also expands the number of official institutions overlooking the election process.²⁴ Under the new electoral law, an additional committee now shares responsibility with the Ministry of Interior, which previously had sole responsibility, for organizing the polling process.²⁵ Such amendments led to much discord between the parliamentary majority, who are associated with the supreme leader and supported the changes, and members of the cabinet aligned with President Ahmadinejad,²⁶ who were opposed. Some observers believe that motivation behind these changes was to control the electoral process, as much as possible, and prevent unexpected developments.

In terms of how voters' leaned, Iranians' preference for a reformist presidential candidate reflects Iranian society's desire to overcome the stifling economic and political crisis the country is going through, their desire to choose a president that would keep the country out of any adventures the Fundamentalists may undertake in response to the sanctions, and Western and Israeli threats against Iran.

Even in the midst of the deep divisions that mark the current Iranian debate, all political forces in the country agree on the severity of the present phase. They all concur that the huge pressures brought about by the West's economic stranglehold, the possibility of a military strike against Iran, and the complications that have risen because of the political and security situation in the region. In contrast, the ruling regime is preoccupied with its preparations for this electoral turning point, which it intends to surpass calmly and with as little discord as possible. It is in this context that one must understand Khamenei's warning against the use of slogans, such as "calls for free

²⁴ Statement from Iran's Ministry of Interior, published on the official Fars News Agency website, November 9, 2013: <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911121000391>. For an overview of the election laws in English, see: <http://iranelectionwatch.com/election-law/>.

²⁵ For further information see: "Iran's Guardians Council Approves New Election Law". *Project on Middle East Democracy*, January 31, 2013. <http://pomed.org/blog/2013/01/irans-guardians-council-approves-new-election-law.html/>.

²⁶ President Ahmadinejad criticized the first draft of election law, claiming that it violated "popular sovereignty". Further details are provided in: Yalouh, "Preparations for Iran's Presidential Elections," 2013.

elections"; for Khamenei, all elections in Iran have been free since the victory of the Islamic Revolution.²⁷

This is further evidenced by a statement made by Ali Saidi, Khamenei's representative to the Revolutionary Guard, who affirmed that the next president must be subservient to the directives of the Revolution's supreme leader. Saidi further affirmed that the Revolutionary Guard should work toward the "rational and logical engineering of the election".²⁸ Mohammed Ali Aswadi, the Revolutionary Guard's spokesperson, echoed the same message when he called on Hezbollah's supporters to face the figureheads of "discord and deviance" at the coming electoral juncture.²⁹ Equally, Sadeq Larijani, Chief of the Judiciary, was also in agreement on this point, which he demonstrated by advising contesting political forces to avoid repeating the 2009 presidential election experience, telling them to carry the elections "in the right manner".³⁰ Such statements may be an indication that there is a high-level political movement in Iran; they may also be taken as a reflection of the ruler's desire to prevent any doubts about Iranian electoral legitimacy, as well as any attempts to get in the way of sound elections. They may also point to the regime's movement toward greater hegemonic control over the state's institutions and society.

The Flow of Candidacies: Criticism and Doubt

There are numerous candidacies emanating from across the spectrum of groups aligned with the Fundamentalists, a possible reflection of the divisions now prevailing within this political camp, notwithstanding their commonalities in policy. Repeated failures in the administration of the political process and transfers of power have shaken the Fundamentalist's core cohesion, exacerbating internal disintegration within the camp. This is a feature that has long characterized Iranian politics, with "division being an inherent feature of Iran's political currents, and the loss of momentum being an

²⁷ Iran's official Fars News Agency, published online on January 8, 2013 (in Farsi): <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13911019000569>; See: Reporters Without Borders, "Supreme Leader Steps Up War," 2013.

²⁸ Iran's official Fars News Agency, published online on April 11, 2013 (in Farsi): <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920122000523>; See: Esfandiari, "Springtime for Ahmadinejad," 2013.

²⁹ Peyke Iran website, published online on January 7, 2013, <http://www.peykeiran.com/Content.aspx?ID=57681>.

³⁰ Khabar Online, published on January 9, 2013: <http://khabaronline.ir/detail/269622/>; Also see: "Iran: Feuding mounts," *NCRI*, 2013.

inherent phenomenon of the country's political parties".³¹ Similarly, the large number of candidacies may also be viewed as a natural symptom of the political impasse that dates back to the events of 2009 within the regime, and the resultant isolation of the Reformists. In the absence of a national reconciliation based on agreements between all active political and societal actors, the electoral process will not escape the closed circle of political corruption, and a recycling of the extant conflict locked within it. This drove the Rafsanjani-aligned newspaper, *Jomhuri Islami* ("The Islamic Republic"), to criticize the number of fundamentalist candidates, in an editorial on April 17, 2013. According to the newspaper, the fact that there were now 20 candidates for presidency was an indication that many [within the fundamentalist camp] had "misconstrued" the tasks involved in running a state.³²

Alternatively, the multiplicity of fundamentalist candidates may also be the practical interpretation of statements made by regime officials, in which they demanded the securing and engineering of the electoral process. Such attempts would fit seamlessly with the regime's desire to avoid any surprises that might arise through a Reformist foray into the political competition. Alternatively, it can also be used to safeguard [the regime] from the prospective power vacuum that could result from the Reformists' absence from the electoral competition.

This situation may be one of the implications of Ahmadinejad's presidential experience, during which the presidency has come to be seen as an easily obtainable position in the eyes of many politicians. Given the current president's humble political experience before his ascent to office, and his management of affairs over the previous years, many Iranian politicians now believe they are better capable of carrying out the tasks.

Given both the internal complexity and the interconnectivity that defines them, categorizing the political blocs and movements vying for power within Iran has become a difficult task. The old dichotomy of Reformists versus Conservatives is now obsolete; instead, the Fundamentalists, who include a variety of political beliefs and formations, have now emerged.³³ The supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guard belong to one

³¹ Smadi, *Political Trends in Iran*, p. 349.

³² Published online by *Jomhuri Islami* newspaper, April 27, 2013: <http://www.jomhourieslami.com>.

³³ Fundamentalists share a set of commonalities, including: the *Wilayat al-Faqih*, as a divine principle which supersedes popular guardianship; an economic mindset based on the idea of a market economy; anxiety about relations with the US, a matter which they believe to be the exclusive domain of the supreme leader; and anxieties about the influence of Western theoretical trends, with the Fundamentalists believing any attempt to make use of this to be sophistry.

of these sub-groups. A second such fundamentalist sub-group is centered around a number of religious authority figures, while a third group is made up of independent figures and technocrats. A discussion that emerged within this context centered on the extent to which it was possible to describe Ahmadinejad's supporters, or Rafsanjani's, as Fundamentalists. In fact, the same internal divisions can be seen within the Reformists, which itself appears to be divided between Reformists working from within the regime, and those working from the outside.³⁴ However, all of the Fundamentalists have been imprisoned or politically isolated in Iran, or have immigrated or sought asylum abroad.

Amir Mohebian, an Iranian scholar, commented on the situation:

It has been clear for some time now that the categorization of Iranian political trends along traditional lines is no longer useful. Older categories were defined within a specific context under certain conditions, the realities of which are no longer extant. The reason being that there are individuals within both branches of the reformist camp who do not accept each other. The same holds for the Fundamentalists: in both camps, there are individuals who refuse to accept each other, with some not able to tolerate others within the same camp on ideological terms.³⁵

Faced with the above reality, the author posited a more flexible approach to the categorization of the political players that were active in the preparations for Iran's elections. In doing so, a distinction is made between three political camps: Fundamentalists, Reformists, and Rafsanjani, a fundamentalist group. The following table attempts to provide a list of the most important components of each of these groups, and the candidates put forward for the presidency from within each of them.

³⁴ For those Reformists operating within the regime, some of the most important abiding principles are: limiting the *Wilayat al-Faqih* through the constitution; support for the concept of guardianship of the nation; promotion of openness with the West, and making use of its theoretical output; dialogue with the US; defense of the market economy; and support for personal liberties.

³⁵ Interview with Amir Mohebian, *Siyasatma* (Our Politics) website, published online on April 20, 2013: <http://siasatema.com/vdchwxnz.23n6qdf2.html>.

| Camp | Group | Components | Prominent Candidates |
|----------------|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Fundamentalist | Traditional Fundamentalists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Progressive Alliance • Society of Forces Following the Line of the Imam • Association of Combatant Clerics • Front of Islamic Revolution Stability • The Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran The Somoud (Steadfastness) Front • Ansar-e Hezbollah | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gholam Ali Haddad Adel • Ali Akbar Velayati • Mohammed Baqer Qalibaf • Manoushehr Mottaki • Mohammed Reza Bahonar • Yahya Al-Ishaq • Syed Mohammed Hasan Abu Turabi • Mostafa Pour Mohammadi • Kamran Bagheri Lankarani • Ali Reza Zakani • Mohsen Rezaei • Mohammad Baqer Kharazi |
| | Ahmadinejad's Supporters | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei • Gholam Hossein Elham • Ali Akbar Salehi • Mojtaba Samreh Hashemi |
| | Independents | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ali Falahian • Mohammed Shariatmadari • Said Jalili |
| | Reformists | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mohammed Khatami • Mohammed Reza Aref • Mohammed Mousawi Khowiniha • Mohsen Mohralizadeh • Ishaq Jahangiri • Mostafa Kavakebian |
| | Rafsanjani Supporters | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani • Hassan Rouhani |

Seven separate contending groups make up the Traditional Fundamentalists, which together have put forward 12 candidates that come from civilian, military-security, professional, economic, and religious backgrounds. This demonstrates that even the Traditional Fundamentalists are broad.

Of the groups within the Traditional Fundamentalists, the Progressive Alliance, also known as the 2+1 coalition, may be considered the strongest. In fact, they are putting three candidates forward—Haddad Adel, Velayati, Qalibaf—who will run simultaneously in the elections, though they will later agree on one candidate from among them to best represent the group. This maneuver, unprecedented in Iranian politics, has been criticized among the Fundamentalists because it deepens the rift within the broader movement.

The Ahmadinejad stream, in its turn, is also a novelty in Iranian political practice. A number of scholars question the extent to which Ahmadinejad truly belongs within the fundamentalist camp.³⁶ Regardless of how one evaluates the relationship that now binds Ahmadinejad to the rest of the Fundamentalists, it would be difficult to place Ahmadinejad outside of this camp, for a number of reasons:

- Ahmadinejad's group has yet to produce a coherent intellectual contribution, which is demonstrably at odds with the fundamentalists' principles.
- Secondly, individuals within the group continue to maintain allegiances and ties with the Fundamentalists. Notable in this regard is Ahmadinejad's own relationship with member of the Assembly of Experts, and former head of the Judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.
- Third, Ahmadinejad and his supporters insist that they remain a part of the Fundamentalists, while maintaining their own specificities. This was recently evidenced by how they emphasized their loyalty to Supreme Leader Khamenei, and their adherence to the principle of Wilayat al-Faqih.³⁷

At the time of writing, despite the fact that a number of prospective individuals have been suggested through various venues associated with the group, no single presidential candidate has been put forward from among Ahmadinejad's supporters.³⁸

³⁶ Smadi, *ibid.*, pp. 332-334.

³⁷ Wilayat al-Fiqh is a Shiite theory contending that Islam gives one man, the supreme leader, guardianship over all people.

³⁸ It has come out that Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei is the candidate they have put forward. However, his candidacy has been rejected by the supreme leader. See: Dailey, "Rasfanjani barred," 2013.

Ahmadinejad's competitors, especially those that are Traditional Fundamentalists, are suspicious of the steps taken by the Iranian president's supporters because they fear that the Ahmadinejad-aligned group may use their presence in state institutions to influence the electoral process.

The individuals whom Ahmadinejad's supporters are promoting as potential presidential candidates share one essential commonality—their close association with the ruling president. This explains the ongoing anxiety some Traditional Fundamentalists have over whether the political path charted by the president for the past eight years will remain in place. However, the latest public rally, organized by the Iranian government in Tehran, served to quell some of the fears of Ahmadinejad's opponents, or so it appears. With the public turnout being far lower than expected, some took this to be a clear indication that the president's popularity was waning, and that his supporters' have little chance of winning the upcoming elections.³⁹

Given the lack of an official declaration, the suggested candidates from within Ahmadinejad's group remain potential candidates. Doubtlessly, the group's leaders are trying to reach agreement on a person who can guarantee their group's political continuity, and who has a good chance of being approved by the Guardian Council, thereby gaining support of the supreme leader. Such an individual must also be one who has the ability of reaching concord with the Revolutionary Guard and other official bodies with influence in the Islamic Republic's strategic policies.

Regarding the independents, the common perception that it is difficult to define truly independent political actors in Iran holds true to some extent. Nonetheless, from an objective point of view, it is important to list the individual candidates from within the fundamentalist camp who have declared that they will run for president as an independent candidate. These include Falahian, whose history is in the security apparatus; Shariatmadari, who has a background in economics; and Jalili, who comes from Iran's diplomatic corps.

The Reformists, meanwhile, are divided along two main axes. The first remains convinced of [the possibility of] reform from within the regime, while the second clings to the hope that extraneous pressures will either topple the regime, or, at least, impose

³⁹ This rally was held at Tehran's Azadi Stadium on April 18, 2013 to honor public employees who participated in 2013's Nowruz (Vernal Equinox) celebrations. With the extensive publicity and massive preparations given over to the rally, the government was accused of exploiting the event to begin its electoral campaign ahead of schedule.

a new balance of powers within it. Thus, the elections are only a concern to the former group, which has itself witnessed a significant transformation over the past several months. Within this group, some figureheads have rescinded their previous two preconditions to participation in politics: the release of political detainees, and a lifting of the house arrest imposed on Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.⁴⁰

Following a number of meetings between members of the Reformists and former president Mohammed Khatami, a letter was issued calling on Khatami to announce his candidacy in the elections.⁴¹ A number of reformist-aligned grassroots movements then digitally mobilized with the aim of garnering signatures on an online petition for a Khatami candidature.⁴² The foreign arm of the Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization, a reformist group, issued a statement supporting a Khatami bid for the presidency, though they also expressed regret that the regime did not reconsider the way it has been running the country.⁴³ Governing a country such as Iran, the statement said, would require a level of national reconciliation, allowing Reformists to re-enter the political stage. Perhaps Khatami's hesitancy in declaring his candidacy is due to the lack of any conciliatory overtures between the supreme leader and the Reformists, especially as Khatami believes that it would be impossible to carry out the presidential duties without the support of the supreme leader.⁴⁴

The identities of those from within the Reformists whose names are being touted as prospective candidates indicate the group's desire to put forward candidates as close as possible to the supreme leader, or, rather, those who stand the greatest chance of being accepted by the Guardian Council. Most of the prospective candidates who come from within the reformist camp have either civilian, administrative, professional, or economic backgrounds.

⁴⁰ A group of imprisoned activists wrote an open letter calling on Mohammed Khatami to enter into the electoral competition, and to postpone demands for their own freedom. A Farsi language draft of this letter, published on April 20, 2013, can be read online: <http://www.istgaheentekhabat.net/?p=8683>; Also see: Esfandiari, "Countries at the Crossroads," 2012.

⁴¹ Nada, "Latest on the Race," 2013.

⁴² "Iranian Reformists Present their Analytical Program for the 1392 [2013] Presidential Elections," published online by Radio Farda on March 19, 2013: http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f9_46_iranian_reformists_present_programme_khatami/24932725.html; Also see: Dareini, "Iran's reformists stake long shot," 2013.

⁴³ *Istagh Eentekhabat* ("The Elections Station") website, April 10, 2013: <http://www.istgaheentekhabat.net/?p=8544>.

⁴⁴ The approved candidates have been released, and Khatami is not on this list. See Dailey, "Rafsanjani barred," 2013.

Hashemi Rafsanjani is a candidate that can be placed in between the Fundamentalists and Reformists.⁴⁵ Although he has a reputation of being a pragmatic politician, he is also well-known within Iran's domestic scene for his ability to influence a broad range of people, including politicians, security officers, merchants, and technocrats. Rafsanjani is also noted for the important role he played in supporting Khatami's original 1997 presidential bid, and for the accusations made by the Fundamentalists against him on for being responsible for the 2009 protests. Despite the blows which Rafsanjani has endured,⁴⁶ he remains an influential political figure, especially with the huge failure of the Fundamentalists in running the country.⁴⁷

Rafsanjani is expected to back the nomination of Hassan Rouhani, Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator. This is indicated by the ties that bind the two men—the presence of Rafsanjani's children, Yasser and Fatima, at Rouhani's formal declaration of his candidacy, and the fact that Mohammed Reza Nematzadeh, a former minister in Rafsanjani's cabinet, is now chief of Rouhani's campaign. Provided that he can win the support of the Reformists, Rouhani stands a good chance of success.

Conclusion

The information available at the time of writing does not point to any surprise factors. Iran's present political landscape has not significantly changed since 2009, and since no influential political figures have announced their candidacies, it is difficult to speak of any real electoral battle.

Because of the absence of any influential political figures among the candidates, and therefore no real battle, the regime is able to avoid any surprises, though it is keen to have the largest level of electoral participation. In the end, the participation of political forces, and the electorate more generally, is a direct vindication of the Islamic Republic's legitimacy, and an affirmation of the regime's ability to stand up to those forces opposed to it. One question still remains: how will an electoral consensus be

⁴⁵ Ibid.; Rafsanjani has been barred from the elections by the Guardian Council.

⁴⁶ This is a reference to Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's failure in the 2009 presidential elections; his loss of the chairmanship of the Assembly of Experts; the imprisonment of his daughter Faeza; and the arrest of his son Mahdi.

⁴⁷ Over the past eight years, and for the first time in the history of the Islamic Republic the Fundamentalists—including those aligned with both Ahmadinejad and the Traditional Fundamentalists—have been able to control almost all of the state's apparatuses.

reached in a manner with which the supreme leader agrees when the two largest political contenders have been politically isolated and marginalized?

These two groups' participation in the local elections, to be held simultaneously with the presidential elections, may be an indication of a potential role for them in the future. Nonetheless, they will remain inconsequential in the reshaping of Iran's political and economic life. The two groups will also be unable to persuade both the grassroots social movements and the elites that they truly are parties to the national decision-making process.

While the supreme leader has warned political actors to avoid tackling the regime's "strategic affairs," it is unexpected that regional matters—especially the Syrian crisis—will be a matter of debate between the various candidates. It should also be noted that the factors defining Iran's strategic policies toward the Arab world—as we know it—make it unlikely that even the best-possible Iranian president of would undertake any substantive changes to Iranian policies towards the Arab Homeland. Any radical changes in this regard would require effort by the Arabs themselves.

In light of the difficult circumstances Iran is presently facing, any plan for national salvation would be the fundamental deciding factor for any group in mobilizing the electorate. In other words, the candidates competing for the presidency will have to put forward a platform providing real solutions to the present economic crisis. Such an agenda would also have to address the program of subsidies that Ahmadinejad began,⁴⁸ and include a way to deal with the West's economic blockade.

In conclusion, a number of questions related to Iran's electoral scene remain open, including: will the regime allow a personage who brings balance back to the political stage to enter the electoral race? Or will the regime, instead, limit candidacies to those individuals who have the backing of the Guardian Council, ultimately securing the presidency of one in tune with the supreme leader? Would a president in line with Khamanei's school of thought be the ideal choice for a way out of the Islamic Republic's present crises? Or is it that the challenges faced by Iran are much deeper than that,

⁴⁸ This is a reference to the government's Subsidies Rationalization Plan "Reductions in government subsidies for foodstuffs and energy," which saw subsidies on a set of goods lifted entirely, while reducing subsidies on another set of goods. Direct financial support was provided to poor families to counter these steps.

requiring ground-breaking measures that provide comprehensive solutions to Iran's foreign and domestic difficulties?

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