



CARPO

Center for Applied Research
in Partnership with the Orient

02

REPORT

25.02.2016

Iran Votes

A Primer on the Elections
of Parliament and the
Assembly of Experts

by Adnan Tabatabai

Table of Contents

The Current Political Climate	03
The 26 February 2016 Vote	05
The Main Contenders	07
What the Political Elite Want	09
What the Electorate Want	16
Key Parameters/Recommendations	17

The dual elections for Parliament and the Assembly of Experts on 26 February 2016 have raised the stakes in the Islamic Republic of Iran. President Hassan Rouhani's aim to be elected for a second term in 2017 will depend on the interplay between parliament and government in the upcoming 16 months. Senior officials hold lively elections in high regard, but are at the same time concerned about intensified internal rivalries and foreign interference. Of particular importance is the newly elected Assembly of Experts, as it is likely to determine the succession of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This process will bear long-term ramifications for the future of the country's political system. The competition over the interpretational sovereignty of the Islamic Republic will further intensify between the factions and senior figures. For the electorate, the key topics of the 2013 presidential elections still remain: voters demand better socioeconomic conditions, more civil liberties and improved foreign relations. The electoral results of the 26 February 2016 vote will not provide clear and immediate answers. Rather, the future months of parliamentary interaction with the government and the limited adjustments within the Assembly of Experts will shed light on what these dual elections ultimately yield.

The Current Political Climate

In the aftermath of the nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1,¹ and in the immediate run-up to the dual elections for Parliament and the Assembly of Experts, political competition between rival factions in Iran has exacerbated. Envisaging the 26 February 2016 vote, far-right elements of the conservative Principlist camp (*jelah-e osulgera*) are anxious about a potential popularity boost of the Moderates (*jelah-e e'tedaliyoun*) and the Reformist camps (*jelah-e eslahtalab*), both supporters of President Hassan Rouhani. At the same time, the Rouhani government seeks to turn its foreign policy success into domestic capital. Consequently, Rouhani-friendly candidates aspire to gain a majority in Parliament and the Assembly of Experts.²

Stakes are high: the newly elected Assembly of Experts will likely have to appoint the successor of 76 year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. As well, the new Parliament will have a critical impact on President Rouhani's

¹ The P5+1 group of states is constituted by the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (USA, UK, France, Russia, China) and Germany.

² In reference to the first electoral victory in the 2013 presidential elections, they now speak about 'the second step' or *gam-e dovvom* in the 2016 elections.

presidency and his bid to be reelected in the 2017 presidential elections. The economy of the country is in dire need of managerial development, foreign direct investment and improved international relations. How far these international relations should progress and how much Iran's economy can and should be self-reliant are heatedly debated questions, which will have to be addressed in the new Parliament.

However, while these issues are of undeniable importance, a more essential dimension is underlying all the above: The competition over who holds the interpretational sovereignty of the Islamic Republic. In recent years, this question has climaxed in differing viewpoints about how Islamic (i.e. theocratic) or republican (i.e. democratic) the country should be governed.³

The pendulum between the republican and theocratic nature of the system has been swinging back and forth ever since the foundation of the Islamic Republic. The current administration of President Hassan Rouhani – who is backed by reform-leaning former presidents Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami – has been putting an emphasis on democratic features of the system. However, a strong pushback by theocrats in the judiciary and security apparatus has led to setbacks in that process.

The dual elections on 26 February may strengthen either school of thought. Therefore, in addition to short- and mid-term policy fields such as the economy, cultural policies and international relations, a parliamentary majority can shape the long-term future of the system through legislation in support of either the republican or theocratic currents. By the same token, a new balance of power in the Assembly of Experts can lay the fundament for a leadership which increases the authority of theocratic elements or empowers democratically elected institutions of the system.

Bearing these long-term calculations in mind helps to make better sense of the rationale behind the intensified internal power struggle and the overall anxiety towards the 2016 elections.

3 For a conceptual overview of competing schools of thought in the Islamic Republic of Iran see: International Crisis Group: Iran After the Nuclear Deal, Crisis Group Middle East Report No. 166, Brussels 15/12/2015, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/iraq-iran-gulf/iran/166-iran-after-the-nuclear-deal.aspx> (21/02/2016).

The 26 February 2016 Vote

For the 10th Parliament

The tenth round of parliamentary elections will feature a race of some 6,200 candidates for 290 available seats. A reallocation of the Parliament has already been prevented after almost half of the 12,000 registered candidates were disqualified by the Guardian Council.⁴ However, when observing the general political conduct of members of parliament (MPs) in Iran, it can be argued that as much as allocation matters, so does the overall political climate. If viewed as expedient, Principlist MPs may raise topics you would expect to be raised by Reformists, and vice versa.

Additionally, Iran's parliament has limited significance when viewed as an isolated entity. What is significant, however, is its interaction with the executive branch along four parliamentary functions: elective, legislative, control and communicative.

Through its *elective function*, the Parliament has the mandate to approve or reject ministers nominated by the President. It can, therefore, shape certain parts of the executive branch. It will seek to more actively do so if it operates as an opposition force to the government. A Rouhani-friendly Parliament, in contrast, will refrain from impeachments and votes of no confidence. Based on its *legislative function*, the Parliament can make life easier or more challenging for the government. Particularly domestic affairs such as economic, cultural, infrastructural or educational policies can be backed or thwarted by legislation. Hence, the interaction of the executive and legislative branch in lawmaking determines the pace of the government's work.

The Parliament's *control function* enables lawmakers to acquire information from the government and summon cabinet members to Parliament for interpellations. Depending on the minister's performance, interpellations can lead to 'yellow cards' or impeachments. Even the president can be challenged through this mechanism. The more critical the Parliament of the government, the more control measures will be adopted. Similarly important are plenary debates in Parliament, which are broadcasted live. Here the Parliament's *communication function* comes into play. The overall discourse and rhetoric conducted by MPs affect the overall political climate and can therefore pave the way for government policies or mobilize pushback.

⁴ The Guardian Council is constitutionally mandated with vetting candidates running for presidency, parliament and the Assembly of Experts.

For the 5th Assembly of Experts

The Assembly of Experts is constitutionally mandated to elect, supervise, and dismiss the Supreme Leader (or Guardian Jurist). Its 88 members are elected through a direct vote from 31 provinces for an eight-year term. In its fifth electoral round, only 161 out of 801 registered candidates were qualified by the Guardian Council, which means that in some provinces the number of candidates will exactly match the number of available seats.

Given the age of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, it is likely that in its fifth term, the Assembly of Experts will have to determine the future of the Islamic Republic's leadership. To do so, the Assembly will have to address both a 'personal' and a 'systemic question'.

With regards to the 'personal question', the Assembly must examine whether it can nominate a clerical figure with adequate authority among the clerical, political and security establishment in order to be elevated into the position of the Supreme Leader. If it manages to agree on one figure, it will have to decide whether that person should be endorsed and elevated into this position by the current Supreme Leader himself – thereby transferring his authority to the successor – or whether the successor is only named after Ayatollah Khamenei steps down as the leader (due to age or health issues) or passes away.

If it cannot agree on a candidate, the Assembly will have to address the 'systemic question' in which it has to decide whether or not the post of the Supreme Leader should be replaced with a 'Leadership Council'. The Assembly would then need to determine whether this council should consist of three, four or five (or more, or less) members and how it will interact with other relevant decision-making bodies of the system. It is often argued that a Leadership Council may diffuse the centrality of power and therefore be in favor of those seeking a more open political system. It should be borne in mind, however, that such a council could potentially further weaken the competencies of the executive and legislative branches and further strengthen top-down structures.

These issues are highly sensitive and rarely discussed in public. Substantive insights on the current dynamics within the Assembly are hard to gain. The high level of disqualifications suggests that stakes are high and decisive years ahead. Thanks to the vetting process, the 26 February 2016 vote will not bring meaningful changes to the composition of the Assembly. It will therefore only be seen in future months and years how the Assembly will address the above-mentioned 'personal' and 'systemic' questions.

The Main Contenders

In Parliament

The main figures in the Parliamentary Elections will be Reformist candidate and 2013 presidential contender Mohammad Reza Aref and Principlist candidate and former Speaker of Parliament Gholam Ali Haddad Adel. Both are the leaders of the most prominent electoral lists in Tehran province.⁵

The list (*fehrest*) headed by Aref is formed by a coalition⁶ of Reformist parties which has managed to embrace the Moderates camp⁷ and well-known Principlists – including Ali Motahari who is known for his scathing criticism of the violation of civil rights and lack of political freedom. This Reformist electoral list has openly expressed its support for the Rouhani administration and is endorsed by former Reformist president Mohammad Khatami. Out of the 30 candidates on the Tehran list, eight are female.

The Principlist Coalition, led by Haddad Adel, unites members of the six main Principlist parties with far-right and center-right groups. Twelve members of this 30-member list are affiliated with the Endurance Front – a very radical Principlist party, whose members have been fierce opponents of the Rouhani administration. Also on the list are senior Principlist MPs such as Ahmad Tavakkoli, Yahya Al-e Eshaq and Deputy Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Hassan Aboutorabifard. Out of 30 candidates on the Tehran list, six are female.

As electoral lists for the Tehran province, these two political formations can play a significant role in national politics. While the Reformist coalition is composed of government supporters only, the Principlist coalition features both supporters and opponents of the Rouhani administration. But it would be wrong to assume that the current government would necessarily be much better off with an electoral victory of the Reformist coalition. Members of this coalition, while supporting the government's economic and foreign policy approach, may criticize the government over the broken electoral promise for more sociopolitical and cultural freedoms. Given the resistance of conservative authorities in the judiciary, all cultural and social policies are going to remain the most difficult to address.

Candidates from other provinces are far less prominent on the national level. Hence, they are less influenced by and less influential on national politics.

⁵ Electoral lists for Tehran are of particular importance because Tehran province is by far the most politicized constituency.

⁶ Known as the 'Pervasive Coalition of Reformists' or the 'List of Hope': www.listeomid.org.

⁷ Main Moderates Party: 'Moderation and Development Party' headed by government spokesperson Mohammad Baqer Nobakht.

Furthermore, their party affiliations merely translate into specific political positions, as these candidates focus on regional and local issues they seek to address. Provincial candidates will therefore seek functional cooperation with the executive branch in order to ensure investment and development projects in their respective constituency. These arguably non-partisan MPs constitute the vast majority of the Parliament and will adjust their conduct toward the government and overall affairs to the prevalent political climate rather than to party politics.

Although most disqualified candidates were Reformists, others were also barred from running. Sitting Principlist MP Hamid Rasaei – probably the most prominent and outspoken member of the far-right Endurance Front – was also disqualified. Known mainly for his spectacular outbursts against the Rouhani government, he also openly criticized Parliamentary Speaker Ali Larijani over how he handled parliamentary affairs, thus damaging his reputation further.

In the Assembly of Experts

Of the 161 approved candidates of the 26 February 2016 elections, 88 are sitting candidates. Changes in this Assembly will, hence, be marginal. The Assembly is strongly dominated by archconservative clerics such as its Chairman Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, Friday Prayer Imam Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami, Chairman of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati and hard-line cleric Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi. Currently, the most influential moderate clerics in the Assembly are Chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, President Hassan Rouhani and Ayatollah Mohammad Ali Dastgheib (who has been disqualified for the 26 February 2016 vote). For the 16 available seats from Tehran, Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Hassan Rouhani have presented a list of close affiliates. This list, which is also endorsed by former president Mohammad Khatami, has coordinated its electoral campaign with the parliamentary Reformist Coalition and its list for the 10th parliamentary elections. Candidates and supporters of both lists urge voters to include all enlisted candidates in their ballots for the respective institutions. While affiliations of the parliamentary Principlist coalition to like-minded contenders of the Assembly of Experts exist, no official coordination has taken shape. In Tehran province – the main theater of the elections – voters can choose 30 candidates for Parliament and 16 for the Assembly of Experts. In other provinces, the number of seats is proportionately less.

Among those disqualified for the Assembly of Experts elections was Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The 43-year old cleric is seen as a protégé of Ayatollah

Hashemi-Rafsanjani and viewed as a potential future power center himself – given he enters the political sphere. If Hassan Khomeini had entered the Assembly, the moderate wing of the Assembly of Experts would have been strengthened.⁸ Alongside Hassan Khomeini, his father-in-law, renowned reform-minded cleric Ayatollah Mousavi Bojnourdi, was also barred from candidacy by the Guardian Council. He, too, would have joined the moderate wing.

Given that the fifth Assembly of Experts will likely decide the successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, the stakes were too high for Guardian Council officials to allow new faces to enter, even though many candidates fulfilled the qualification criteria.⁹ Only exceptional peaks and lows in the share of votes of elected candidates may slightly shift some of the dynamics in the Assembly. Beyond that, no changes can be expected.

What the Political Elite Want

The discourse in Iran's political elite is shaped mainly by a few senior officials who hold key posts in the system. Their remarks, albeit often divergent, set the overall interpretational framework for current affairs on the state level. To grasp their expectations and hopes for the 26 February 2016 elections, it is therefore worthwhile to examine related views expressed by the following key personalities.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

As long as he has been in office, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has held broad voter participation in high regard and emphasized the value of electoral processes in the Islamic Republic.¹⁰ "Elections really are a huge blessing",¹¹ he told the country's Friday Prayer Imams in a meeting on 4 January 2016. As he did in the run-up to the 2013 presidential elections, Ayatollah

⁸ Polls suggested Hassan Khomeini would have gained 60%+ of the votes in Tehran.

⁹ Hassan Khomeini's religious qualifications as *mujtahid* can be verified through his bibliography, recordings of his *Ikhraj* teachings, as well as by the endorsements of senior clerical figures such as Grand Ayatollahs Javadi Amoli and Vahid Khorasani. Khomeini, however, did not attend an exam candidates were requested to take after registration. His qualification was, hence, formally rejected.

¹⁰ See composition of Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks during past 20 years in which he encouraged high turnout in elections: <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=4141> (22/02/2016).

¹¹ Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Friday Prayer Imams, 04/01/2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=31847> (23/02/2016).

Khamenei invited even those who do not approve of the Islamic Republic or of him as the Supreme Leader to the 26 February 2016 vote.¹² Influential conservative cleric Ayatollah Makarem-Shirazi echoed this notion and stressed that people should vote if they cared about their country.¹³ However, Ayatollah Khamenei also made clear on 20 January 2016 that this freedom of conscience did not apply to candidates running for Parliament or the Assembly of Experts, who should by all means be supporters of the system.¹⁴

At the same time, Khamenei is concerned about intensified political rivalry and prolonged electoral campaigning. On numerous occasions, he has criticized officials for neglecting urgent affairs because of early preoccupation with elections.¹⁵ Similarly, the Supreme Leader often warns of plots by ‘the enemy’,¹⁶ which seek to divide the Iranian nation, and stresses that high voter turnout leads to the “frustration of the enemy”¹⁷ because it strengthens the country’s dignity.

In essence, Supreme Leader Khamenei hopes to see two outcomes from the elections: a high voter turnout (above 60 %) followed by a calm political climate. With regards to policy fields, Khamenei places emphasis on the economy of the country and has urged officials numerous times to take economic hardship off shoulders of the people.¹⁸ Not in any public appearance has he hinted at which faction he would like to see victorious. On the basis of his recent remarks, it is fair to argue that this is not of great relevance for him as long as these elections keep the political system (*nezam*) intact.

¹² See: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with People of Qom, 09/01/2016, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=31906> (23/02/2016).

¹³ See: “Recommendations for the Elections by Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi”, Tabnak, 17/02/2016, <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/print/568676> (24/02/2016).

¹⁴ See: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Operators of the Elections, 20/01/2016, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32040> (23/02/2016).

¹⁵ See: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Members of Parliament, 27/05/2015, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=29853> (23/02/2016) and Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Different Strata of Society, 09/09/2015, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=30716> (23/02/2016).

¹⁶ In general, the term ‘enemy’ is used in reference to the USA, UK or ‘the Zionists’ (i.e. Israel).

¹⁷ Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Air Force and Air Defense Commanders, 08/02/2016, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32222> (24/02/2016).

¹⁸ See: Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Meeting with Air Force and Air Defense Commanders, 08/02/2016, <http://farsi.Khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32222> (23/02/2016).

President Hassan Rouhani

In contrast to the Supreme Leader, President Hassan Rouhani holds the view that elections gain meaning in proportion to their competitiveness.¹⁹ He has therefore strongly criticized the disqualification of candidates. On 21 January 2016, during one of his boldest speeches since taking office, he lashed out at the vetting process by the Guardian Council, stating there was no need for elections if only one faction represented in Parliament.²⁰ With the confidence gained through the success of the nuclear agreement and the beginning of its implementation on 16 January 2016,²¹ the President is able to publicly profess the view that a healthy competitive climate and high voter turnout will make electoral success of government-leaning candidates more likely. This confidence allows Rouhani to be 'trustful' of voters and emphasize their role as "the main decision-makers" in the country's affairs.²²

While on the one hand capitalizing on the nuclear agreement for the dual elections, President Rouhani on the other hand tries to play down this link and shares the view that elections and the nuclear agreement are "two separate issues".²³ He highlights that the government seeks no partisan approach in the run-up to the elections.²⁴ Rouhani also urges the 54 million eligible voters to come to the ballot box, and stresses that the country's prestige and dignity is bound to high voter participation.²⁵

With regards to the Parliament, the President undoubtedly hopes that the ballot box will produce a government-leaning majority. This does not mean, however, that Hassan Rouhani wants Reformists to secure that majority. As much as archconservative factions have been and will criticize the government for its outreach to the West or its lax cultural policies, the Reformists too will challenge the President on failed policies on the domestic scene – particularly

19 See: Hassan Rouhani, Meeting with Governors, 30/05/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/87403> (24/02/2016) and Hassan Rouhani, Meeting with National and International Journalists, 29/08/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/89001> (24/02/2016).

20 See: Hassan Rouhani, Gathering with Governors, Local Politicians and Electoral Officials, 21/01/2016, <http://president.ir/fa/91397> (24/02/2016).

21 See: Implementation Day of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has been reached, European Union External Action Service, 16/01/2016, http://eeas.europa.eu/top_stories/2016/150116_implementation_day_en.htm (24/02/2016).

22 Hassan Rouhani, Meeting with Electoral Staff of Interior Ministry, 21/12/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/90946> (24/02/2016).

23 Hassan Rouhani, Interview with Italian TV Channel, 13/11/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/90480> (24/02/2016).

24 See: Hassan Rouhani, Cabinet Meeting, 18/11/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/90523> (24/02/2016) and Hassan Rouhani, Gathering with Academics at Sharif University, 07/12/2015, <http://president.ir/fa/90818> (24/02/2016).

25 See: Hassan Rouhani, Anniversary of the Revolution Rally, 11/02/2016, <http://president.ir/fa/91939> (24/02/2016).

with regards to citizen rights and political opening. Therefore, Hassan Rouhani will hope to see a majority share of seats for moderate Principlists and conservative Reformists.

As a sitting candidate of the Assembly of Experts, Hassan Rouhani seeks to be reelected into this body. In this capacity he aspires to have his share in determining the leadership of the Islamic Republic. In reference to what has been discussed above, Rouhani seeks to strengthen the republican nature of the system and, therefore, hopes to see more similar-minded figures in the Assembly of Experts. Such a new dynamism in the Assembly, however, is unlikely to materialize.

Speaker of Parliament Ali Larijani

Known as a pragmatist Principlist, Ali Larijani rarely introduces personally favored policies. Rather, he echoes what he believes is expedient given the overall political climate and the views of the Supreme Leader. But Larijani can also be viewed as an important figure in trying to tame some of the most hardline Principlist members of Parliament by moderating heated plenary debates in a reasonable and conciliatory fashion.

His remarks in the run-up to the elections have mainly focused on the need to abstain from decrying rivals and creating divisions, as a prerequisite for healthy elections that affirm the dignity of the nation.²⁶ For some years, Larijani has been expressing regret over the lack of strong political parties in Iran, and has, therefore, encouraged parties to get organized and nominate candidates for the elections.²⁷ Larijani recently questioned the validity of the divide between Principlists and Reformists, and underlined that both had their place in Parliament alongside the Moderates camp.²⁸ Even though Larijani is well known as a Principlist figure, a certain weariness of radical elements among his own Principlist ranks could be observed in his behavior. This is why some believed Larijani would seek to align himself with Reformist elements in Parliament and join their electoral list.

²⁶ See: "The Strategy of the Elections Must Be 'haqq on-nas'", ICANA, 31/05/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/278342> (24/02/2016); "No One Should be Discredited in Elections", ICANA, 28/09/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/285288> (24/02/2016) and "Some Countries Act Against Spirit of JCPOA", ICANA, 27/12/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/291066> (24/02/2016).

²⁷ See: "Our View Towards the Ummah is Strategic", ICANA, 12/10/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/286296> (24/02/2016).

²⁸ See: "Cooperation with the Current Government More Based on Law", ICANA, 01/12/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/289447> (24/02/2016).

While Larijani himself did not join Reformists, Kazem Jalali, the influential leader of the majority Principlist faction in Parliament, whom Larijani had convinced to seek another term in Parliament,²⁹ did indeed join the electoral list of the coalition of Reformists.

Ali Larijani's overall strategy – apart from being reelected as an MP and Speaker of Parliament – can be viewed as seeking the de-radicalization of the Parliament and improving the interplay between the executive and legislative branches.

Chief of the Judiciary Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani

Remarks by Ayatollah Sadeq Larijani are indicators of the overall political climate; i.e. a climate which goes beyond written law and postulates political behavior. Like other senior officials, Ayatollah Larijani praises the track record of numerous elections.³⁰ He, too, highlights the value of the “presence of the people” as fundamental for the system.³¹ But he also stresses the necessity to not allow “suspicious people” into the electoral race,³² and therefore praises the work of the Guardian Council and warns that criticism against it is a plot by ‘the enemy’.³³ Resonating the views of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Larijani voices concerns over polarizing society during electoral campaigning.³⁴

His remarks show that while electoral processes are viewed as indispensable and high voter-turnout as beneficial to the system, political competition should be narrowed and ‘top-down control’ of electoral processes – primarily through the Guardian Council – be maintained in order to avoid tensions.

Chairman of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati

The role of the Guardian Council in vetting electoral candidates was openly criticized by President Hassan Rouhani and other senior officials. As shown

²⁹ See: “The Speaker of Parliament Has Asked Kazem Jalali to Participate in 10th Parliamentary Elections”, ICANA, 25/12/2015, <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/News/290909> (24/02/2016).

³⁰ See: “The Judiciary Chief in Meeting with Senior Judicial Officials”, Dadiran, 24/08/2015, <http://dadiran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=2351&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=77996> (24/02/2016).

³¹ See: “The Judiciary Chief in Ceremony to Revive the Principles of Imam [Khomeini]”, Dadiran, 09/02/2016, <http://dadiran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=2351&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=78780> (24/02/2016).

³² See: “The Judiciary Chief: It is Impossible That the Guardian Council Approves Candidates for Parliament Who Are Suspicious or Not Qualified”, Dadiran, 09/11/2015, <http://dadiran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=2351&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=78325> (24/02/2016).

³³ See: “The Judiciary Chief in Meeting with Senior Judicial Officials”, Dadiran, 14/09/2015, <http://dadiran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=2351&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=78093> (24/02/2016).

³⁴ See: “The Judiciary Chief in Meeting with Senior Judicial Officials”, Dadiran, 21/12/2015, <http://dadiran.ir/Default.aspx?tabid=2351&articleType=ArticleView&articleId=78514> (24/02/2016).

above, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Larijani deemed it necessary to back the role of the Guardian Council as the 'electoral watchdog'. Its chairman, archconservative cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, himself defended the very strict filtering of candidates.

In his public appearances, Ayatollah Jannati said some candidates for the Assembly disrespected the Supreme Leader,³⁵ and had therefore been barred from running. He warned that the "sedition"³⁶ must not be forgotten and that some intend to "take over" the Parliament.³⁷ Against the backdrop of the particularly high margin of disqualifications for Assembly of Experts candidates, Ayatollah Jannati clarified that the Guardian Council will not allow those who seek to enter the Assembly at any cost and do not qualify as righteous (*saleh*), *mujtahid*, just (*adel*), and as believers in the Rule of the Guardianship of the Jurist (*velayat-e faqih*).³⁸

While for critics this vetting process undermines meaningful democratic representation, the former spokesman of the Guardian Council Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei holds that filtering candidates was part of protecting '*haqq-on nas*' (the people's right).³⁹ According to this logic, vetting ensures only thoroughly qualified representatives are allowed to run. Throughout past elections, the vetting process has been subject to heated debate, which will undoubtedly appear again whenever elections are approaching.

Chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani

The Expediency Council (a 30 to 40 member body appointed by the Supreme Leader) functions as a permanent investigation committee, resolving differences between Parliament and the Guardian Council over draft bills, and advises the Supreme Leader on important affairs.

Its Chairman Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani undoubtedly is a key point of contention in Iranian politics. While the Moderates and Reformist camps believe

³⁵ See: "Ayatollah Jannati: Some Who Are Active in Assembly of Experts Elections Do Not Have the Eyes [verbatim] to See the Supreme Leader", Raja News, 19/05/2015, <http://www.rajanews.com/news/211913> (22/02/2016).

³⁶ The term "sedition" (*fetneh*) is used in reference to the post-election protests and claims of electoral fraud in the 2009 presidential elections.

³⁷ See: "Remarks Made by an Official about Taking Over the Future Parliament Means Interference in the Elections", Fars News, 30/05/2015, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13940309000525> (22/02/2016).

³⁸ See: "Some Seek to Enter the Assembly of Experts to Create Problems for the System", Hoshdar News, 14/08/2015, <http://www.hoshdarnews.ir/detail/News/24844> (23/02/2016).

³⁹ See: "Upheaval Against haqq on-nas", Fars News, 07/01/2016, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13941017000484> (22/02/2016).

in his ability to steer the Islamic Republic in a more republican direction, the far-right Principlists detest Hashemi-Rafsanjani's economic power, his pragmatist rather than ideological conduct regarding the future of the system, and his openness to improved relations with the West and even the United States.

In his public remarks about the elections, Hashemi-Rafsanjani emphasized his trust in the people and their electoral choices,⁴⁰ and holds the view that high turnout and vivid elections were the best way to thwart any attempt of 'infiltration' (*nofooz*) by external actors.⁴¹ On numerous occasions, he has encouraged women to play a bigger role and "not be afraid" to register as candidates for the elections.⁴² Like Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani believes the lack of a solid party structure is a weakness of the system and a major reason why radicals go too far too often and cannot be controlled by their parties.⁴³ When encouraging high voter turnout, Hashemi-Rafsanjani suggested people should adopt a national approach in order to embrace all existent views in Iran's society and in this way strengthen Iran's international prestige.⁴⁴

The public statements made by Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani are characterized by the conviction that the less restrictive electoral processes in Iran are, the more candidates and parties close to him will secure votes. His trust in the people's vote is coherent with his general tendency to strengthen the republican nature of the Islamic Republic as a political system, which he, by all means, aspires to protect. This systemic aspiration is despised by hard-line elements of the Principlist camp, which is why political figures and parties affiliated with Hashemi-Rafsanjani face restrictions from the Guardian Council and its archconservative Chairman.

40 See: "The Chairman of the Expediency Council: People Should Finish the Job in the Elections", Azad News Agency, 13/12/2015, <http://www.ana.ir/news/71445> (24/02/2016).

41 See: "Which Candidate's Approval Was Against haqq on-Nas?", HashemiRafsanjani.ir, 06/01/2016, <http://tinyurl.com/hr5u37s> (24/02/2016).

42 See: "Electoral Recommendations by Hashemi for Women", HashemiRafsanjani.ir, 07/06/2015, <http://tinyurl.com/hbpppa4> (24/02/2016); "Women Should Not be Afraid to Become Candidates", HashemiRafsanjani.ir, 29/10/2015, <http://tinyurl.com/haeq5yc> (24/02/2016) and "Iranian Women are Tired of the Barriers of Radicals", ILNA, 08/12/2015, <http://tinyurl.com/j6efgjs> (24/02/2016).

43 See: "Radical Groups Instrumentalize Parliament for Their Faction", Entekhab, 08/08/2015, <http://tinyurl.com/gsx-yxqe> (24/02/2016).

44 "All People Should Participate in Elections with a National Approach", IRNA, 31/12/2015, <http://www.irna.ir/fa/News/81901046/> (24/02/2016).

What the Electorate Want

Hopes and expectations of voters are by and large the same as in the 2013 presidential elections. The first and most urgent demand is improved economic living conditions. The benefits of the nuclear agreement and the lifting of sanctions are yet to be felt in the pocket of the ordinary Iranian citizen. There is an undeniable rise of hope and confidence among people about the short- and mid-term future in this regard. And yet, envisaging presidential elections in 2017, the Rouhani administration must put tremendous effort into alleviating economic grievances. A government-friendly parliament can be helpful and facilitate this process through suitable legislation. The vast majority of MPs who represent constituencies, other than the highly politicized Tehran province, will seek to realize infrastructural and economic projects in their respective regions. Consequently, legislative work in the 10th Parliament can be expected to mainly focus on economic development, and it is fair to assume that the majority of the Iranian electorate would want their representatives to do so.

Secondly, the electorate is still demanding and hoping for an improved situation of civil rights. Since Rouhani election in 2013, seemingly paradoxical developments can be observed, with progress and setbacks happening at the same time. However, far from being paradoxical, these developments illustrate a phenomena of transitional periods in which pushes for change are fought by forces of resistance. The government's attempts to ease cultural and social life, de-securitize academia, and open the media and political landscapes face heavy resistance by archconservative elements in Iran's judicial and security apparatus. A government-friendly Parliament may help policies of the government through its legislative and communicative functions: legislative, by drafting bills in support of government policies; and communicative, by creating a political climate that exerts pressure on the Guardian Council to approve the new bills.

When casting their vote for the Assembly of Experts, the question of 'succession' will be the key issue for the electorate. However, as mentioned above, public debate on this matter is very limited. The only visible fault line is the choice between candidates who may push toward a more republican future of the political system (i.e. the Ayatollah Hashemi-Rafsanjani camp), or those seeking to bolster theocratic characteristics of the Islamic Republic (the Ayatollah Jannati, Ayatollah Yazdi camp). They may therefore decide, according to their views, which current they want to push forward. Other policy fields and issues do not play a role in the vote for the Assembly of Experts.

Key Parameters / Recommendations

1) *The political climate will outweigh seat allocation.*

The overall political atmosphere determines parliamentary conduct. Principlist MPs may raise Reformist demands and vice versa, if considered politically expedient. Observers should therefore not only focus on the share of seats of the different factions, but also pay attention to the predominant discourse.

2) *The nature of parliamentary interaction with government is critical for Rouhani.*

The parliamentary execution of its elective, legislative, control and communication functions towards the government will impact domestic policies of the Rouhani administration. However, not the election result as such, but rather the upcoming months will show the overall parliamentary approach towards the executive branch.

3) *Do not 'Tehranize' parliamentary affairs.*

Especially for MPs outside Tehran province, local affairs constitute the priority. This will potentially play into the hands of the Rouhani government as the majority of MPs will seek to cooperate with the government in order to implement economic and infrastructural development projects in their constituency. Observers should therefore overcome their 'Tehran focus', which carries a partisan bias into parliamentary affairs.

4) *The question of succession is a key task for the Assembly of Experts.*

Debates about a single successor or a potential systemic change introducing a Leadership Council will take place behind closed-doors. In case a single candidate is chosen, it can be assumed that the current Supreme Leader will endorse this person before leaving office in order to transfer his authority. Should debates on the Leadership Council become concrete, it will be crucial to look into how this Council is supposed to interact with other state institutions. It would be shortsighted to assume the Council would necessarily decentralize state power.

5) *Key demands of electorate recall Rouhani's electoral promises.*

The electoral reiterates its demands from the 2013 presidential elections: economic growth, more civil liberties, and improved international relations. Public debates show voters are aware that a functional relationship between parliament and the government is necessary for President Rouhani to keep his electoral promises. He will need to deliver in order to pave the way for his re-election in the 2017 presidential elections. Public pressure on the government can be expected to increase in upcoming months and can turn into a protest vote against him in 2017 unless he sufficiently delivers on the economic and civil rights domains.

About CARPO – Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient

CARPO was founded in 2014 by Germany-based academics trained in the fields of Near and Middle Eastern Studies, Political Science and Social Anthropology. Its work is situated at the nexus of research, consultancy and exchange with a focus on implementing projects in close cooperation and partnership with stakeholders in the Orient. The researchers in CARPO's network believe that a prosperous and peaceful future for the region can best be achieved through inclusive policy making and economic investment that engages the creative and resourceful potential of all relevant actors. Therefore, CARPO opens enduring channels for interactive knowledge transfer between academics, citizens, entrepreneurs, and policy-makers.

About the Author

Adnan Tabatabai is co-founder and CEO of CARPO. He attained his master's degree in Middle East Politics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. Tabatabai is consulted on Iranian affairs by the German Federal Ministries, EU institutions, as well as by political foundations and journalists. He regularly publishes political analyses and op-eds in German and English speaking media.

Contact: tabatabai@carpo-bonn.org

© 2016, CARPO – Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient e.V.
All rights reserved.

ISSN 2364-0634

CARPO – Center for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient e.V.
Graurheindorferstr. 63
53111 Bonn
Email: info@carpo-bonn.org
www.carpo-bonn.org

