



# BULLETIN

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## All the Supreme Leader's Men: Presidential Elections in Iran in 2013

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*This year, elections for the president of Iran probably will result in the success of a candidate who can guarantee full loyalty to the Supreme Leader. Ali Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard have real power in Iran, and due to that the new president will not be able to change for the better the economic and international situation of the country, including finding a solution to the nuclear issue. For these reasons, Iran is headed by illusionary stability in government with growing potential for anti-systemic rebellion. This suggests the need for a review of the West's strategy, which for the last few years has tended to ignore the importance of human rights' protection and support for internal changes in Iran. These issues should be a "specialty" of the new members of the EU.*

**Presidential Campaign.** The presidential elections in Iran on 14 June 2013 are a test of Iranian theocracy under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei (age 74), who is supported by the Shia clergy and the country's security apparatus. To avoid mass protests similar to the elections of 2009 ("Green Revolution"), this year's elections have been accompanied with unprecedented procedural manipulations. The Council of Guardians only allowed eight candidates (initially 686 persons wanted to be registered), and the majority of them are completely loyal to Khamenei, while others were dismissed due to their expected aspiration for greater autonomy in decision-making. Hashemi Rafsanjani (former speaker of parliament and president) as well Esfandiar Rahim Mashai (former chief of staff of the outgoing president) were excluded from the elections. These elections will mark the end of the two-term presidency (2005–2013) of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose cabinet after 2011 came into conflict with Khamenei. The Supreme Leader's intentions in the parliamentary elections of 2012 were to introduce this year's presidential elections and help neutralise the internal factionalism of the regime.

The shape and results of this year's campaign were dictated by Khamenei. In one of his speeches he suggested that having too many candidates should be avoided and that those who participate needed to be cautious in their campaign promises and that the future president needs to be adamantly against the "enemies of Iran." Among the candidates, only Mohammad Qalibaf (mayor of Tehran) and Hassan Rowhani (former head of the Supreme National Security Council) can count on the votes of Iranians interested in reforms of the regime. Their hopes for a higher activation of voters are based on the parallel elections for local authorities, usually less controlled by the Council of Guardians and the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Iran. As a low turnout and the voters' acquiescing to the will of Khamenei are expected, the potential winner could be Saeed Jalili (a former nuclear negotiator), Ali Akbar Velayati (former head of diplomacy and advisor to Khamenei) or Mohsen Rezaei (former head of the Revolutionary Guard). The democratic fiction of the campaign was supported by three television debates with all of the candidates, dedicated, respectively, to economy, social-cultural and foreign policy issues. The substance of these debates was almost fully agreed to be a critique of the economic policy of Ahmadinejad.

**Legitimacy and Stability of the Regime.** It is widely recognised that with the Revolutionary Guard's repression of the "Green" movement and the reformers' increased social apathy in Iran, the Guards' takeover of all levels of administration and control of the lucrative sectors of economy in Iran are intended to consolidate and conserve Khamenei's rule. This is seen by Khamenei as the price of avoidance of internal tensions resulting from the dualism of the religious and republican institutions in Iran after 1979. However, this direction of the regime's evolution may

result in a lack of internal pluralism and social legitimacy, two previous distinctions between Iran and the Arab dictatorships. Khamenei's adherence to anti-Western ideology as well as the importance of the clergy and security apparatuses are eliminating any chance for essential reforms in Iran.

The new president of Iran will face a fatal economic situation in the country. Presidential limits and appeals by Khamenei for a "resistance economy" may deepen the structural problems of the economy and the frustrations of Iranians, the majority of which do not remember the sacrifices and isolation during the war with Iraq. Many of the observable economic problems of Iran are the result of mismanagement, and international sanctions only enhance them. They are so serious that even Khamenei's loyalists confirm statistics about a decline in oil exports, foreign trade deficits, closures of factories, stagnation in privatisation as well as growing unemployment (officially at 17%) and Rial inflation (officially at 30%, in reality even 50%). When all of the internal factors are taken into account, it is reasonable to expect only the illusion of stability and growing potential for social discontent. These negative trends might also exaggerate Iran's problems with ethnic and sectarian minorities of Kurds, Arabs and Belochs in the country.

**Foreign Policy of Iran.** Khamenei also indicated his "red lines" for the international activities of the new president of Iran. These limitations are raising questions about the possibility of the end of the international isolation of Iran. For more than a decade, the main obstacle to the normalisation of relations between the U.S. and EU and Iran has been the progress in its nuclear programme. Multiple modified offers from the P5+1 group (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) for wide assistance in the civilian nuclear programme of Iran in return for transparency are not satisfactory to the regime. Iran's programme of producing and enriching uranium is unstoppable. Iran is estimated to now have 8,960 kg of low-enriched uranium, which after further conversion might be used to construct 7–8 simple nuclear warheads. Until now, Iran has not renewed work on warhead construction, halted in 2003. However, Iran has the know-how to do it, as well knowledge on the adaptation of ballistic missiles to deliver nuclear warheads. It is also expected that Iran in the second half of 2014 will start its heavy water reactor in Arak, which might produce plutonium, i.e., mastering the "second path" to a nuclear arsenal (along with the current production of uranium). All these might add pressure on the Israeli government with a perceived existential threat from Iran and the need for eventual preventive air strikes.

Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guard want to preserve the regional influence of Iran. Since the start of the "Arab Spring" and outbreak of the civil war in Syria, Iran is perceived by Arabs through a prism of sectarian division and support for Shia minorities in the Middle East. Even with all the pluses and minuses of modern Turkey, Iran is not capable of an effective rivalry with it for influence among Arab countries dominated by Sunnis. The latest decisions by the Arab League and Gulf Cooperation Council to condemn Iranian involvement in Syria and declaring Hezbollah a terrorist group are only another illustration of Sunni–Shia and Persian–Arab divisions. Closely linking the great-power agenda of Iran with its support of radical and pro-Iranian Shias may also result in stronger negative reactions from moderate ayatollahs in the Shia centres of Iraq.

**Conclusion and Recommendations.** Khamenei's purpose is to finish Ahmadinejad's presidency and the long period of Iranian politicians who tried to achieve autonomy from the clergy. It might be assumed that the winner of these elections will be one of the candidates who is totally loyal to the Supreme Leader, most likely Jalili or Velayati. A lack of credible polls makes it impossible to predict if this will happen in the first or second round of the elections. In case the younger population in big Iranian cities are mobilised, much higher support is probable for Rowhani or Qalibaf. But even if one of these men are permitted to be president, it is unrealistic to expect their campaign goals to be adopted or for serious changes in the domestic and foreign policy of Iran.

The real power of Khamenei, the other ayatollahs and the Revolutionary Guard will prevent the influence of the new president on the security policy of Iran. Although Jalili and Velayati have experience in diplomacy, both share Khamenei's nuclear ambitions and hostility towards the U.S. and Israel. From their statements it seems that they are in favour of negotiations with the P5+1 only on inflexible Iranian terms. This approach will result in Iran playing further for time, excluding chances for mutual compromise and full transparency in its nuclear programme. This development might push Israel into preventive action against Iran or cause further re-evaluation of the current U.S. strategy to offer dialogue or the threat of more sanctions.

The internal and international problems of Iran will in the long term foster a de-legitimisation of the regime among Iranians and growth in the potential for anti-systemic revolt. A centralisation of power around Khamenei may also cause a fierce struggle for the shape and result of succession after his death. Paradoxically, contrary to efforts to consolidate the regime in the next few years it may be even more weak and unstable. In such a context, issues of human rights, democratisation and liberalisation of the country should be elevated as a priority in the relations between the EU and Iran. These issues should be considered a "specialty" of the Central and North European countries which are not directly engaged in the P5+1 nuclear negotiations with Iran. Possible European aid for democratic activists in Iran should be planned and implemented according to the "above all do no harm" rule.