

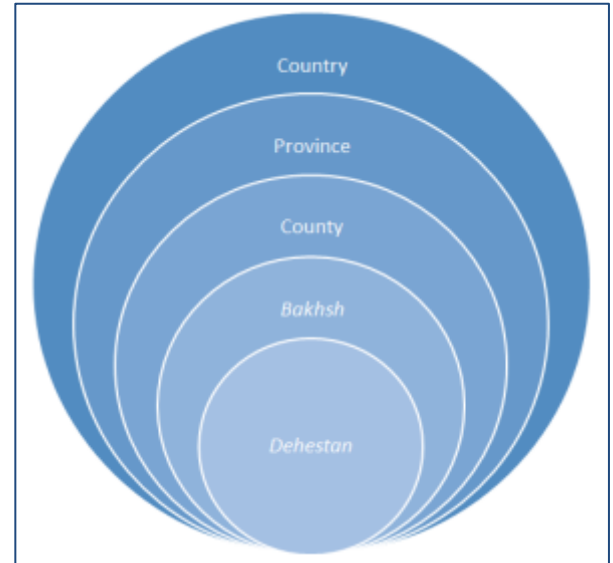
AN INTRODUCTORY PRIMER ON

# Local Elections in Iran



## Structure of Local Government

Local institutions resemble national ones in their dual nature. At almost every level of government, there are appointed, administrative councils headed by representatives of the central government. These institutions represent the top down hierarchy on the provincial, county, district, city and village level. There is also a parallel bottom up hierarchy of elected officials and councils, with local and village councils at its base.



Village and city councils are the only local institutions whose members are directly elected. Once village councils are elected, councilors nominate members from their ranks to represent their village at district, or *bakhsh*, councils. Once bakhsh councils are formed, they nominate members to represent their bakhsh at county councils, and so on until the Supreme Council of the Provinces. The bottom-up, elected councils tend to play supervisory and consultative roles rather than legislative ones. City councils elect mayors, approve municipal budgets and supervise their implementation. They approve all city planning and development decisions.

Conversely to elected bodies, central government and executive functions are largely managed through a top-down process of appointed heads of councils with the bulk of authority, although mayors are chosen by councils themselves. Mayors are in charge of implementing directives from city councils. They are nominated by the councils and approved by the Ministry of Interior, and serve as heads of the municipal administrations for four-year terms. The Ministry of the Interior also appoints the *ostandars*, who appoint the *farmandars* in their province with the Ministry's approval and so on. Administrative councils are unelected bodies comprised of officials from the county's executive, law enforcement and judiciary. Their functions tend to be more security and law-and-order-based as they implement state policies and coordinate among government agencies.

Level	Top Down, Appointed ↓	Bottom Up, Elected ↑
Country	Ministry of the Interior	Supreme Council of the Provinces
Province	Ostandars, head of Provincial Administrative Councils	Provincial Councils
County	Farmandar, head of County Administrative Councils	County Councils
Bakhsh <sup>i</sup>	Bakhshdar, head of Bakhsh Administrative Councils	Bakhsh Councils
Dehestan <sup>ii</sup>	Dehdar	No councils
City/Village	Mayor/Dehyar (chosen by council)	City/Village Councils



## Local Village and City Councils

Though their powers are limited, local councils have been credited with creating new - if slight - political space in Iran, where citizens might be able to be critical of, but not threatening to, the central state.<sup>iii</sup> Directly following the Islamic Revolution the consolidation of power, the nationalization of many industries, fear of ethnic uprising, the Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent reconstruction led to the strengthening of state centralization. Between 1979 and 1998, then, there was little to no space for direct public contribution to social, political or economic urban management decision making.<sup>iv</sup>

For more information on Iran's local governing structures, check out Nabz-Iran, [Making Sense of Iran's Administrative System and Divisions](#).

Prior to 1999, the Ministry of Interior appointed mayors. Since the first popular local elections in 1999, holding direct elections for council members and having the elected council members recommend mayors has shifted accountability away from the Ministry of Interior to local residents as locally elected officials will need to satisfy their constituents in order to gain reelection.<sup>v</sup> A new bill is currently being debated in parliament; if ratified mayors of 50 major cities with over 200,000 inhabitants will be elected directly by citizens rather than appointed by council members, further tying mayors directly to constituents.<sup>vi</sup> According to the 2003 Law of Councils, the number of seats on a local council is proportionate to the size of the constituency.

### Number of Council Members According to Population

Size of Population	Number of Seats on Council
Cities of population below 10,000	5 representatives, no districts
Cities of population between 10,000 and 50,000	7 representatives, no districts
Cities of population between 50,000 and 100,000	9 representatives, 3 districts
Cities of population between 100,000 and 150,000	12 representatives, 4 districts
Cities of population greater than 150,000	15 representatives, 5 districts
City of Tehran	30 representatives, 10 electoral districts

### 1999 Local Elections

In the first ever municipal elections in 1999, more than 334,000 individuals, including some 5,000 women, ran for office to fill 190,000 seats across the Islamic Republic (36,000 candidates were disqualified).<sup>vii</sup> In many large cities, especially Tehran and Esfahan, moderate-leaning candidates won convincingly. In more rural areas, independents dominated, indicating a larger concern with more local issues over national politics or ideologically aligned blocs.<sup>viii</sup> In Tehran, candidates representing the pro-Khatami (reformist) Islamic Iran Participation Front won 13 out of 15 seats, with independents winning the remaining two. Overall, the turnout for the poll was 24 million, or 65 percent of eligible voters, higher than the 45 percent participation in the Assembly of Experts election held the previous year.

Although only 2.2 percent of candidates across Iran were women, many polled exceptionally well. President Khatami's sister was elected in their hometown of Ardakan, and women candidates won the most votes on 20 councils.<sup>ix</sup> Overall for these first councils, 1,375 women were elected throughout Iran, comprising less than one percent of the total councilors elected. The highest ratio of women councilors was in the city of Tehran at three percent, while in many city councils around Iran, there were no women elected.<sup>x</sup>

The first term of local councils faced a number of problems, including the need to spend a large portion of the term laying foundations for the new institutions; they were thus less able to focus on managing local affairs. Ambiguities in the Local Council's Election Law also led to friction between appointed officials, elected council members, mayors and governors, which further impacted the council's overall efficiency. As a result, citizens felt local councils failed to meet their expectations and needs, which led to voter apathy in the 2003 election.<sup>xi</sup>

### 2003 Local Elections

In contrast to the 1999 municipal elections, the number of candidate hopefuls and ballots cast for the 2003 local polls were remarkably low (200,000 candidates for 168,000 seats). However, fewer than three percent of candidates were disqualified<sup>xii</sup> (compared to the almost 19 percent during the previous municipal election) and the percentage of women elected into local councils increased from 0.8 to 1.4 percent. Notably, many constituencies went uncontested and elections were held in only 21 of 28 provinces.<sup>xiii</sup>

The decline in voter turnout was steepest in major cities like Isfahan, Mashhad, Shiraz and Tehran, where only 12 to 20 percent of eligible voters participated.<sup>xiv</sup> Overall, only 16 million eligible voters participated, compared to 26 million in 1999.<sup>xv</sup> The sharp decline in voter turnout was attributed to public disillusionment with local council's initial performance -- their perceived lack of power and poor governance -- following the enthusiasm and expectations that the 1999 elections generated.<sup>xvi</sup>

Capitalizing on low voter turnout and the public's disappointment with the political process, conservatives dominated the elections in nearly all major cities, representing the first time the reform movement had been so badly defeated at the polls since its emergence in the mid-1990s.<sup>xvii</sup> The most significant outcome of the low turnout was that it allowed hardliners to gain control of the Tehran City Council and elect a previously little known Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as mayor, who was catapulted to the presidency from this platform just two years later.<sup>xviii</sup>



### 2006 Local Elections

The 2003 local election results clearly demonstrated Iranian's discontent with the reform movement's performance.<sup>xix</sup> The 2006 vote also served as a clear referendum, but this cycle's results demonstrated a backlash against conservative President Ahmadinejad's failure to keep his electoral promises to resolve the country's growing economic problems. The turnout of 60 percent<sup>xx</sup> was well above previous local elections and candidate applications increased significantly as more than 233,000 people, including some 5,000 women, ran for more than 113,000 council seats. The harliner-dominated parliamentary committees disqualified 10,000 candidates before the poll.<sup>xxi</sup> Of the 264 seats on provincial capital councils 44 went to women.<sup>xxii</sup>

Candidates running on Ahmadinejad's Sweet Scent of Service coalition list secured only three out of 15 seats on the symbolically important Tehran City Council, indicating support for the pragmatic conservative mayor, Baqer Qalibaf, a rival Ahmadinejad had defeated in the 2005 presidential election.<sup>xxiii</sup> The dissatisfaction expressed in the low turnout in 2003 and the high, reformist leaning turnout in 2006 demonstrate that, despite the councils' local focus, municipal elections are both influenced by and have an impact on national polls.

### 2013 Local Elections and the Combination of Elections

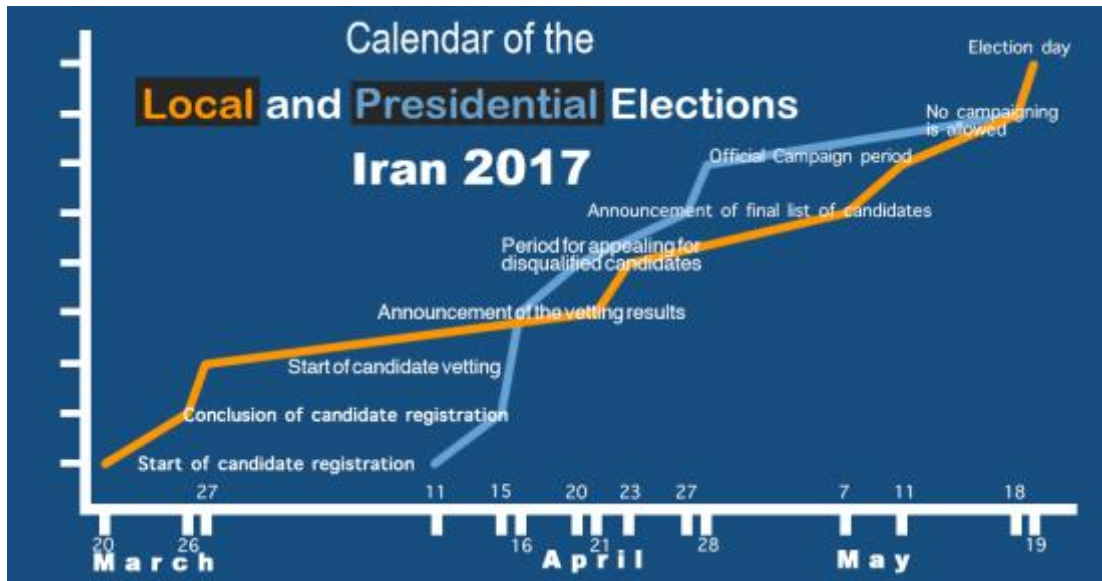
Due to the unstable political climate following the 2009 Green Movement, the 2010 city council elections were not held and all incumbents' terms were extended. In April 2010, by the order of the Supreme Leader and parliament's subsequent ratification of Article 3 of the Presidential Election Law, future local elections were legislated to be held the same date as the presidential elections<sup>xxiv</sup> in attempts to improve public relations and restore confidence in the presidential process.<sup>xxv</sup> This is not the first time Iranian officials scheduled local and national elections together to encourage voter turnout. In 1999, the Guardian Council and the Interior Ministry held the Assembly of Experts election

around the same time as the first local elections, which resulted in a nine percent increase in the Assembly of Experts turnout compared with the previous election.<sup>xxvi</sup>

During the candidate registration process, 686 candidates, including about 30 women, registered as presidential candidates; ultimately only eight candidates were approved by the Guardian Council.<sup>xxvii</sup> Over 300,000 candidates registered for city and local elections, with 3,000 candidates being disqualified,<sup>xxviii</sup> 2,810 of which appealed their disqualifications.<sup>xxix</sup> On June 14, 2013, Iranians cast their votes in the country's eleventh presidential and fourth city and village council elections. In addition to electing a new president given a two-term limit prohibiting the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from seeking re-election, the elections filled more than 126,000 local council seats. Although the high turnout rate reported by the government (72.67 percent) cannot be independently confirmed, there was obvious voter enthusiasm and Iranians demonstrated an appetite for change given the first-round victory of the relatively moderate Hassan Rouhani. In Tehran the local election turnout was 45 percent compared to 12 percent in 2003.<sup>xxx</sup> Across Iran, principalists also lost ground in many of their former strongholds.

## Context for the 2017 Presidential and Municipal Elections

Over the course of the past few election cycles, moderates and women have gained ground in the elected parliament, municipal councils and the executive branch. For the February 2016 parliamentary election, more than 12,000 people registered as candidates, although the Guardian Council's strict and opaque vetting procedures disqualified more than half. Women also registered to run for elections in record numbers. In fact, three times as many women registered to become candidates for parliament in the 2016 election than the 2012 election. In the end, 6,229 candidates, including 586 women, stood for the elections and campaigned for a place in the 290-seat parliament. Falling just short of an outright majority, moderates and reformists now make up the largest faction in the parliament for the first time in ten years. In addition to the 14 women who won in the first round, four more were elected in the runoff in April 2016, resulting in the highest number of women elected to parliament since the start of the Islamic Republic.



Though these gains are encouraging, they have produced backlash from hardline elements in the unelected branches of government that has resulted in stricter enforcement of morality laws and an increase in arrests and executions. With an eye on the 2017 elections, hardliners have targeted activists and led crackdowns on civil society and cultural events in an effort to discredit Rouhani as a force of moderate social change. Friction between the appointed conservative establishment and elected moderates brought on by the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action nuclear agreement and the upcoming elections have also highlighted the tension created by the dual government structure.



Iranian civil society and moderate elements of the government, however, have proven resilient and have taken to social media to dispute some of the hardliners restrictions on certain freedoms. How this dispute between moderates and hardliners affects Iranian citizens, as well as civil society's response, will continue to be important factors to watch ahead of the elections, particularly its impacts on local level politics and whether the municipal election will serve as a proxy for larger political maneuvers or whether it will be informed by local issues and interests.

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<sup>i</sup> Bakhsh is sometimes translated as district.

<sup>ii</sup> Dehestans consist of a number of adjoining villages, localities, and farmsteads that are linked with one another for cultural, social, or economic reasons. Further information is provided below.

<sup>iii</sup> Tajbakhsh, "Political Decentralization and the Creation of Local Government in Iran: Consolidation or Transformation of the Theocratic State?"

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.uni-potsdam.de/db/wtcms/contentido-4.4.5/cms/upload/pdf/lehre\\_kraemer2\\_nateghpour.pdf](http://www.uni-potsdam.de/db/wtcms/contentido-4.4.5/cms/upload/pdf/lehre_kraemer2_nateghpour.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> The Majles is currently reviewing a bill which, if ratified, would make it so that in cities with a population greater than 200,000, mayors would be elected by direct popular vote.

<sup>vi</sup> "Mayors elected by direct popular vote," Entekhab.ir, May 14, 2016.

<sup>vii</sup> Nigel Parsons, "Electoral Politics in Iran: Rules of the Arena, Popular Participation, and the Limits of Elastic in the Islamic Republic." Middle East Institute, November 1, 2010.

<sup>viii</sup> Peter Kiernan, "Iran's Reformers Dominate Council Elections," Washington Report on Middle East Affairs, April/May 1999, pages 66, 102

<sup>ix</sup> Ibid.

<sup>x</sup> Razieh Rezaadeh, "Women Empowerment and Good Urban Governance in Iran." Asian Social Science Vol. 7, No. 3; March 2011.

<sup>xi</sup> Alem, Elklit and Kar, "Duality by Design: The Iranian Electoral System."

<sup>xii</sup> "Iran Report," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, February 24, 2003, Volume 6, Number 8.

<sup>xiii</sup> Parsons, "Electoral Politics in Iran: Rules of the Arena, Popular Participation, and the Limits of Elastic in the Islamic Republic."

<sup>xiv</sup> "Iran Report," Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, October 23, 2006, Volume 9, Number 39.

<sup>xv</sup> Ray Takeyh, "Iran's Municipal Elections: A Turning Point for the Reform Movement?" The Washington Institute, Policy #721, March 6, 2003.

<sup>xvi</sup> Parsons, "Electoral Politics in Iran: Rules of the Arena, Popular Participation, and the Limits of Elastic in the Islamic Republic."

<sup>xvii</sup> Takeyh, "Iran's Municipal Elections: A Turning Point for the Reform Movement?"

<sup>xviii</sup> Robert Tait, "Iranians vote in first test for Ahmadinejad," The Guardian, December 15, 2006.

<sup>xix</sup> "Local election results in Iran seen as rebuff for Ahmadinejad," Russia Today (RT), December 19, 2006.

<sup>xx</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxi</sup> Jame Klatell, "Ahmadinejad Rivals Lead Iran Elections," Associated Press-CBS News, December 16, 2006.

<sup>xxii</sup> Sanam Vakil, "Women and Politics in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Action and Reaction," (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Robert Tait, "Ahmadinejad loses first electoral test as political rivals win key seats," The Guardian, December 18, 2006.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Reza H. Akbari and Saeed Aganji, "Why Iran's city council elections matter," Al Monitor, May 20, 2013.

<sup>xxv</sup> Mohammad Hossein Ziya, "Iranian presidential election: why turnout will be key," The Guardian, March 13, 2013.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Akbari and Aganji, "Why Iran's city council elections matter."

<sup>xxvii</sup> "Summary Report: Iran's June 14, 2013 - Presidential and City and Village Elections," National Democratic Institute for International Affairs, June 12, 2013.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Note: the Guardian Council is not responsible for vetting candidates for city and local council elections. An observatory body appointed by the parliament is responsible for managing the vetting process for local elections.

<sup>xxix</sup> Hanif Zarrabi-Kashan, "Iran Election Update," The Wilson Center, May 16, 2013.

<sup>xxx</sup> Ali M. Pedram, "Reformists return to power in Iran's local elections," Asharq Al-Awsat, June 20, 2013.

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