



A Curtain-Raiser to the Iranian Elections 2016

*Dr. Asif Shuja**

The elections of the Iranian Parliament and the Assembly of Experts are scheduled to be held on February 26, 2016. These two are among the three popularly elected institutions of the Iranian political system, the third being the President, the election for which is scheduled for next year. This is for the first time that the two elections are being held simultaneously due to the government's efforts to reduce spending on elections and aggregating them.¹ The forthcoming elections would constitute the 5th Assembly of Experts and 10th Parliament respectively.²

Election of the Assembly of Experts

The Assembly of Experts is an elected body of 88 senior clerics which is responsible for appointing the Supreme Leader of Iran. Earlier, it had 86 members, which has been increased³ in August 2015 by 2 more members, in order to incorporate the newly created Alborz Province. The tenure of the Assembly of Experts is eight years. Out of 801 candidates⁴ who had registered to contest the elections of the Assembly of Experts, only 166 were approved⁵ by the Guardian Council, a conservative body of 12 clerics tasked with vetting the candidates.

Because of the power of vetting candidates⁶, the Guardian Council plays a crucial role in any popular election in Iran. Notably, out of the 12 members of the Guardian

Council, the Supreme Leader appoints six members and other six members are elected by the Iranian Parliament from a list of candidates nominated by the Head of Judiciary.⁷ Further, the Head of Judiciary is also appointed by the Supreme Leader. Hence, the Guardian Council is virtually subservient to the Supreme Leader. This systemic arrangement provides the Supreme Leader scope for indirectly influencing the outcome of the elections. Nevertheless, the history of the Islamic Republic has shown that the Supreme Leader has exercised his powers in such a manner that elections in Iran are democratic to the extent they are indicative of the popular sentiments, but at the same time does not change the established clerical system.

In the Iranian political system, elections are not held based on the political parties fielding their candidates the way it happens in multiparty democracies. Rather, the elections are held on individual identities. While some candidates do have earlier affiliations with various pressure groups such as guilds, labour unions and other associations, in most cases they are endorsed by these groups once they register for elections. These groups later form loose coalitions under diverse banners and based on their broad ideologies they could be identified as either hard-liners, conservatives, pragmatists, moderates or reformists. Such groups are known as 'factions' in the discourses on Iranian politics. In the Iranian political system, 'hard-liners' are those who are rigid in their approach towards preserving the Revolutionary credentials of the Islamic Republic. Majority of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) members, who had supported the previous President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are considered as hard-liners. 'Conservative' is a more general term used to define those who favour the preservation of the Islamic Republic in its present form. Most of the unelected institutions such as Guardian Council, Expediency Council etc are dominated by the conservatives. Both the hard-liners and the conservatives find maintaining of the status quo in their own interests.

On the other hand, Iran's former President and current chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani epitomised the term 'pragmatist' as he sought to introduce as the President of Iran reforms in the economic realm for improving the

Iranian economy from the ravages of eight year Iran-Iraq war. Those following his ideology are later called as pragmatists. The terms 'moderates' and 'reformists' are sometimes used interchangeably to define those who seek greater freedom in the closed Iranian society. As against the hard-liners and conservatives, they are also known to favour better relations with the West. While the former President Mohammad Khatami was popularly called a reformist, the current president Hassan Rouhani is known to be a moderate. Since various factions in the Islamic Republic are mostly centred on personalities, their defining terminologies are neither watertight compartment nor do they hold much legal value within the Iranian system.

Amongst the prominent candidates who are contesting the election of the Assembly of Experts include the current President Hassan Rouhani and the former President and current chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani.⁸ Rafsanjani, who had played crucial role during the appointment of the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in 1989, is now 81 years old. Since he is a pragmatist, he is expected to favour a candidate belonging to his own faction. On the other hand, Rouhani, who is considered as a moderate, is currently very popular within Iran and his participation in the election of Assembly of Experts may work against the interests of the conservatives and the hard-liners.

The Guardian Council has disqualified many clerical leaders "that are considered moderate or reformist-affiliated"⁹ including Seyedali Mohammad Dastgheib, a member of the current Assembly of Experts and two close associates of President Rouhani, Hassan Namazi and Majid Ansari.¹⁰ In many provinces, the Guardian Council has approved the number of applicants equalling the number of allotted seats for that province, literally handpicking the candidates of their own choice.¹¹ Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the first Supreme Leader and the Father of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini is also disqualified from contesting the elections of the Assembly of Experts. The fact that Hassan Khomeini is known for his moderate leanings is indicative of the fact that conservatives are making efforts to check reformists' infiltration to this body.

During the nominations for the forthcoming Assembly of Experts election, 16 women had registered. However, all of them have been disqualified by the Guardian Council from contesting elections. This may not be surprising as only once a female member has served in the Assembly of Experts in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran.¹² This happened in the first Assembly of Experts when Monireh Gorji¹³ was the only female member. Since then no female candidate has been approved to contest the elections of the Assembly of Experts.¹⁴ The way Guardian Council has vetted the candidacy of the registered candidates amply shows that it is trying to ensure that a conservative Assembly of Experts is constituted.

On December 13, 2015, the Iranian Labour News Agency (ILNA) quoted¹⁵ the former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, indicating that ‘an Iranian committee is examining potential candidates to be the next Supreme Leader,’¹⁶ effectively, breaking the taboo of publicly discussing succession in Iran. Rafsanjani was quoted as saying that “the Assembly of Experts will act when a new leader needs to be appointed. They are preparing for that now and are examining the options.”¹⁷ He also added that “they have appointed a group to list the qualified people that will be put to a vote (in the assembly) when an incident happens.”¹⁸ Similarly, Hassan Rouhani also termed this election as the one of “high significance for the Islamic Republic of Iran.”¹⁹ Making an appeal to the people of Iran for their full participation in this election, he said that “under certain conditions, even a single vote of the Experts Assembly members will be important for election of the leader.”²⁰

Election of the Iranian Parliament

The Iranian Parliament currently has 290 seats and its tenure is four years. There has been a surge in the number of candidates contesting for the forthcoming Parliament. While 5,300 candidates were qualified during the previous Parliamentary elections, this year 6,233 candidates have been approved for contesting. Amongst the registered candidates, the Guardian Council disqualified 5,223 candidates from contesting.²¹

It is reported that ‘as few as 100 reformist candidates’²² have been approved by the

Guardian Council to contest the Parliamentary elections and 'it is believed that some pro-reform figures may have been spared from disqualification because their allegiance has been unclear.'²³ Consequently, the reformists are making all efforts to ensure the defeat of their conservative rivals despite all odds. For instance, the reformists have 'issued their joint list of 30 candidates'²⁴ to capture the seats of Majlis from Tehran, the Iranian capital. This group is led by Mohammad Reza Aref, 'an influential reformist figure whose decision to stand down in the 2013 presidential election in favour of Rouhani'²⁵ was crucial in his victory.

The current Parliament is controlled by the conservatives while their primary opponents, reformists, hold less than a quarter of the seats.²⁶ This election is significant since it would be the first Parliamentary election after the nuclear deal agreed by Iran and the world powers on July 14, 2015. The victory of the moderates in the Presidential election of 2013 and Rouhani's success in enabling the lifting of economic and political sanctions from Iran through the nuclear deal shows that the moderates stand a good chance of winning in an election. Since this is also realised by the conservative Guardian Council, by exercising its power of vetting the candidates it has ensured that their chances are minimal. The fact that President Hassan Rouhani managed to clinch the nuclear deal despite the dominance of conservatives in the Parliament, indicates that despite the nature of the forthcoming Parliament, the deal is expected to stay, unless otherwise decided by the Supreme Leader.

Conclusion

Arguably, the Election of the Assembly of Experts is more important amongst the two forthcoming elections as it may play a critical role for the future of Iran. Iran's current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei is 76 years old and the tenure of the Assembly of Experts is 8 years. There have been rumours²⁷ doing the rounds for more than a decade concerning the health of Ayatollah Khamenei and Iran has officially announced²⁸ that he had undergone prostate surgery on September 8, 2014. Under the circumstances the probability of the next Assembly of Experts choosing the successor of Khamenei appears to

be higher than before. Since it is also likely that the chosen successor could be amongst the members²⁹ of the Assembly of Experts, the election of this body becomes crucial for Iran's future. As far as the Parliamentary elections are concerned, a reformist's victory could strengthen the hands of President Rouhani, who is trying to end Iran's isolation in the world. The result of the next forthcoming elections notwithstanding, the substance of electoral campaigns is bound to have implications on the Presidential elections scheduled for next year.

** Dr. Asif Shuja is Research Fellow, Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi – 110001. The Views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.*

End Notes

¹ *Press TV*, “Iran's Assembly of Experts elections,” January 27, 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2016/01/27/447520/Assembly-of-Experts-Elections/>, accessed on February 17, 2016.

² *Ettelaat*, “Iran Guardian Council endorses credentials of 166 for Experts Assembly polls,” February 16, 2016, <http://www.ettelaat.com/index2.asp?code=endisplay&fname=/ettelaat/etbupload/data/2016/01/01-27/4.htm&title=Iran%20Guardian%20Council%20endorses%20credentials%20of%20166%20for%20Experts%20Assembly%20polls>, accessed on February 17, 2016.

³ *Iranian Students' News Agency (ISNA)*, “تعداد نمایندگان مجلس خبرگان رهبری افزایش یافت” (Number of Representatives in the Assembly of Experts Increased), ۱۱ شهریور ۱۳۹۴ (September 2, 2015), <http://www.isna.ir/fa/news/94061107612/تعداد-نمایندگان-مجلس-خبرگان-رهبری-افزایش>, accessed on February 15, 2016.

⁴ *Tehran Times*, “Iran sees 65% rise in registration for parliamentary polls,” December 26, 2015, http://www.tehrantimes.com/Index_view.asp?code=251770, accessed on February 17, 2016.

⁵ *Ettelaat*, “Iran Guardian Council endorses credentials of 166 for Experts Assembly polls,” February 16, 2016, <http://www.ettelaat.com/index2.asp?code=endisplay&fname=/ettelaat/etbupload/data/2016/01/01-27/4.htm&title=Iran%20Guardian%20Council%20endorses%20credentials%20of%20166%20for%20Experts%20Assembly%20polls>, accessed on February 17, 2016.

⁶ Whether or not the Iranian Constitution actually provides the Guardian Council this power is a contested issue within Iranian politics.

⁷ “Article 91,” *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, available at Islamic Parliament of Iran, <http://en.parliran.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=84&pageid=3054>, accessed on February 23, 2016.

⁸ *Tehran Times*, “Rafsanjani: I will run for a seat in Assembly of Experts,” November 26, 2015, http://tehrantimes.com/Index_view.asp?code=251150, accessed on February 18, 2016.

⁹ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, “Hardliners Handpick Candidates to Block Moderates and Rig Elections,” February 9, 2016, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/02/elections/>, accessed on February 18 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

- ¹² *Payvand Iran News*, “Female candidates rejected in run for assembly seats,” January 27, 2016, <http://www.payvand.com/news/16/jan/1150.html>, accessed on February 15, 2016.
- ¹³ Princeton University, “The 1979 Assembly of Experts for the Drafting of the Constitution Election,” *Iran Data Portal*, <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/elections/experts/1979/>, accessed on February 15, 2015.
- ¹⁴ *Payvand Iran News*, “Female candidates rejected in run for assembly seats,” January 27, 2016, <http://www.payvand.com/news/16/jan/1150.html>, accessed on February 15, 2016.
- ¹⁵ *Reuters*, “Iran’s possible next Supreme Leader being examined: Rafsanjani,” December 13, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/uk-iran-election-leader-idUSKBN0TW0OV20151213>, accessed on February 16, 2016.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ *Ettelaat*, “February elections of high importance for Iran,” February 17, 2016, <http://www.ettelaat.com/index2.asp?code=endisply&fname=/ettelaat/etbupload/data/2016/02/02-16/11.htm&title=February%20elections%20of%20high%20importance%20for%20Iran>, accessed on February 17, 2016.
- ²⁰ Ibid.
- ²¹ *Tehran Times*, “6,233 candidates to run for parliamentary election,” February 17, 2016, p. 2.
- ²² *The Guardian*, “Iran’s reformers campaign to block hardliners ahead of key elections,” February 17, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/irans-reformers-campaign-to-block-hardliners-ahead-of-key-elections>, accessed on February 18, 2016.
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ *Tehran Times*, “Govt. welcomes increase in number of qualified parliament hopefuls,” February 17, 2016, p. 1.
- ²⁷ “Iran’s Top Leader Undergoes Prostate Surgery,” September 8, 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/world/middleeast/irans-ayatollah-khamenei-has-prostate-surgery.html?_r=0, accessed on February 24, 2016.
- ²⁸ “Leader Undergoes Successful Surgery,” September 8, 2014, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/1950/Leader-Undergoes-Successful-Surgery>, accessed on February 24, 2016.
- ²⁹ “Article 107, Chapter VIII, ‘The Leader or the Leadership Council,’” *The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, available at Islamic Parliament of Iran, <http://en.parliran.ir/index.aspx?fkeyid=&siteid=84&pageid=3054>, accessed on February 17, 2016.