

AN INTRODUCTORY PRIMER ON THE

Election Landscape in Iran



Understanding Iranian Politics

Despite high voter participation and frequent elections, Iran remains one of the most politically opaque and repressive countries in the world. The tightly controlled state media, the vetting of candidates and the jailing of activists create a political environment with very little room for free expression or debate.

Past elections in Iran have failed to demonstrate the country's adherence to democratic principles and international election standards. Elections in 2005 that led to the country's first presidential runoff election were widely criticized, and the outcome of the 2009 presidential election was met with mass protests and a subsequent violent government crackdown. Soon after the election results were announced, hundreds of thousands of Iranians took to the streets to protest the government's administration of what was largely viewed as a flawed process. Since the disputed 2009 presidential election, certain governmental bodies have felt threatened and have tightened

their control over the national electoral processes. The Iranian government also continues to place heavy restrictions on citizens' rights and arrest dissidents, including political opponents, members of the media and reform-minded activists. Rights groups continue to point to the country's human rights record as among the worst in the world.

Election season in Iran, however, is sometimes characterized by the slight loosening of restrictions on state-sanctioned civil society and the media in order to allow candidates to spread their messages and garner support. Local elections, in particular, present an opportunity for citizens to engage in the electoral process in a less politically sensitive and closely monitored -- both domestically and internationally -- environment than the one surrounding the presidential polls.



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Structure of the Iranian Government

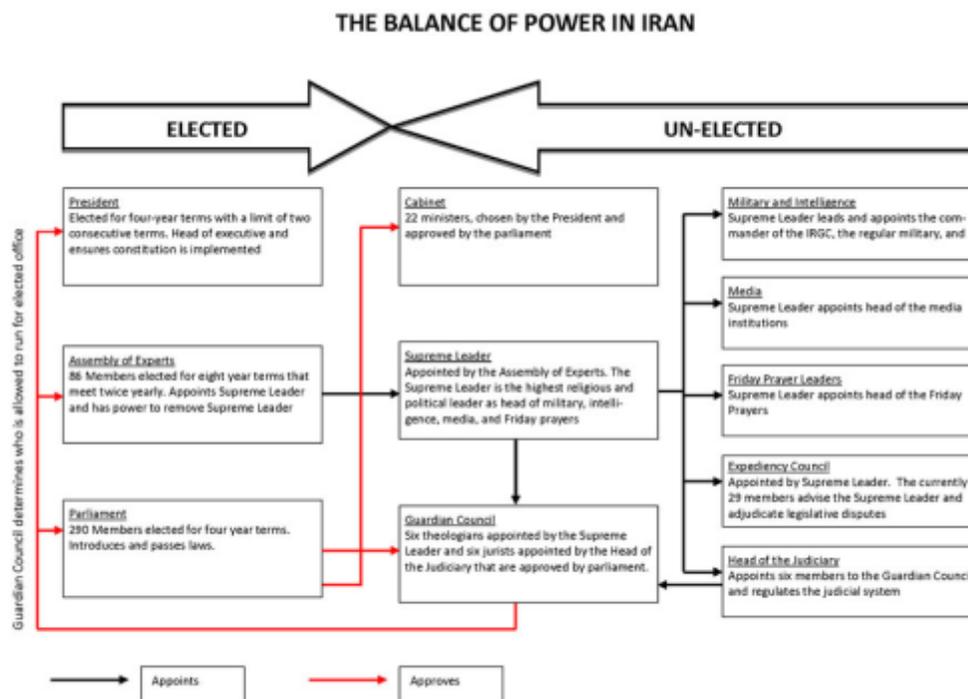
Iran's constitution stipulates a political structure with several unique characteristics stemming from its dual system of authority. Ultimate authority in the country is vested in the office of the *Vali-e Faqih*, the Supreme Leader or Supreme Jurisprudent, supported by the Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts. The Supreme Leader is appointed and can be dismissed by the Assembly of Experts, a directly elected body. However, since Assembly candidates are vetted by the Guardian Council, an institution composed of six jurists appointed by the parliament and six experts of Islamic law selected by the Supreme Leader himself, ⁱ the body hardly serves as a true check on the Supreme Leader's authority.

For more information on Iran budget process check out the Nabz-Iran, [Introductory Primer to the Budget Process in Iran](#).

The national legislative body of Iran is the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran or parliament (known in Persian as *Majles-e Shorâ-ye Eslami* or simply *Majlis*). The current parliament has 290 elected representatives elected by the direct vote of the people for four year terms. The powers and functions of the Majlis are specified by the constitution (Articles 71-90). According to the rules, the Majlis has a steering board which oversees the general procedures of Iran's legislative process, including procedures for meetings, debates, votes, motions and committees. Normally bills under review are debated in the order they are introduced. However, some bills and motions can be put on hold, while others, like the budget, cannot. Though the Iranian parliament is constitutionally responsible for approving the state's budget, its real fiscal power is limited by the Supreme Leader's control over religious foundations called *bonyads*. The Supreme Leader controls up to 35 percent of Iran's gross domestic product through these foundations, which are not responsible to the parliament, any ministries or the president.ⁱⁱ

Cities across the country are governed by municipal governments headed by a mayor. The mayor is appointed by the city council for four-year terms. Council members are elected directly by their local constituents and serve four-year terms. Articles 6, 7, 12, 100, 101, 102, 103, 105 and 106 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran state that local councils must be an essential part of decision making and local administration in the country. Every four years around 200,000 members are elected to the city, village, province, and district councils across Iran. According to Article 55 of the Law of Municipalities, municipal governments are responsible for things such as: public spaces, like parks and markets; urban planning and construction licensing; and public health efforts to prevent epidemics; and creating public spaces for food markets and ensure high quality and good quality.

For more information on Iran budget process check out the Nabz-Iran, [Introductory Primer to Local Government in Iran](#).



Political Parties

While Iran has over 250 registered political parties, they are often viewed as powerless and ineffective. Instead, politics is best understood as a system of political currents with shifting alliances among political groups, notable individuals, constituencies, and centers of power. Currently, the main currents fall into two broad alliances. The centrists and reformists form the moderate alliance, while the hardliners and the traditionalists form the conservative or “Principlist” grouping. In general terms, centrists are more focused on private sector-driven economic growth and less concerned with social issues and foreign policy. Their constituency tends to be made up of technocrats and entrepreneurs. Reformists tend to advocate for more social and political freedoms and represent the urban middle class and youth. Traditionalists tend to favor a market-style economy and conservative moral view that appeal to the more traditional clergy and mercantile class. Finally, the hardliners favor a “resistance economy” that emphasizes economic self-reliance, a hawkish foreign policy and the rejection of social and political reform.ⁱⁱⁱ

This system has become increasingly confusing for voters over the past few election cycles as the number of candidates has risen sharply in response to the Guardian Council’s strict vetting. In an effort to shed some light on candidates, ahead of elections political organizations often publish lists of the candidates as a guide for voters. But because candidates rarely claim a political affiliation as it would unlikely have much significance in most electoral contests, an individual’s name could appear on several different lists at once. For example, in smaller constituencies where voters will have fewer candidates to choose from, their choices are often based on local interests and needs rather than political affiliation.^{iv} This has resulted in tenuous relations between social groups and political parties, due in part to the historical development and prevailing structural weaknesses of Iranian political parties as well as overall constraints on political activity.

Major Iranian Political Currents

Political Current	Alliance	Policy Priorities	Constituents	Prominent Politicians and Leaders
Centrists	Moderate, List of Hope	Private sector-driven economic growth, less confrontational foreign policy, less concern about enforcing Islamic morals	Technocrats and entrepreneurs	Hassan Rouhani, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani
Reformists	Moderate, List of Hope	Social and political freedoms	Urban middle class and youth	Mohammad-Reza Khatami, Mehdi Karroubi
Hardliners	Conservative, Principlists	Resistance economy that emphasizes self-reliance, hawkish foreign policy that stresses opposition to Western influence, rejection of greater political and social freedoms	Lower socioeconomic constituents	Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, key figures dominating the Guardian Council, judiciary and security forces
Traditionalists	Conservative, Principlists	Market-style economy and less confrontational foreign policy	Conservative clergy, traditional mercantile class	Ali Larijani

The struggle between conservative hardliners and reformists came to a head during the 2009 presidential elections. The Green Movement emerged when the reformist candidates, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi challenged the incumbent conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's reelection win. Their calls for protests and accusations of electoral fraud resulted in the largest demonstrations since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The international community widely criticized Tehran's response as the leaders of the movement were put under house arrest and more than 70 people were killed in protests that ensued. Since 2009, the Iranian government has significantly stepped up its efforts to crackdown on dissent and screened reformist and moderate candidates more thoroughly to limit their ability to stand for office while attempting to reestablish the legitimacy it lost in the aftermath of the contested elections.

In the 2016 legislative elections, hardliners won just 68 of 290 parliamentary seats, down from the 112 seats held previously, with reformists and moderates winning 85 and 73 seats respectively. Women also made significant gains, winning the highest number of parliamentary seats since the Islamic revolution. They now hold a total of 17 seats, outnumbering clerics for the first time; religious leaders have been steadily losing ground in the parliament since they occupied almost half of the seats in the immediate wake of the Revolution. These gains demonstrate at least some level of tolerance on the Guardian Council's part for Reformist and Moderate candidates.

Shortly after the election, however, there were initial indications that these gains were not as significant as reformists and moderates hoped. The new parliament re-elected conservative Ali Larijani as speaker, which served as a possible sign that the composition of the parliament may not be as different as the election results would have indicated. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, also a staunch conservative and head of the Guardian Council, was also elected as the head of the Assembly of Experts, which selects the Supreme Leader.



The Electoral Process

Iran has one of the most frequent election cycles of any country, with respective elections for parliament, president, councils or assembly members occurring in some form nearly every year since 1979. Unlike elections in many countries, Iranian elections do not employ a voter's roll; as such, there is no voter registration process and eligible voters are not issued voter cards. Rather, on election day eligible voters can vote at any polling station using only their birth certificate, or *shenasnameh*, to verify that they are an Iranian citizen and 18 years or older. The Ministry of Interior estimates that 50 million people are eligible to vote in 2017. The 2016 parliamentary election was reported as having a 60.09 percent turnout rate of eligible voters, and the 2013 presidential election as having a 72.67 percent turnout rate. These state-reported numbers are difficult to verify, however, as no independent monitors have been allowed to observe the elections. Candidates for national elections are vetted by the Guardian Council

According to Article 28 of the Parliamentary Election Law, to qualify for the election a candidate must fulfill the criteria:

- ✓ Have faith and trust in Islam, and virtual obligation and practical engagement in Islamic tenets and the holy regime of the Islamic Republic of Iran
- ✓ Hold Islamic Republic of Iran's citizenship
- ✓ Demonstrate loyalty to the constitution, and the principle of *velayat-e faqih* (absolute rule of the jurisconsult)
- ✓ Hold a minimum of a high school diploma or its equivalent
- ✓ Have a good record and reputation in the respective constituency
- ✓ Be in good physical health (be able to see, hear and speak)
- ✓ Be at least 30 and no more than 75 years of age

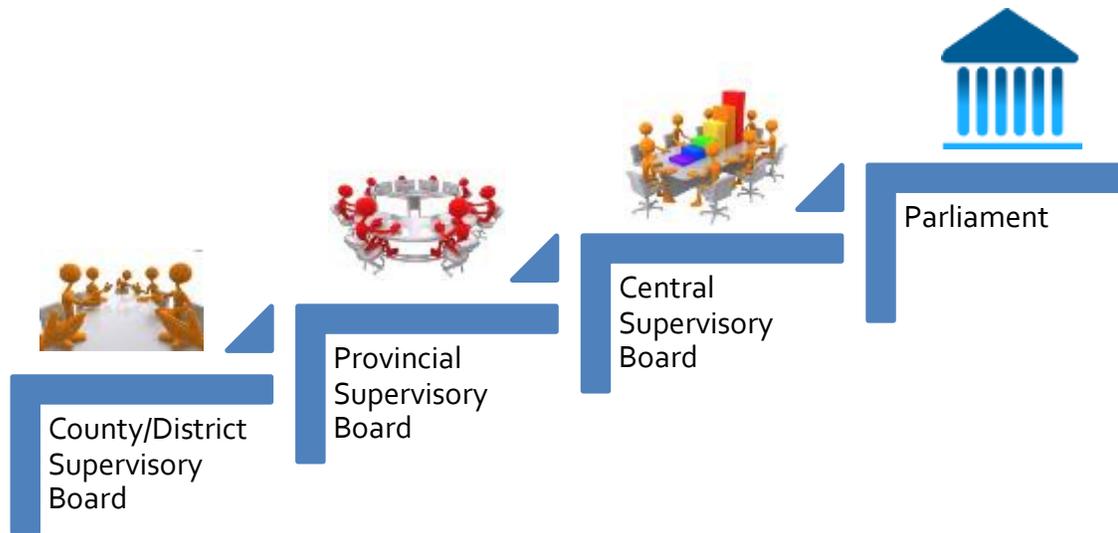
The Council has consistently used this power in previous election cycles to preemptively disqualify candidates. While certain objective vetting criteria such as age and nationality are clear, other criteria are subjective and, given the conservative nature of the presiding entities, results in broad disqualifications of candidates on an arbitrary basis, potentially including gender. The process lacks transparency and a fair appeals process, which further allows these entities to exclude individuals based on perceived ideological leanings. Moderate and reformist candidates face disproportionate disqualification; as a result their lists have included large numbers of candidates in attempts to overwhelm the screening process. Iranian news outlets reported that in 2016, for example, 12,123 candidates registered for the parliamentary elections, and over 1,200 women registered as candidates—almost triple the number of candidates in the previous parliamentary elections in 2012. Although a number of candidates were able to appeal their rejections and field campaigns, the vast number of registered candidates who had been cut from the process were unable to rejoin. In the end, 6,229 candidates, including 586 women, stood for the elections and campaigned for a place in the 290-seat parliament. The number of candidates for the Assembly of Experts nearly doubled from 493 in 2009 to 801 in 2016, nearly nine times the total number of available seats in the body. Sixteen women registered for the Assembly of Experts, but all were disqualified during the vetting process.

The president is directly elected through a two-round electoral process as the head of the government and nominates the Council of Ministers that is approved by the parliament.^v Ministers are responsible to the president and to the parliament. A 1989 constitutional amendment eliminated the office of the prime minister. The parliament can require the president or his ministers to attend its sessions and answer questions posed by members. The president does not hold veto power over legislation or hold the ability to dissolve the parliament. As the Iranian president is elected directly by the people and not the parliament, the president is not necessarily the



leader of the largest bloc in the legislature. The president is also not explicitly the commander in chief of the armed forces; the chain of command goes directly from the Supreme Leader to the heads of the regular armed forces and to the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Iran is currently the only country in the world in which the executive branch does not control the armed forces.^{vi}

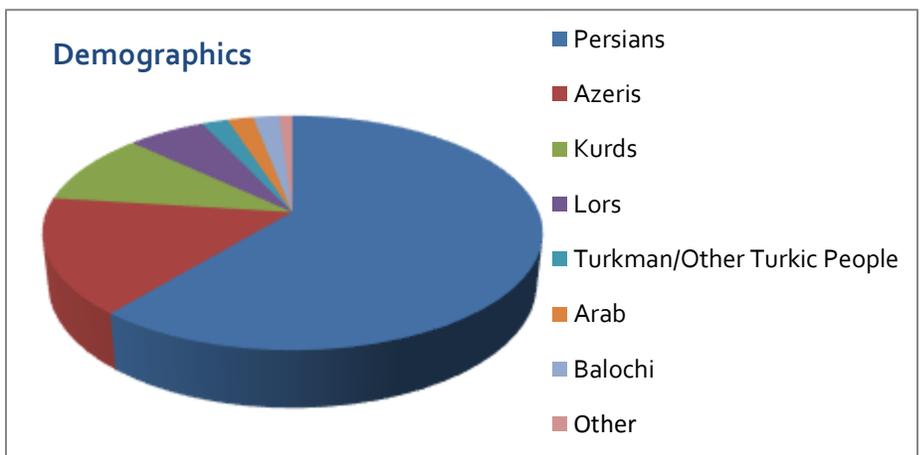
For local elections, candidates must be approved by their County (for city councils) or District (for village councils) Supervisory Board. These boards are charged with approving candidates in accordance with Articles 26 and 29 of the Local Council’s Election Law. According to law, the Parliament is responsible for overseeing council elections through these Boards. First, Members of Parliament (MPs) choose a five-member Central Supervisory Board among themselves. The Central Board is then responsible for selecting Provincial Supervisory Boards that in turn appoint five-member County/District Supervisory Board.



The electoral system for local council elections is based on a plurality system, where eligible voters have as many votes as the number of seats in their electoral district. Seats are filled by candidates in the order of highest votes until all positions are taken.^{vii} Local elections are administered by the Ministry of Interior. Locally, an Executive Board is formed to oversee council elections. The board is headed by the county governor (for city councils) or district governor (for village councils) and consists of the head of the Registration office, head of the Education office, and eight trusted members of the community. The county or district governor first nominates 30 trusted members of the community who will then hold a meeting and vote for eight (for city) or seven (for village) candidates among themselves.

Electorate Demographics

Iran is a multiethnic country, with over 80 different ethnic groups (including those that speak various languages and dialects) and religious sects. As of 2013, the main ethnic groups in Iran include: Persians (61%), Azeris (16%), Kurds (10%), Lors (6%), Turkmen and Other Turkic Peoples (2%), Arab (2%), Balochi (2%), and Other (1%). The Persian population tends to be concentrated in the central plateau, while concentrations of other ethnic groups are located in trans-border regions.^{viii}



As noted earlier, there are an estimated 50 million eligible registered voters. Several demographic factors, including voter age, ethnicity, degrees of urbanization and unemployment have affected both voting patterns and government structures. Over the last 20 years, the population of Iran has more than doubled, with approximately 60 percent of the population under the age of 30 years and 73.4 percent of the population living in urban areas.^{ix}

These demographic factors and trends have had multiple effects and influence on voter behavior:^x

- The average family size is getting smaller, which has led to families taking a more modern economic and social outlook.
- 70 percent of the population lives in urban areas and are therefore generally more concerned about issues such as urban management, transportation, the environment and pollution.
- 33 percent of women and 50 percent of the men between the ages of 20 and 34 are unmarried. This segment of the population (seven percent of the population overall) often does not feel represented by traditional and religious values held by a majority of candidates.
- There are 2.5 million families where a woman is the main provider for the family. This number has gone up over the last decade from 9.5 percent, increasing by 900,000 families. The emergence of a large number of single-woman households has resulted in a greater push for equality and an end to discrimination against women in politics and society.

The political dominance of urban elites over national elections has also resulted in delays in the decentralization process and led to a lack of political mobilization of rural constituencies. Directly following the revolution and during the Iran-Iraq war, the central government feared delegating any power to geographically peripheral ethnic minorities through decentralization, which it felt would interfere with the consolidation of power or war efforts.^{xi} After the war ended, however, it became clear that the central state would be unable to handle all of the planning in every city and village, particularly given rapid population growth and urbanization.

Women and Elections

Women face particular obstacles to serving in government. They are often excluded from processes because of a political culture of male domination and widespread perceptions of being unqualified given their gender. For example, in June 2013, Siahkali Moradi was prevented from assuming her seat on the Qazvin council because she was deemed “too attractive.”^{xii} Even with more than 10,000 votes, which placed her 14th out of 163 candidates and winning her a council seat, the election review board disqualified her for failing to follow Islamic norms in her campaign.^{xiii} Relatedly, in July 2014, a Tehran municipality manager attempted to segregate his offices by gender and to prevent deputy directors and managers from employing female secretaries and office managers, citing the need to “protect the women against familial and social damage.”^{xiv}

Women’s lack of independent financial resources also makes standing for election difficult. Because candidates often pay for the administrative costs of running an election campaign themselves (either through personal funds and/or fundraising), a candidate's financial resources can impact their ability to participate in elections.^{xv} Even if a woman is able to succeed in earning a place on the electoral lists, the proportion of women remains small relative to male counterparts, and low rates are often exacerbated by prevailing political conditions. A study has shown that in the first city councils, more than 70 percent of elected women served either as secretaries or ordinary members, despite the fact that in 109 out of 717 city council's, women received either the most or the second highest number of votes.^{xvi} For the 2012 parliamentary elections – the first following the highly contested 2009 presidential poll and subsequent violent government crackdown – 428 of 5,395 candidates were women, or just seven percent; four years earlier 12 percent of candidates were women. In the 2016 parliamentary elections more than 12,000 people filed to run for parliament, 1,434 of whom were women, constituting 12 percent of those registering. Following the rigorous vetting process led by the 12-member Guardian Council, the parliamentary candidate list was cut in half to 6,229 candidates, including 586 women. Despite this setback, 18 women secured seats in the new parliament, the highest number of women elected to parliament since the start of the Islamic Republic.



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- ⁱ Kian Tajbakhsh, "Municipal Management and Decentralization in Iran Phase I-Draft," The World Bank Regional Municipal Management and Decentralization Project, November 2003.
- ⁱⁱ Frederick Kagan, "Political Structures of Iran," American Enterprise Institute, March 1, 2009.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Farzen Sabet, "Iran's 2016 Elections: Change or Continuity?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 9, 2016.
- ^{iv} "Iran Report," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 24, 2003, Volume 6, Number 8.
- ^v The two-round system, or a second round of voting, is triggered if during the first round of elections no candidate receives a majority or at least 25 percent of votes cast.
- ^{vi} "The Structure of Power in Iran," Frontline-PBS.
- ^{vii} Yasmin Alem, Jørgen Elklit and Mehrangiz Kar, "Duality by Design: The Iranian Electoral System." International Foundation for Electoral Systems, March 2011.
- ^{viii} "Iran Minorities 2: Ethnic Diversity," The Iran Primer, United States Institute of Peace, September 3, 2013.
- ^{ix} Ted Regencia, "Iran votes 2016," Al Jazeera.
- ^x "Iran's youth key to elections," The Iran Project, June 1, 2013.
- ^{xi} Kian Tajbakhsh, "Political Decentralization and the Creation of Local Government in Iran: Consolidation or Transformation of the Theocratic State?" *Social Research*, Vol. 67, No. 2, Iran: Since the Revolution (SUMMER 2000), pp. 377-404.
- ^{xii} Adam Withnall, "City council candidate 'too attractive' for Iranian politics," *Independent*, August 14, 2013.
- ^{xiii} "Too sexy for Ayatollah? Iranian councilor banned for 'model' looks," *Al Arabiya*, August 14, 2013.
- ^{xiv} "Widespread Elimination of Women from Tehran City Administration for Their Comfort," Center for Human Rights in Iran, July 18, 2014.
- ^{xv} Tara Povey and Elah Rostami-Povey, *Women, Power and Politics in 21st Century Iran* (Oxon: Routledge, 2016).
- ^{xvi} Zohreh Khoshnamak, "Women Mayors in Iran," *Rooz* 2500, June 1, 2007

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