



Brandeis University

Crown Center  
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010  
Waltham, Massachusetts  
02454-9110

781-736-5320  
781-736-5324 Fax  
www.brandeis.edu/crown

*Judith and Sidney Swartz Director*  
**Prof. Shai Feldman**

*Associate Director*  
**Kristina Cherniahivsky**

*Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor of  
Middle East History and  
Associate Director for Research*  
**Naghmeh Sohrabi**

*Senior Fellows*  
**Abdel Monem Said Aly, PhD**  
**Khalil Shikaki, PhD**

*Myra and Robert Kraft Professor  
of Arab Politics*  
**Eva Bellin**

*Henry J. Leir Professor of the  
Economics of the Middle East*  
**Nader Habibi**

*Sylvia K. Hassenfeld Professor  
of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies*  
**Kanan Makiya**

*Junior Research Fellows*  
**Payam Mohseni, PhD**  
**Aria Nakissa, PhD**

# Middle East Brief

## Can Iran Surprise by Holding a “Healthy” Election in June?

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi

Three years ago, the 2009 presidential election in Iran changed history. As is well known by now, amidst accusations of vote rigging, the supporters of the opposition candidates, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karrubi, took to the streets, only to be aggressively repressed by the government. Tens of people were killed<sup>1</sup> or injured, and hundreds were arrested and sentenced to prison. But the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, refused to annul the election results, and Mahmud Ahmadinejad claimed to have won the election with more than 63 percent of the vote.

Many Iranians asserted that a regime that could change the results of an election at will would also do the same in future elections. The term “election engineering” was thus born, referring to the regime taking action to ensure a particular outcome. If, as some feared, the regime was going to engineer future elections, then election campaigns and the act of voting itself would be nothing more than ceremonial, and Iranian elections would resemble the presidential elections in undemocratic republics like Syria, Egypt (prior to the 2011 election), and Iraq (prior to the 2003 U.S. invasion). Consequently, the 2013 presidential election in Iran did not attract much attention until a few months ago.

This Brief argues that although undemocratic and military powers have the upper hand in Iran’s political arena, divisions within the regime, the impact of sanctions on people’s daily lives, and domestic and foreign political crises have made the 2013 election meaningful—indeed crucial—and unpredictable. The current unstable situation, with respect to the country’s economy, domestic

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi was a member of the Central Council of Mujahedin Inqilab, a reformist party in Iran, and on the editorial board of several reformist newspapers. He is currently an MA student in the Coexistence and Conflict program at the Heller School for Social Policy and Management at Brandeis University.

*The opinions and findings expressed in this Brief belong to the author exclusively and do not reflect those of the Crown Center or Brandeis University.*

policy, and foreign relations, has enhanced the election's significance. The British Foreign Minister has announced that the deadline for reaching an agreement with Iran over its nuclear program will be six months after the election.<sup>2</sup> People who are close to the current Iranian Supreme Leader believe that the election will be followed by even more extensive rioting than that which followed the 2009 election,<sup>3</sup> and discussions have proceeded among opposition groups in Iran regarding whether to participate in or boycott the upcoming election.<sup>4</sup>

Although various Iranian and foreign players have different expectations for the next president of Iran, all agree on the strategic significance of the 2013 election. To this end, this Brief will first discuss five main factions that will be important players in the June 2013 election. It will conclude by arguing that, ironically, the current situation in Iran may lead to a "healthy" election, which in turn may signal the return of the reformists to power.

### Isargaran: A Political-Military Party

The Isargaran (or "selfless") party is composed of individuals and groups that have generally obtained their positions in Iran's political scene solely through the Supreme Leader or via organizations directly under his supervision. After the uprising of reformist students in July 1999 (considered to be the first street protests after the 1979 revolution), Ali Khamenei established the Isargaran as part of a political movement loyal to him. This movement began with political action at universities, gradually expanding the scope of its activities to running candidates on election lists, and various media outlets, most significantly, the influential Fars News Agency<sup>5</sup> and the *Kayhan* newspaper.<sup>6</sup> Their political approach has also been adopted by other important media, such as the state-run Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).

Before Ayatollah Khamenei became the Supreme Leader in 1989, the political movement that eventually encompassed Isargaran did not have a major role in governance, even though the Revolutionary Guards played an important part in organizing and supporting it—and it in turn influenced Revolutionary Guard policies. In fact, the majority of the individuals in Isargaran have a history of fighting in the Revolutionary Guards and held middle or low rankings in the Iran-Iraq war.

Even though the Deputy Chief of the Revolutionary Guards once explicitly referred to the election of President Ahmadinejad as "a multi-layered operation" that was administered by the Revolutionary Guards and pro-Supreme Leader movements, Isargaran never officially ran one of its own in a presidential election.<sup>7</sup> Now, after fourteen years of political activism, Isargaran seeks to capture the presidency. Its most prominent political figure is Ghulam Ali Haddad Adel, who was the Speaker of the Seventh Iranian Parliament and is the father-in-law of the Supreme Leader's son. Alireza Zakani is another influential figure in this movement. He is a Member of Parliament, Director of the influential *Panjereh* weekly and the Jahan News (World News) website, and former President of the Student Branch of Basij.

Isargaran's perspectives are in line with those of the Supreme Leader, especially with respect to foreign policy. In their discourse and that of the Supreme Leader, the revolutionary nature of the Islamic Republic did not end in 1979. In fact, they believe that political Islam around the world is in a constant battle with the

United States, which by its very nature seeks domination; consequently, a sustainable peace between the two countries is impossible.<sup>8</sup> In terms of culture, Isargaran believes in censorship, and in maximum oversight by the government. For example, the Deputy Head of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, a member of this party, does not allow the airing of some Iranian films even after the approval of the Ministry of Culture. With regard to social freedoms, Isargaran believes that even Ahmadinejad's administration is too liberal and advocates, for example, harsher treatment of improper veiling on the part of women.<sup>9</sup>

On economic matters, there is no evidence of Isargaran's affiliation with any particular school of economic thought. In 2005 they opposed Khatami's plan for the systematic elimination of energy subsidies and ratified the well-known "fixation of prices" bill in the parliament. However, in 2010, in line with the Supreme Leader's position, they supported implementing the plan to eliminate subsidies by Ahmadinejad's government.

Isargaran played a key role in the post-2009 treatment of the reformist groups by the state and their negative portrayal in the media. The well-known parliamentary report on the post-election protests, in which Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani and his family were accused of inciting street riots and Mohammad Khatami was accused of taking money from foreigners, was read in parliament by the Secretary General of Isargaran.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, their media outlets were at the forefront of the battle against the perceived "soft war" of the West against the Islamic Republic—and took the position that the Green Movement was a pre-planned project of the security services of the United States and Israel.

This faction now holds almost 80 out of 290 seats in parliament. It also exerts a powerful influence on all the organizations that work under the Supreme Leader, including the judiciary, military and security forces and Islamic propaganda organizations. Isargaran has used the past eight years to appoint its members to different organizations throughout the country, thanks to its connection with the Supreme Leader and with the huge network of Revolutionary Guards. Its discourse of a continuing revolution and its alignment with the Supreme Leader are the only winning cards that might help Isargaran win the votes of the pro-Leader electorate in the 2013 election.

## The Islamic Conservatives: The Right Wing

The right wing is considered to be the oldest active group competing in the 2013 Iranian presidential election, and is regarded as the political group closest to the Shiite clergy. Before 1979, when Islamic schools did not receive institutional support from the monarchy, they were generally financed by pious Muslim merchants—who thereby acquired a significant role in post-revolutionary politics.<sup>11</sup> Immediately following the revolution, the right wing had both a substantial share of seats in the Iranian parliament and role in the government. None of its members, however, were elected president, and the right wing never entirely took possession of the government. And because of its inherent bias in favor of free trade, the right wing was in serious conflict with Ayatollah Khomeini's leftist economic policies in the first decade of the Islamic Republic, leading to a public reprimand by Ayatollah Khomeini who said that "these folks are not even qualified to run a bakery!"<sup>12</sup>

In the first decade of the Islamic Republic, the right wing was connected to the government primarily through then-President Khamenei and Speaker of Parliament, Hashemi Rafsanjani. Accordingly, when the former became Supreme Leader in 1989 and the latter President, the rightists believed that they now had a larger role to play in the political field. But little in the way of power was given to the right wing, as it was deemed too independent of the Supreme Leader, and key government roles were instead assigned to individuals from institutions directly dependent on him. In 1996, Rafsanjani officially broke with the right wing through the creation of the new Kargozaran party of technocrats—which while maintaining free market economic values, espoused more liberal cultural and social ideas. Ayatollah Khamenei, in turn, consolidated his own powers away from the rightists with his 1999 decree dismissing a member of Motalefeh (a party under the conservative right wing) who was the head of the largest financial holding company in Iran, Bonyad, and replaced him with a former Minister of Defense.

The right wing has no relationship with Ahmadinejad's administration. While pursuing a populist policy of supporting the poor through the distribution of cash subsidies, the administration has attacked the right wing's top leaders as wealthy businesspeople. Nonetheless, in the presidential campaign of 2009, the right wing did not introduce its own candidate to run against Ahmadinejad, on account of its historical affinity with Khamenei, and refused to support his opponents despite its disagreement with his policies. Taking its lead from the Supreme Leader, the right wing also condemned the Green Movement and



considered its leadership to be manipulated by the United States and Israel.<sup>13</sup>

With regard to cultural affairs, the right wing follows the Qom clergy and does not believe in freedom for social media and digital communities. Its domestic policy assumes the sovereignty of spiritual leaders and believes that the people's votes are of secondary importance and matter only within the boundaries of Islamic governance.<sup>14</sup> Owing to its mercantile background (the right wing heads the key commercial chambers including in China, UAE, the UK, and Germany), the right wing would welcome a less isolationist foreign policy that might lead to the lifting of economic sanctions and improved free trade. Still, it cannot be expected to stray far in foreign policy from the Supreme Leader's stated positions, particularly on the nuclear issue.

For the June 2013 election, the right wing has decided to introduce its own candidate. The Supreme Leader, it claims, is disappointed with Ahmadinejad's administration and unhappy about the enormous costs incurred by his behavior—which, they claim, necessitate a highly experienced government that at the same time will remain obedient to Khamenei's leadership. A major privilege of the right wing is that they have the traditional religious classes and the senior clergy behind them. Although the total vote for this party in previous elections is not particularly striking, it could be decisive in a multi-party election: If the right wing gains in popularity, it might pave the way for a coalition candidate or take votes away from its competitors.

## The Government Wing: Ahmadinejad's Circle

The party supporting Ahmadinejad is, in fact, a relatively small circle within his current entourage, which has shrunk considerably since the 2005 election that brought him to power. In 2005, Ahmadinejad, in contrast to the previous two presidents, kissed the Supreme Leader's hand upon receiving confirmation of his presidency. Subsequently, Khamenei dubbed Ahmadinejad's administration the greatest since the Constitutional Revolution of 1906 and explicitly supported Ahmadinejad's second term in office in the face of the post-election protests of 2009.<sup>15</sup> In his historic speech addressing the June 2009 protests, Khamenei observed that “[i]n conflicts between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani, I tend to concur with the viewpoint of the former.”<sup>16</sup> By contrast, before the 1997 election that ushered Khatami and the reformists into power, Khamenei had adopted a more neutral stand, stating that “[w]hoever wins the

majority of votes will be supported by me, but for me, nobody can become Rafsanjani.”<sup>17</sup>

The warm relations between the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad, however, did not last until the end of the latter's administration. Once he settled into office for his second term, an empowered Ahmadinejad tried to create a power base independent from Khamenei by consolidating the key decision-makers of the government into a small circle of those loyal to him, led by his old friend and Chief of Staff, and his son's father-in-law, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei. Mashaei's stated positions went far beyond Ahmadinejad's campaign rhetoric during his first presidential term. Mashaei has, for example, publically supported more social freedoms, advocated a kind of Islam that does not require clerical leadership (going so far as to say, “I do respect the clergy, but they cannot be politicians”<sup>18</sup>), and declared that Iranians are “friends of all people in the world—even Israelis.”<sup>19</sup> The drift between the two sides reached the point that those close to the Supreme Leader labeled Ahmadinejad's supporters in government a “deviancy movement,” emphasizing the degree to which he and those close to him had moved away from Khamenei's positions and guidelines.

Moreover, Ahmadinejad claimed a singular legitimacy by pointing to the 63 percent of the votes he received in the 2009 election. This attitude brought about a new power struggle between him and the Leader, beginning in 2010. One of Ahmadinejad's moves in this power struggle has been to take advantage of his access to secret information inside the regime by threatening both the reformists and, later, supporters of the Supreme Leader himself, with disclosure of personal and confidential documents. It was to gain more immediate access to these secrets that Ahmadinejad unsuccessfully tried to dismiss the Minister of Intelligence, a cleric chosen by Khamenei, in May 2011.

Even though Ahmadinejad and his supporters obviously benefited from the 2009 election (in that they remained in power), they kept silent during the post-election clashes, except for the astounding statement made by Ahmadinejad himself the week following the voting, when he called the protestors “dust and dirt.”<sup>20</sup> Although Khamenei's public support of Ahmadinejad directly implicated him in this crisis, the silence of the president's inner circle opened the possibility of this faction gaining a substantial amount of the votes in the 2013 presidential election and ultimately being in a strong position vis-à-vis at least three of the five factions competing. References to “increasing the amount of the monthly allowance paid to the Iranian people,”<sup>21</sup> “freedom of what to wear and how to dress,” and granting permission to musicians from

abroad to hold a concert inside the country, have helped Ahmadinejad court the youth and the lower classes of Iranian society. In the area of foreign policy, Ahmadinejad's trump card has been the promise to build political ties with the United States and to resolve the nuclear issue, a problem for which he deflected responsibility in April by noting that "[w]e bumped into a problem at nuclear negotiations whenever there were several decision-makers involved."<sup>22</sup>

## The Paydari Front

When Ahmadinejad first came to power, he and his supporters were dubbed the "Third of Tir" (June 23) faction, after the date of the second round of the 2005 elections.<sup>23</sup> This reflected the extent to which political analysts initially failed to discern a specific political identity for this newly emergent faction, instead naming them based only on the date they won the election.

At the time, the only known characteristic of Ahmadinejad's faction was that it was backed by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, the most prominent political icon of Shiite fundamentalism in Iran. Mesbah Yazdi did not play an important role in the 1979 revolution as he did not believe in the establishment of an Islamic state and was therefore out of sync with Ayatollah Khomeini's revolutionary Islamic and political views.<sup>24</sup> As a result, between 1979 and 1989 when Ayatollah Khomeini was the Supreme Leader, he played no role beyond his research and teaching at the seminaries. To Mesbah Yazdi and other Shiite fundamentalists, given the absence of the Shiites' last Imam, the Mahdi, governance is solely the right of the cleric (in accordance with the principle of *vali faqih*, or rule of the Islamic jurist), and the only duty of the people is to obey him. In this sense, Shiite fundamentalists reject the idea that the people are the source of the legitimacy of the regime.<sup>25</sup> As such, he implicitly criticized Khomeini in saying that "[Khomeini] included republicanism in the Constitution as a contingency of the revolutionary situation." Ahmadinejad's slogan in the 2005 campaign, "Islamic government," reflected his agreement with Mesbah Yazdi's views on governance.<sup>26</sup>

Many in the "Third of Tir" faction distanced themselves from Ahmadinejad once his new circle of friends—particularly Esfandiari Rahim Mashaei—came to power.<sup>27</sup> After the 2009 election, Ahmadinejad set off in a new direction, adopting liberal cultural policies and avoiding full obedience to the Supreme Leader; he even tried to change his social base, turning his attention to two groups of people: the lower classes, and proponents of a modern lifestyle. He targeted the former through cash subsidies,

while seeking to attract youth who wished to be relieved of the mandates of the Islamic lifestyle with liberal social slogans. In response to this new direction Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi broke with Ahmadinejad and founded the "Paydari Front" in anticipation of the 2012 parliamentary election.

This faction, which includes senior officials from Ahmadinejad's first term, has played a significant role in Iranian politics. Its most salient feature is the stance it has taken toward the 2009 election protests and the Green Movement. The founding members of Paydari played a significant role in suppressing the Green Movement: Their parliamentary representatives chanted "Down with Mousavi!" and their news website demanded legal action be brought against the protesting candidates.<sup>28</sup> Additionally, members of the Paydari Front have called those who tried to put an end to post-2009 election disputes through reconciliation—even those close to the Supreme Leader, such as the Speaker of the Parliament, Ali Larijani, and Tehran's Mayor, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf—"the silent ones" (*sakintin*), and accused them of cooperating with the protesters.<sup>29</sup>

It is said that the head of the Basij militia is inclined toward the Paydari Front. If Paydari can compete in the presidential election, it most likely will garner the votes only of a radical minority and of some of the Basij. But there is also the possibility that, if protests similar to those of the Green Movement erupt, the Paydari Front will enhance its standing with the Supreme Leader by presenting itself as the protector of the regime and confronting the reformists and democratic forces as it did in 2009.

## The Reform Movement

Mohammad Khatami's election to the presidency in 1997 saw both the birth of the reform movement and that of the concept of "dual sovereignty" among the regime's elected and appointed departments.<sup>30</sup> Dual sovereignty highlights the distinction between unelected institutions, such as the Supreme Leadership, and elected ones such as the presidency, as laid out in the constitution. While this duality has more or less existed since the birth of the Islamic Republic, the tensions inherent in it intensified during the eight-year period of Khatami's government (1997–2005). On the one hand, the confrontations between these two types of institutions undermined the reformist movement (as seen in the crackdown on the student uprisings in 1999, and the closing of reformist newspapers) and led to its failure to realize liberal promises. On the other, it gave rise to an important development in the Iranian political system that has had reverberations until

today: The reformers' critical and democratic tone of speech, coming as it did from within the system, turned the center of opposition to the inside of the country. Consequently, a movement was born inside the Islamic Republic that has remained active sixteen years after its founding and is still regarded as one of the most important opportunities for a gradual and internal transformation of the system.

The brutal suppression of the reformists also increased the latter's public legitimacy as a liberal discontented group. The main supporters of the reformist movement are the urban classes, who seek greater political participation and a more modern and globally connected life, demands that trouble conservative leaders. These leaders see the reformers as having fallen away from the original goals of the Islamic Republic; while the reformers, for their part, believe that it is the weakening of republicanism and the move toward a purely Islamic regime that represents a departure from those goals.

Even though the reformers came from within the regime itself, they are the only faction discussed here who do not occupy a position of political power. However, the current struggle between the reformers and the regime has increased the reformers' legitimacy and popularity among the middle class. The regime is now concerned that the reformers could transform this popularity into a return to power. In his New Year speech, while Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized the necessity for the participation of all political parties in the presidential election,<sup>31</sup> he still considers the 2009 post-election protest to be "sedition" (*fitneh*) planned by foreign enemies.<sup>32</sup> Hence, as a precondition for participation in the next presidential election, the reformers have been asked by those close to the Leader to repent or distance themselves from the 2009 post-election protests—but none of the reformers has yet expressed any such regrets.

## A June Surprise: A "Healthy" Election?

"The rope does not always tear at the thinnest spot" is the best allegory to describe the 2013 Iranian presidential election. The most powerful section of the rope of Iranian politics is the Supreme Leader and the institutions under his control, such as national radio and television (IRIB), the judiciary and intelligence systems, the armed forces, and the Guardian Council. At first glance, it is the Leader and these institutions who make all the significant decisions regarding the election. The entire process, from its preliminaries to its final stages, will, after all, be monitored by him: Verification of the candidates' qualifications on May 21st, TV coverage, confirmation

of the final results, and, eventually, endorsement of the president all fall within the purview of the Leader and his institutions. The accusation of "election engineering," raised by the reformists and by Ahmadinejad, does not necessarily imply that the vote count was rigged; rather, this phrase conveys the belief that institutions under Ayatollah Khamenei's supervision are able through careful planning to lead the election toward a victory by their preferred candidate.

There are three reasons why Khamenei and his supporters might, in fact, engineer this election to bring into power the candidate of their choice. First, since becoming Supreme Leader in 1989, Khamenei has at some point been in conflict with every president of Iran. Hashemi-Rafsanjani, the first president during Khamenei's tenure as Leader, commented last April: "The Leader no longer trusts me as [he did] before, and we have different outlooks on the problems of the country."<sup>33</sup> (Two of Rafsanjani's children have been taken to court by the regime on charges of anti-state activities and corruption.) Mohammad Khatami, the president after Rafsanjani, is barred from leaving the country and has been accused of having received money from Saudi Arabia and of liaisons with people like George Soros,<sup>34</sup> and he has not met with Khamenei for the past four years. Khamenei has specifically condemned the Khatami administration with regard to foreign policy, which he has described as humiliating vis-à-vis the West.<sup>35</sup> And the relationship between Khamenei and Mahmud Ahmadinejad has also soured, as noted earlier. Those close to the latter have many times attributed Ahmadinejad's illusion of power to Khamenei's great patience as he waits for his presidency to end. It is reasonable to suppose that Khamenei will not again run the risk of having a contentious president in power.

A second reason why Khamenei and his supporters might seek to ensure a favorable election result is that Ayatollah Khamenei will be 74 years old when the next president is elected (and the Supreme Leader is almost always a lifelong position, according to the constitution of the Islamic Republic). The Leader and his associates will presumably take into consideration the influence that the next president can exert in selecting Ayatollah Khamenei's possible successor—and an independent president not aligned with the Leader's thinking could potentially play a crucial, and in their eyes detrimental, role in determining Iran's political future.

Finally, Iran is on the verge of a significant turning point with respect to the conflict regarding its nuclear program. Even though the last round of the negotiations between Iran and P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) came to a fruitless end



in Kazakhstan, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, in response to Congress' call for tougher action against Iran, asked that they "wait for two months until the Iranian presidential election."<sup>36</sup> It thus seems that Iran will need to make a final decision regarding suspending nuclear fuel enrichment or entering into hostility with Western powers sometime in 2013. But Ayatollah Khamenei recently noted that "[w]e should be domestically united when dealing with or fighting a foreign enemy."<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, one could speculate that the Leader regards it as crucial that a president congruent with his stance on the question be elected, so that the country speaks with a single voice.

\* \* \*

Paradoxically, the most important factor standing in the way of election engineering in 2013 is Ahmadinejad himself. After Ahmadinejad's refusal to appear in office over the dismissal of the Intelligence minister in 2011, several court cases were opened against his associates. At least five of the government's high-ranking managers were arrested, two Ministers were deposed by the parliament, and cases were opened relating to the Vice President and to Ahmadinejad's Executive Deputy.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, state managers were charged as accomplices in two criminal cases of large-scale financial corruption. Ahmadinejad understands that should he and his faction be completely overthrown, a destiny similar to that of Mousavi, who is still under house arrest, awaits him.

There are at least five indications that Ahmadinejad will use his powers, particularly through the Ministry of Interior, which is in charge of conducting elections in Iran, to prevent a consolidation of power along the lines desired by Khamenei.

First, in recent months, Ahmadinejad has explicitly condemned those who wish to engineer the election, and has repeatedly emphasized that the Leader has only one vote to cast, just like all other people.<sup>38</sup> Second, he is working to make predetermining the result more difficult by increasing the number of candidates and enhancing voter participation. He has made it a goal of his government to increase participation to 90 percent of the electorate and has requested all political groups enter candidates in the election. Third, Ahmadinejad has also repeatedly proclaimed his faction's 2013 slogan, "Viva Spring"—a slogan clearly intended to evoke the "Arab Spring"—at various public appearances. Fourth, he has proposed an increase in cash subsidies in an attempt to influence the vote, as he has done in the past two elections. (He recently announced that the government had the ability to pay people five times the current amount, but

was stopped by the parliament from doing so.) Finally, Ahmadinejad has tried to blame Iran's critical economic conditions on the sanctions, and indirectly on the Supreme Leader, by emphasizing his own lack of authority in the management of the nuclear conflict.

Ironically, Ahmadinejad's strong motivation to play a role in the election has given hope to those calling for a legitimate balloting. The conflicting interests of the Ministry of Interior, in charge of holding the election, and the Guardian Council, which is under the Leader's control, in charge of supervision, may cause them to watch each other's actions, leading to a correct counting of the votes. In this case, the question becomes: Of the five factions discussed in this Brief, which might be the main beneficiary of a competitive election with a high turnout of voters?

The Paydari Front and Isargaran do not have enough of a defined social agenda to be able to court a strong bloc of voters. While the conservative right wing represents a significant religious-economic group, its influence on both the younger generation and the middle class is weak. Ahmadinejad's inner circle, on the other hand, has made several attempts to mobilize voters through cash subsidies and promises of social and cultural freedoms. Their ability to garner votes depends on governmental tools, such as authorization to dispense cash subsidies from the state budget, over which they do not have full control—and which can be curtailed by other, hostile centers of power, such as the legislature and the judiciary.

The one group that can therefore hope to win in a competitive election is the reformists. Should they be allowed to run in the election,<sup>39</sup> they can present themselves as the solution to Iran's current domestic, nuclear, and economic crises. Even in government-sponsored polls, former president and reformist leader Mohammad Khatami shows up as the most popular of the possible candidates, not only in terms of sheer numbers but also among the most segments of society. Thanks to his low-cost management of the nuclear issue, Khatami is not seen as being responsible for the current sanctions and the economic crisis they have contributed to. Some have even argued that should the reformists take power, the West will change its behavior toward Iran, and the sanctions will decrease.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, Khatami's administration was responsible for strong job creation and economic growth, and for the eight-year stabilization of the dollar during his two terms. Consequently, although the Supreme Leader neither trusts nor has any inclination toward the reformists, particularly since the Green Movement was born, the popularity of the reformists among the voters, and the potential tug of war between the holders and the

supervisors of the election are factors that increase the reformists' chances of regaining power.

The outcome of the 2013 presidential election will greatly affect how Iran will be governed—whether the reformists can crawl back into power and establish a “Turkish-style” government that is both Islamic and development-oriented, or whether factions such as Paydari can take control and establish a more isolated dictatorship. Whatever the outcome, there is no doubt as to both the crucial and the unpredictable nature of this election.

## Endnotes

- 1 [The Centre for Human Rights and Rehabilitation \(CHHR\) announced that 112 people were killed after the election, while Iran's Supreme National Security Council insisted that the correct figure was only 34.\\*](#)
- 2 [“William Hague in Conversation: The Transcript,” Prospect Blog, Prospect, April 16, 2013.\\*](#)
- 3 [Speech by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard's deputy minister of culture, \*Alef.ir\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
- 4 Many Green Movement activists both inside and outside the country support using the upcoming election to pursue their demands. In contrast, the oldest opposition party (most of whose members live abroad) believes that elections have merely helped legitimize the Islamic Republic and will make no difference.
- 5 Fars News Agency was founded by the Revolutionary Guards in 2002 when Khatami was in office. It opposed the hegemony of the Reformist mass media in the Iranian political atmosphere of the time.
- 6 *Kayhan* newspaper is directly managed by a representative of the Iranian Supreme Leader.
- 7 *BBC Persian* [in Persian] ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/12/071209\\_bd-az-zolqadr.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2007/12/071209_bd-az-zolqadr.shtml).)
- 8 Shariatmadari, the Supreme Leader's representative to the *Kayhan* newspaper, recently wrote that “Americans are attempting to break down the model of resistance that is Iran through negotiations. Through diplomatic talks, they are trying to compel Muslim movements throughout the world to accept that if the Islamic Republic of Iran is the origin of your ideology, then even your ideological origin has given up years of resistance and eventually has found no choice but to surrender before the U.S. Taking that into account, negotiations with the U.S. would be a serious danger to Iran.” [“Hossein Shariatmadari's comments about the negotiations with America, the devil is losing,” \*Ettelaat.net\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
- 9 See the minister of culture in Ahmadinejad's first administration, currently working as advisor to the Revolutionary Guards' chief commander, comments regarding Ahmadinejad's measures in the direction of liberalism, [“Ahmadinejad course of language change Harandi,” \*Hamshahri\*, April 2011 \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
- 10 In addition, the chief commander of Basij, directly appointed by the Supreme Leader, openly accused Khatami of taking money from the Saudi King; a claim for which no documentary evidence was offered. *24OnlineNews.ir* [in Persian] (<http://24onlinenews.ir/news-12059.aspx>).\*
- 11 In the Shiite seminary system, the individual with the greatest number of followers will reach the highest rank and become a *marja* (or source of emulation). One major factor is the number of clerical students who have received fellowships from that person—the financial source of those fellowships being his wealthy sponsors. Those sponsors were entirely religious businessmen up until the 1979 revolution.
- 12 *Alef.ir* [in Persian] (<http://alef.ir/vdcicq3azvt1aqz2.cbct.html?169168>).
- 13 For example, Habibollah Asgaroladi, a well-known political figure in the conservative right wing, accused the U.S. and Israel of plotting the post-election demonstrations and the



- Green Party's protesting candidates (Mousavi and Karubi) of directing the demonstrations.
- 14 ["Party secretary-general of the Islamic Motalefeh: the majority of Islamic principles, the agency," \*Gooya News\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 15 ["Best of the constitutional government of Ali Khamenei," \*Digarban.com\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 16 *Raja News* [in Persian] (<http://www.rajanews.com/detail.asp?id=31354>).
  - 17 Official Website of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani [in Persian] (<http://www.hashemirafsanjani.ir/fa/node/212134>).
  - 18 *Entekhab.ir* [in Persian] (<http://www.entekhab.ir/fa/news/98865>).
  - 19 *Tabnak.ir* [in Persian] (<http://www.tabnak.ir/pages/?cid=14024>).
  - 20 *Kaleme.com* [in Persian] (<http://kaleme.com/1391/12/03/klm-134430/>).
  - 21 During his April 22 trip to Khuzestan Province, Ahmadinejad announced that the government had decided to increase the cash subsidy for each Iranian to 250,000 tumans—but implementation of this has been impeded by the parliament. *Jamejam Online* [in Persian] (<http://www.jamejamonline.ir/NewsPreview/1015219277958301995>).
  - 22 ["Mahmoud Ahmadinejad says Iran's nuclear issue became a problem when the government got out of hand" \*Radio Farda\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 23 Iran's 2005 presidential election was the first election to lead to a second round of voting, as none of the candidates received more than 21 percent of the votes in the first round. (Ahmadinejad, the then mayor of Tehran, received 19.5 percent of the votes.) In the second round, Ahmadinejad defeated Rafsanjani, former president and political veteran, with 63.2 percent of the votes.
  - 24 *Khabar Online* [in Persian] (<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/59380/>).
  - 25 *Fars News* [in Persian] (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8805120937>).
  - 26 Ahmadinejad's 2005 campaign also included: toughness in relations with the West, and the establishment of strategic alliances with revolutionary and anti-American governments, including Latin American countries, Syria, and Sudan; opposition to a luxurious lifestyle and other manifestations of a capitalist economy; sociocultural stringency; an emphasis on the distance the Islamic Revolution had traveled from its early goals; the participation of marginalized people—those not involved in the aristocratic system that dominated the nation—in the government; the necessity of rebuilding Iran's managerial team; and bringing money earned from oil to people's dinner tables.
  - 27 The publicly expressed opposition of the Supreme Leader to the appointment of Mashaei as Ahmadinejad's vice president was an effort to prevent the Putin-Medvedev pattern from repeating in Iran. The Leader's decree as published on his official website can be found at: <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/?p=contentShow&cid=5692> [in Persian].
  - 28 *Radio Farda* [in Persian] [http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4\\_Iran\\_parliament\\_members\\_letter\\_judiciary\\_trail/2043563.html](http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f4_Iran_parliament_members_letter_judiciary_trail/2043563.html).
  - 29 See, [Naghmeh Sohrabi, "Reading the Tea Leaves: Iranian Domestic Politics and the Presidential Election of 2013" Middle East Brief, no. 65 \(Brandeis University: Crown Center for Middle East Studies, July 2012\).\\*](#)
  - 30 Saeed Hajariyan was Khatami's advisor and a theorist of political reforms in Khatami's administration. In proposing the theory of "dual sovereignty," he argued that this duality can be taken advantage of by applying social pressure from below and negotiate with power from above.
  - 31 ["Full Farsi Speech of Imam Khamenei in Mashhad of Iran, Remarking New Persian Year 1392," \*Youtube\*, Published on March 21, 2013.\\*](#)
  - 32 *Fars News* [in Persian] (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13910729000262>).
  - 33 *BBC Persian* [in Persian] ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130416\\_ir92\\_hashemi\\_khamenei\\_election.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/04/130416_ir92_hashemi_khamenei_election.shtml)).
  - 34 The Supreme Leader's representative to the *Kayhan* newspaper has repeatedly accused Khatami of cooperating with Soros; see <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/143214> [in Persian].
  - 35 ["Leader's remarks in a meeting with university students in Yazd province," \*Leader.ir\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 36 ["Kerry Asks for Patience on U.S. Iran Sanctions before Election," \*Reuters\*, April 18, 2013.\\*](#)
  - 37 ["Khamenei: Ahmadinejad unlawful conduct and the law/Ali Larijani also went too far," \*Briangi.com\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 38 ["Nekoonam: Rahimi case is pending in the Judiciary," \*Aftab News\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 39 ["Ahmadinejad's New Year speech," \*YJC.ir\*, March 20, 2013.\\*](#)
  - 40 Intelligence minister Heydar Moslehi has already, without naming them, warned former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami regarding their alleged roles in the protest movement that followed Iran's disputed 2009 elections. See ["Iran Minister Warns ex-Presidents over Elections," \*AFP\*, May 2, 2013.\\*](#); see also ["Haddad Adel: Khatami is disqualified," \*Radio Zamaneh\* \[in Persian\].\\*](#)
  - 41 ["Iran's battered reformists tug at hero Khatami for one more long shot run for president," \*Fox News\*, April 15, 2013.\\*](#)

\* Weblinks are available in the online versions found at [www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)



Brandeis University Crown Center  
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010  
Waltham, Massachusetts  
02454-9110

781-736-5320  
781-736-5324 Fax  
[www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)

# Middle East Brief

## Can Iran Surprise by Holding a “Healthy” Election in June?

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi

---

### Recent Middle East Briefs:

Available on the Crown Center website: [www.brandeis.edu/crown](http://www.brandeis.edu/crown)

Asher Susser, “Is the Jordanian Monarchy in Danger?” No. 72

Payam Mohseni, “The Islamic Awakening: Iran’s Grand Narrative of the Arab Uprisings,” No. 71

Abdel Monem Said Aly and Karim Elkady, “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly of Egypt’s Political Transition,” No. 70

Dror Ze’evi, “The Transformation of Public Space in Turkey,” No. 69

Aria Nakissa, “Islamist Understandings of Sharia and Their Implications for the Post-revolutionary Egyptian Constitution,” No. 68

Nader Habibi, “The Economic Agendas and Expected Economic Policies of Islamists in Egypt and Tunisia,” No. 67

