

IRAN TASK FORCE

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Iran's Internal Politics: The Supreme Leader Grows Ever Lonelier at the Top

As the nuclear standoff between Iran and much of the rest of the world deepens, Iranian domestic politics are in turmoil. Trying to reduce endemic conflict within the system, the country's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has succeeded in recent years in expelling discordant voices and closing off institutional loopholes for dissent.

The result is an increasingly narrow space for authorized political expression in Iran, and a regime that is at once more powerful and more weak—relying on an ever-shrinking base of elite and popular approval amid rising social and economic discontent. At the same time, Khamenei has failed to eliminate factionalism and remains vulnerable to a new eruption of opposition from within (or without) the system.

By marginalizing factions that were once pillars of the Islamic Republic—pragmatists led by former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and reformists associated with the Green Movement—and bypassing advisory bodies, Khamenei, seventy-two, has tried to cement his monopoly over decision-making. Where once he sought consensus from a spectrum of advisers and power centers, now his word—and that of a handful of military, security, and intelligence officials loyal to him—is final.

However, Khamenei has always lacked the legitimacy of his predecessor, and lost much of what remained after backing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the disputed 2009 elections and overseeing a brutal crackdown on peaceful protestors. Subsequently, he also had a falling-out with Ahmadinejad. With the March 2 parliamentary elections now

About the Atlantic Council's Iran Task Force

The Iran Task Force, co-chaired by Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat and Senator Chuck Hagel, seeks to perform a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape, as well as its role in the region and globally, to answer the question of whether there are elements within the country and region that can build the basis for an improved relationship with the West and how these elements, if they exist, could be utilized by U.S. policymakers. Launched in February 2010, the Task Force has hosted eleven briefings with experts addressing key issues such as "Iran's Regional Role," "Foreign Policy Choices Within Iran," "Iran's Nuclear Capabilities and Strategic Goals," and "Negotiating with Iran in an International Context."

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safely behind him, and Ahmadinejad weakened, the leader may choose to reconcile with selected reformists and pragmatists in order to shore up his narrow base. In a key move, he allowed Rafsanjani to remain as chair of an advisory body known as the Expediency Council for another five years.¹ Another indicator will be whether the regime releases 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi after more than a year of house arrest.

¹ EA World View, "The Latest from Iran: Questioning Ahmadinejad, March 14, 2012 <<http://www.enduringamerica.com/home/2012/3/14/the-latest-from-iran-14-march-questioning-ahmadinejad.html#1215>>

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Although the government has asserted that 64 percent of eligible voters participated in the recent elections, the number was likely inflated. Candidates said to be loyal to the leader claimed most of parliament's 290 seats, but only 5 candidates in Tehran received the 25 percent of votes cast that are necessary to avoid a runoff. Anecdotal information suggests that many middle-class Iranians stayed home rather than being forced to choose between the political equivalent of Tweedledum and Tweedledee. (One joke making the rounds in Tehran said that "80 percent of the people are sitting home watching 70 percent of the population vote on TV.")² Khamenei is also facing increasing discontent from Iran's merchant class and elements of the Revolutionary Guards, who are angered at the impact of economic sanctions on their businesses.

How all of these factors will influence Khamenei's willingness to compromise over the nuclear issue is unclear. Iran has agreed to new talks with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, plus Germany. However, even though Khamenei may feel more confident about negotiations having "won" the parliamentary elections, he appears to have backed himself into a corner by constantly stressing Iran's "right" to nuclear capabilities that could give it the ability to make weapons, even as he denies that nuclear weapons are his goal. When combined with the cautious politics of a US presidential election year, the chance for progress toward a resolution of the crisis in the near future appears slight. The Obama administration, nevertheless, should put forward face-saving proposals that respect Iran's "rights" while constraining its ability to make nuclear bombs. The United States should refrain from military action—and convince Israel to abstain from striking Iran—since a war would have dire consequences for the global economy, US forces in the region, Israelis, and the Iranian people. The United States and its allies should seek other means, short of direct intervention, to help reopen Iran's political space so that eventually, Iranians can find a way to change their political system by themselves.

The Context

To say that Iran's political system is complex is an understatement. Designed by and for the leader of its 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, it is a bifurcated structure that gives ultimate power to a supreme religious

leader, endows a president with some of the formal functions of an executive, and grants varying amounts of leverage to veteran officials, appointed clerical bodies, and directly elected institutions and individuals.

Khamenei, a relatively weak figure chosen to succeed Khomeini in 1989, has gradually consolidated control of competing centers of power by purging opponents, emasculating advisory boards, and transforming elected institutions into docile and subservient entities overshadowed by the leader's office. Yet new divisions keep emerging within this shrinking elite.

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The Iranian theocracy has never been an indivisible polity. In the early 1980s, Islamic groups from across the political spectrum joined forces to expel liberals and other secular figures from the political arena. Once victorious, they quickly splintered into opposing currents, which eventually became known as conservatives and reformists. These two loosely defined groups characterized Iran's political landscape for the following two decades. With the systematic marginalization of reformists, however, the circle has further narrowed, and the regime is once again molting. New splits have emerged, pitting followers of Khamenei against those backing Ahmadinejad.

The March 2 parliamentary elections gave an overwhelming victory to Khamenei loyalists, but new splits are likely to emerge as Khamenei weighs whether to allow presidential elections to go forward as scheduled in 2013, or seeks to take advantage of his parliamentary majority to amend the constitution and introduce a system where the president would be elected by the parliament. If Khamenei were to die without consolidating his base, Iran could experience a succession crisis and new popular unrest.

² Scott Peterson, "High Turnout in Iran Elections Could End 'Paranoia' of Leaders," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 5, 2012 (www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2012/0305/High-turnout-in-iran-elections-could-end-paranoia-of-leaders).

A History of Expanding and Shrinking Electoral Legitimacy

Iranian leaders like to brag that there have been thirty elections in the history of the Islamic Republic, and that turnout has been as high as 85 percent of registered voters. These elections have provided a modicum of choice, especially when compared to neighboring authoritarian Arab regimes—at least until the Arab Spring of 2011 injected popular opinion as a factor in several states. Still, voting in Iran has never been entirely free, or fair.

Until 2009, Iran's clerical authorities controlled the outcome of elections primarily by weeding out candidates considered insufficiently loyal to the system of *velayat-e faqih*, the rule of the jurist. Some competition was permitted, which resulted in the upset election of Mohammad Khatami as president in 1997. Khatami defeated Khamenei's choice, a former speaker of the parliament. Khatami, a moderate intellectual cleric who favored more freedom at home and a less-confrontational relationship with the West, won again in 2001. But the pattern began to shift in the 2005 presidential elections and, to an even greater extent, in 2009.

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During this period the regime embarked on a gradual but systematic consolidation of conservative power. Relying on a coercive security apparatus, state resources, and appointed institutions, the Islamic regime went on the offensive against the reform movement and any other voice of dissent. Although the Iranian electoral system has always juxtaposed democratic rules with authoritarian tendencies, the system has moved in a distinctly authoritarian direction over the past eight years—a period that has also seen the Revolutionary Guards achieve increasing political power.

Where once manipulation largely occurred *before* elections—an appointed body, the Guardian Council, vets those seeking to run for office and eliminates most contenders—in 2005 there were credible reports of fraud in the first round of voting

that led to a runoff between Ahmadinejad, then a little-known appointed mayor of Tehran, and Rafsanjani. Mehdi Karroubi, a former speaker of the parliament and a veteran political figure, appeared to be running second to Rafsanjani in the first round, but Ahmadinejad was declared the runner-up and went on to defeat Rafsanjani in a second round, receiving 17 out of 24 million votes cast, according to the official count. "The whole concept of 'engineered elections' began in 2005," said Farideh Farhi, an expert on Iran's internal politics at the University of Hawaii. "That was when the question of fraud really emerged."³

The next presidential elections took vote-rigging to new levels and gravely undermined the residual legitimacy of the entire system. In the weeks and days running up to the June 12, 2009, vote, popular support had swelled behind the candidacy of Mir Hossein Mousavi, a respected former prime minister during the Iran-Iraq war. However, Ahmadinejad was declared the winner only a few hours after the polls closed, with 63 percent of the vote. Millions of Iranians took to the streets in protest and sporadic demonstrations continued for another eight months. These were eventually suppressed by brute force and arrests, including the detention of Mousavi and Karroubi, who had run again against Ahmadinejad.

Since 2009, Khamenei has systematically targeted reformists associated with Mousavi, Karroubi, and Khatami. He has also purged followers of Rafsanjani, stripping the former president of his remaining institutional levers as a Friday prayer leader in Tehran, chairman of the board of a collection of universities, and head of the Assembly of Experts—the elected clerical body that, under the constitution, is supposed to supervise the supreme leader and choose his successor. A key indicator that Khamenei recognizes the regime's shrinking legitimacy and seeks to ameliorate it came when he decided to allow Rafsanjani, seventy-seven, a "pillar of the revolution" who was once Khomeini's key lieutenant, to retain a final post as head of the Expediency Council, a body created to resolve disputes among government branches.

Bijan Khajepour, an analyst of Iran's economy and politics, said that Khamenei might allow Rafsanjani to remain in an effort to further marginalize Ahmadinejad and shore up the regime's base.⁴ Despite having endorsed Ahmadinejad's reelection as divinely blessed, Khamenei and his president soon had a falling-out, and by the spring of 2011 were openly

³ Telephone interview with Farideh Farhi, February 22, 2012.

⁴ Interview with Bijan Khajepour, March 6, 2012.

at odds. After successfully replacing several officials close to Khamenei, Ahmadinejad overreached and sought to fire the intelligence minister, Heydar Moslehi, in April 2011. Khamenei forced the president to reverse the firing, and unleashed a campaign against so-called deviationists close to Ahmadinejad said to be responsible for crimes ranging from sorcery to financial corruption.⁵

When combined with an ongoing campaign against the purported “secessionists”—the followers of Mousavi and Karroubi—Iranian politics have not been so bitterly divisive since the revolution’s early days. Ahmadinejad is likely to survive until his term ends in 2013, but increasingly he recalls an embattled predecessor—Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, the Islamic Republic’s first president, who was impeached in 1981 after he fought a losing battle with the clerical-led establishment over the choice of cabinet ministers, the conduct of the Iran-Iraq war, and the fate of the US hostages.

Like the current president, Bani-Sadr was a contentious character, “full of himself, convinced he was a genius and that the rest were fools,” said Shaul Bakhash, a professor of history at George Mason University and a former journalist who covered the Iranian revolution.⁶ Bani-Sadr failed to heed repeated warnings from Khomeini, resorted to an alliance with a soon-to-be purged militant leftist faction, the Mujahedin-e Khalq, and finally fled Iran concealed in the black cloak of a woman. Ahmadinejad is unlikely to meet the same fate and is more apt to go down fighting—even if that means he will drag more of the system down with him. What role he will play after he leaves office is unclear.

Elections for the Ninth *Majles*

The circumstances under which the 2012 elections for Iran’s parliament (or *majles*) were conducted were extraordinary in several respects. Unprecedented international sanctions coupled with economic mismanagement have severely impacted Iran’s anemic economy. Inflation stands at 20

percent (unofficial reports put it closer to 30 percent), unemployment is at 11 percent (much higher among youth), prices of basic staples have skyrocketed, and the Iranian currency has lost 40 percent of its value on the unofficial market in recent months. Saber-rattling by Israeli leaders and US Republican presidential candidates have frightened the Iranian people. Although the Islamic Republic has experienced economic malaise and external pressure in the past, for many young Iranians, the threat of war is new.

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At the same time, Iranians have been subjected to extreme internal pressure from the regime’s security apparatus. In the run-up to the parliamentary elections, Khamenei described the vote as a potential “security challenge,”⁷ and a means of countering the hostile designs of the United States. His protégé, Minister of Intelligence Moslehi, called the poll the “most sensitive elections in the history of the Islamic Republic.”⁸ The vote was carried out under a highly securitized environment designed to preempt any unrest. Whereas in the past the Iranian regime eased restrictions on social liberties and provided more space for public debate in the run-up to elections, this time it launched a campaign of intimidation.

At least ten journalists and bloggers were arrested ahead of the vote.⁹ Five were accused of working for the BBC Persian Network and charged with “gathering news and information, producing content in various formats, recruiting, training and preparing for the departure of Iran’s elite media workers from the country.”¹⁰ The systematic crackdown was not confined to civil society actors, journalists, and bloggers. In an unprecedented move, family members of journalists living

⁵ Barbara Slavin, “The Incredible Shrinking Ahmadinejad,” *Foreign Policy*, May 25, 2011 (www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2011/05/25/the_incredible_shrinking_ahmadinejad). Telephone interview with Shaul Bakhash, February 16, 2012.

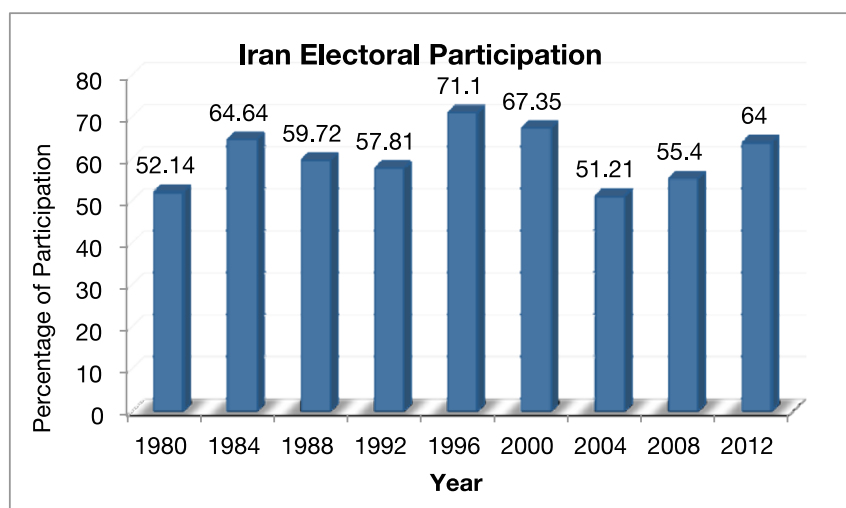
⁶ Telephone interview with Shaul Bakhash, February 16, 2012. ⁶ “Ayatollah Khamenei: Elections Should Not Become a Security Challenge,” Radio Farda, August 31, 2011 (www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_khamenei_fetr_eid_election_challenge/24313415.html) (in Persian).

⁷ “Ayatollah Khamenei: Elections Should Not Become a Security Challenge,” Radio Farda, August 31, 2011 (www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_khamenei_fetr_eid_election_challenge/24313415.html) (in Persian).

⁸ “Moslehi Warns that Upcoming Elections are the Most Sensitive Elections in the History of the Islamic Republic,” BBC Persian, November 23, 2011 (www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2011/11/111123_i10_moslehi_khamenei_majlis9th.shtml) (in Persian).

⁹ “Journalists Recently Arrested are Well Known Personalities,” Radio Farda, January 22, 2012 (www.radiofarda.com/content/f12_interview_on_recent_arrests_of_journalists_in_iran/24459259.html) (in Persian).

¹⁰ Amnesty International, “We Are Ordered to Crush You: Expanding Repression of Dissent in Iran,” February 28, 2012, p. 56 (www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/mde130022012en.pdf).



Source: Ministry of Interior, Government of Iran¹³

abroad, including BBC Persian employees, were harassed, questioned, and detained by the security and intelligence apparatus.¹¹ According to a recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are forty-two journalists in prison in Iran—more than in any other country.¹²

The government also initiated a clampdown on the Internet. Beginning in mid-February of 2012, Iranian authorities periodically closed access to social networking sites, international news sites, and e-mail providers such as Yahoo, Gmail, and MSN. In the same month, Reza Taghipour, Iran’s communications minister, announced that Iran would be launching a *hala* network (authorized national Internet) in May 2012.¹⁴ The intent is to disconnect the Iranian population from the World Wide Web and allow access only to internal websites. Although many question the feasibility of this, the Iranian regime is following a model pursued by other repressive regimes, such as China. Ironically, Iran was the first Muslim nation in the Middle East to be connected to the Internet in the early 1990s.¹⁵

It was in this environment that Iran’s byzantine political system geared up to elect a new parliament. The Iranian government

faced “the usual dilemma” of wanting a large turnout and to control the outcome at the same time, Bakhsh said.¹⁶

A Competition for Power, Not Ideology

Since his public rift with the supreme leader last year, Ahmadinejad and his lieutenants have come under unprecedented pressure. The president’s circle of associates, dubbed the “deviationist current,” stand accused of corruption and of holding anti-clerical views. Several of the president’s aides are under judicial investigation, some have been arrested, and a few were condemned to lengthy prison sentences.

Ahmadinejad sought to ensure his political survival by retaining a base of support in the next parliament. His team devised an array of tactics to increase their chances. For example, the president’s camp maintained a low profile in the big cities and fielded candidates from small constituencies. His government also timed the distribution of cash payments to lower-income families to tilt the balance in favor of Ahmadinejad’s allies.

¹¹ “BBC Condemns Pressure by the Iranian Regime on the Family Members of its Employees,” BBC Persian, February 2, 2012 (www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2012/02/120202_i10_bbcpersian_iran.shtml) (in Persian).

¹² Barbara Slavin, “Exclusive: New Human Rights Report Released on Iran,” Al-Monitor.com, March 7, 2012 (www.al-monitor.com/cms/contents/articles/opinion/2012/barbara-slavin/exclusive-new-human-rights-repor.html).

¹³ Ministry of Interior, Government of Iran (www.moi.ir/portal/File/ShowFile.aspx?ID=017447e1-bce3-4045-b0b9-c7d739f585f9).

¹⁴ “The Timeline for the Launch of National Internet,” Fararu, February 18, 2012 (www.fararu.com/vdcj8ievxuqeyyz.fsfu.html) (in Persian).

¹⁵ Christopher Rhoads and Farnaz Fassihi, “Iran Vows to Unplug Internet,” *The Wall Street Journal*, December 19, 2011 (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704889404576277391449002016.html>).

¹⁶ Telephone interview with Shaul Bakhsh, February 16, 2012.

However, Khamenei and the vast panoply of state institutions at his service countered Ahmadinejad's efforts. In the first round of screenings, provincial executive committees assembled by local governors—who are direct appointees of Ahmadinejad—rejected the credentials of the president's staunchest critics. But in the second, final round of vetting, conducted by the Guardian Council—which is dominated by Khamenei appointees—Ahmadinejad's foes were reinstated and his allies were disqualified. An official close to the Guardian Council told the Reuters news agency that the council was able to spot and weed out 45 percent of Ahmadinejad's supporters.¹⁷

At the same time, discord among Khamenei loyalists produced new factional fissures in a country where political parties do not exist in a Western sense, and politicians tend to group themselves loosely around well-known figures. Months of negotiations, attempts at persuasion, and even threats failed to create a single front among conservatives. In the end, they splintered into two main coalitions and several smaller groups. The contest was not focused on ideology, but rather on power and access to the country's economic spoils.

The first large group was the United Principlist Front, headed by Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, Chairman of the Assembly of Experts, and Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, who headed the judiciary from 1989 to 1999. It brought together an amalgam of so-called traditional conservatives with roots in the clerical establishment and the bazaar; technocratic veterans of the Iran-Iraq war; and hard-liners from the Revolutionary Guards and the intelligence apparatus. The United Principlist Front supported candidates in every constituency and a full list of thirty candidates in Tehran, headed jointly by former parliamentary speaker Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel and former deputy speaker Hojatolislam Mohammad-Hassan Aboutorabi-Fard.

The group's main rival was the equally opaque Steadfast Front. It consisted mostly of hard-liners who came to power after Ahmadinejad's first 2005 electoral victory and who were followers of an ambitious, messianic, ultraconservative cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, nicknamed Ayatollah Crocodile, who has since broken with Ahmadinejad. Members of this group included former Ahmadinejad cabinet minister Manouchehr Mottaki, foreign minister from 2005 until

the president sacked him in 2010. The group asserted that they were the true representatives of conservatism, as opposed to more-pragmatic figures such as Ali Larijani, speaker of the outgoing parliament, Tehran mayor Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, and Ali Mottahari, son of an important cleric in the 1979 revolution, and a harsh critic of Ahmadinejad. While the Steadfast Front and the United Principlist Front engaged in a fierce competition in Tehran, their candidate lists overlapped in other constituencies.

Smaller groups coalesced around other conservative personalities, such as Mottahari and the former commander of the Revolutionary Guards and presidential candidate, Mohsen Rezaei.

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Leading reformist groups and politicians initially refused to participate in the election. However, Khatami voted—despite having vowed not to unless the regime met a series of conditions, including the release of all political prisoners. Khajehpour said this was a sign that Khamenei may be considering reconciliation.¹⁸ Rafsanjani also voted, even while expressing doubt about the fairness of the process. Some second- and third-rank reformists also participated.

Khamenei's “Victory”

On Election Day, the Iranian regime brought to bear its three decades of electoral experience and prowess in social control. According to Iranian officials, 64 percent of eligible voters participated, and Khamenei loyalists won more than 70 percent of the 225 seats awarded in the first round. By orchestrating a grand electoral spectacle, the regime attempted to redeem itself from the 2009 debacle. Far from adhering to internationally recognized standards, the legislative elections resembled a public relations campaign designed to showcase the regime's legitimacy and popularity

¹⁷ Parisa Hafezi, “Ahmadinejad Seen Big Loser in Iran Election,” Reuters, Tehran, February 17, 2011 (www.reuters.com/article/2012/02/17/us-iran-politics-idUSTRE81G0MK20120217).

¹⁸ Interview with Bijan Khajehpour, March 6, 2012.

to the outside world. Domestically, the political establishment sought to send a strong message to its opponents, proving that it is in control and still enjoys the support of a broad base of the population. For a regime that traditionally hails high voter participation as the totem of its legitimacy, image is more important than reality. State media announced that the “epic” voter turnout was a glorious victory and a “great slap in the face of the West.”¹⁹

“Apart from the regime’s credibility, Ahmadinejad was clearly the biggest loser.”

However, Khajepour said real participation was lower than expected and also very fragmented, judging from the failure of more than five candidates in Tehran to get the requisite 25 percent of votes cast necessary in order to enter parliament without a runoff election. He noted that Khamenei did not appear immediately after the vote to herald the results; in addition, an opposition boycott had been largely effective, and conservatives were split among a dozen different electoral lists.²⁰

Foreign journalists permitted to cover the elections were bused to several prearranged sites and then confined to their hotels, and thus had difficulty judging the turnout independently. The authorities also kept the polls open five hours beyond the usual deadline in what appeared to be an effort to increase vote totals.²¹ Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad Najjar, the official in charge of administering the election, gave different participation figures “virtually every time he spoke publicly after the polls closed,” according to Farideh Farhi, the University of Hawaii expert.²²

Apart from the regime’s credibility, Ahmadinejad was clearly the biggest loser. Khamenei loyalists gained ground even in rural areas that had been considered Ahmadinejad strongholds. According to official results released by the Ministry of Interior, the United Principlist Front secured 43 percent of the 225 seats where victors could be declared, the Steadfast Front won 7 percent, and Ahmadinejad allies, only 2 percent. Independent candidates won 35 percent of the seats, but are likely to coalesce around the dominant faction once runoffs are held and the new 290-member parliament convenes.²³

Traditional conservatives also lost ground. Broadly considered a spent force, according to Hosein Ghazian, a visiting scholar at Syracuse University, some will likely be appointed by the leader to other government institutions.²⁴ Moderate conservatives such as Larijani and Mottahari also appear likely to lose their previous influence. Khamenei had accused them of passivity toward the “secessionists” in the aftermath of the 2009 elections, and of remaining too cozy with Rafsanjani. Haddad-Adel, a docile former speaker of parliament who is related to Khamenei by marriage, is likely to return to that office.

The showing of the president’s allies was sharply reduced from 2008, when they received about 25 percent of the seats.²⁵ On a personal level, the results were particularly embarrassing: Ahmadinejad’s sister lost her election bid in the family’s provincial hometown of Garmsar; his brother’s son-in-law also failed to secure enough votes; and other close friends faced crushing defeat. As a result, Ahmadinejad will likely share the fate of his predecessors and spend the remainder of his term as a truly lame duck. His Putinesque dream of enthroning an ally to succeed him—and then returning to power himself in 2017—has also proven to be a mirage.

¹⁹ “The Participation of Iranians is a Great Slap in the Face of the West,” Press TV, February 29, 2012 (www.presstv.ir/detail/fa/229247.html) (in Persian).

²⁰ Interview with Bijan Khajepour, March 6, 2012.

²¹ Scott Lucas, “Iran Special Analysis: The ‘Invented’ Election,” EAWorldView, March 3, 2012 (www.enduringamerica.com/home/2012/3/3/iran-special-analysis-the-invented-election.html).

²² Farideh Farhi, “The Tale of Iran’s ‘Critical’ Election,” Inter Press Service, March 7, 2012 (<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=106961>).

²³ Figures from the Iranian Ministry of Interior, in Farsi at (www.moi.ir).

²⁴ Telephone interview with Hosein Ghazian, March 3, 2012.

²⁵ Kaveh-Cyrus, Sanandaji, “The Eighth Majles Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran: A Division in Conservative Ranks and the Politics of Moderation,” *Iranian Studies*, September 2009, 42:4, p 621-648.

Outlook for the Future

Amid democratic uprisings that have swept the region in the past year, Iran's political system is going in the opposite direction. Taking a page from the Shah's playbook, Khamenei seems to be paving the way to create a "Yes Party" and a "Yes Sir Party" in a subservient parliament that bends to all of his whims. Having weakened the institution of the presidency, the leader may decide to eliminate the position altogether.

A less-divided house could increase the regime's self-confidence and allow it to return to nuclear negotiations with the appearance of doing so from a position of strength. If Khamenei considers the conditions right for a deal, it would be easier for him to give his consent with a lame-duck president and a submissive parliament.²⁶ Speaking six days after the elections, Khamenei offered rare praise for President Barack Obama, noting that the US leader had tamped down calls for war against Iran.²⁷

Some experts, including Mehrzad Boroujerdi, a professor of political science at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, argue that Khamenei has no intention of giving in to mounting pressures, and will use the new hard-line parliament as an excuse for refusing to compromise on the nuclear issue.²⁸ Alireza Nader, an Iran expert at the RAND Corporation, also doubts whether Khamenei can bend. "He's put himself in a corner," Nader said. "He talks about the principles of the Islamic Revolution constantly, making it hard for him to be flexible."²⁹

However, if there is one thing history has shown about Iran, it is that its politics are unpredictable. Khamenei will have to remain vigilant against new threats to his rule. He must be concerned about growing expressions of dissatisfaction within the Revolutionary Guards, whose financial interests have been hurt by economic sanctions. Never a monolith, the body includes many supporters of Mousavi and of Rafsanjani.

Succession also presents challenges to the regime. Rumored for many years to be suffering from cancer, Khamenei is reportedly grooming a former head of the judiciary, the Iraqi-born cleric Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, who

is currently the leader's representative in the Iraqi Shiite center of Najaf. However, the Revolutionary Guards may prefer a weaker figure, according to Mehdi Khalaji, an expert on Iranian clerical politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.³⁰ Khalaji noted that the Guards are "highly factionalized with different degrees of loyalty to the *velayat-e faqih*," and may have trouble coming to a consensus about a new supreme leader. It is also possible that a council will replace Khamenei, and many of his powers will pass to a new president or prime minister.

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Conclusion

Despite the regime-change fantasies of some American opponents of the Iranian government, responsibility for altering the system should and will almost certainly remain with the Iranian people. The United States can take several steps, however, to try to help open more political space in Iran, and at least avoid rallying Iranians around their repressive government:

- Provide free satellite access to the Internet for the Iranian population.
- Give more training to civil society actors through web-based programs.
- Increase access for Iranian students to education in the United States.
- Urge Iranian exiles to work together to try to influence developments in Iran rather than wasting their energies attacking each other.
- Negotiate seriously with the Iranian government over the nuclear question so that the onus for sanctions falls more on the regime than on the international community.

²⁶ Peterson, "High Turnout in Iran Elections Could End 'Paranoia' of Leaders."

²⁷ Farhad Pouladi, "Iran's Khamenei Hails Obama Caution on War," Agence France Press, March 8, 2012 (www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5gxiQd6GkuT-DcvuSbLMWPfba635w?docId=CNG.2d018c8049e2eb0be83385ae146b5403.71).

²⁸ Telephone interview with Mehrzad Boroujerdi, March 7, 2012.

²⁹ Telephone interview with Alireza Nader, February 22, 2012.

³⁰ Mehdi Khalaji spoke at the Washington Institute on February 13, 2012.

- Raise awareness of human rights abuses and seek to shame Iran for its wanton arrests and high rate of executions.
- Stop threatening to attack Iran, and convince Israel that starting a conflict with Iran will only push the Islamic Republic to develop nuclear weapons while destroying the chances for political reform for another generation.

Humility is in order when attempting to shape Iran's political future. US intervention in 1953—overthrowing a popular prime minister—brought the United States an ally for twenty-six years, but also created hostility that led to a regime that has been a US adversary for thirty-three years. As with physicians, the first rule for any American administration should be to first do no harm. Ultimately, a highly educated Iranian population will find a way to change the nature of the government that has brought them independence from foreign domination but at the price of political freedom, international reputation, and economic success.

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