

# IRAN TASK FORCE

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## The Political Kaleidoscope Turns Again in Crisis-Challenged Iran: 2013 Elections

Iran has never had what the West would regard as free, fair, and competitive elections. Some would point to the brief periods following the 1906 Constitutional Revolution and between the end of World War II and 1953, when a CIA-backed coup re-installed Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, as possible exceptions to this rule. The upcoming presidential elections this June will be no such exception, with candidates restricted to eight proven loyalists to the regime. Nevertheless, the vote will be an important barometer of the stability and durability of an embattled regime that is increasingly unpopular domestically and isolated internationally. The elections will also produce a new turn of the kaleidoscope within Iran's shrinking political elite, as existing factions break apart and regroup. The next president is likely to be more moderate in tone, if not in policy, and more competent and less divisive than the outgoing Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This could have important implications not just for the country's domestic course but for Iran's confrontation with the United States and the international community over the nuclear question.

### The Context

The 2013 elections will take place at a time of crisis for Iran, which is suffering from the worst economic sanctions in its history. The Iranian leadership's refusal to accept international demands for verifiable curbs on its nuclear program combined with its mismanagement of the economy have led to a dire situation. Iranian oil

### Atlantic Council Iran Task Force

The Iran Task Force, launched in 2010 and chaired by Ambassador Stuart Eizenstat, seeks to perform a comprehensive analysis of Iran's internal political landscape, as well as its role in the region and globally, to answer the question of whether there are elements within the country and region that can build the basis for an improved relationship with the West and how these elements, if they exist, could be utilized by US policymakers.

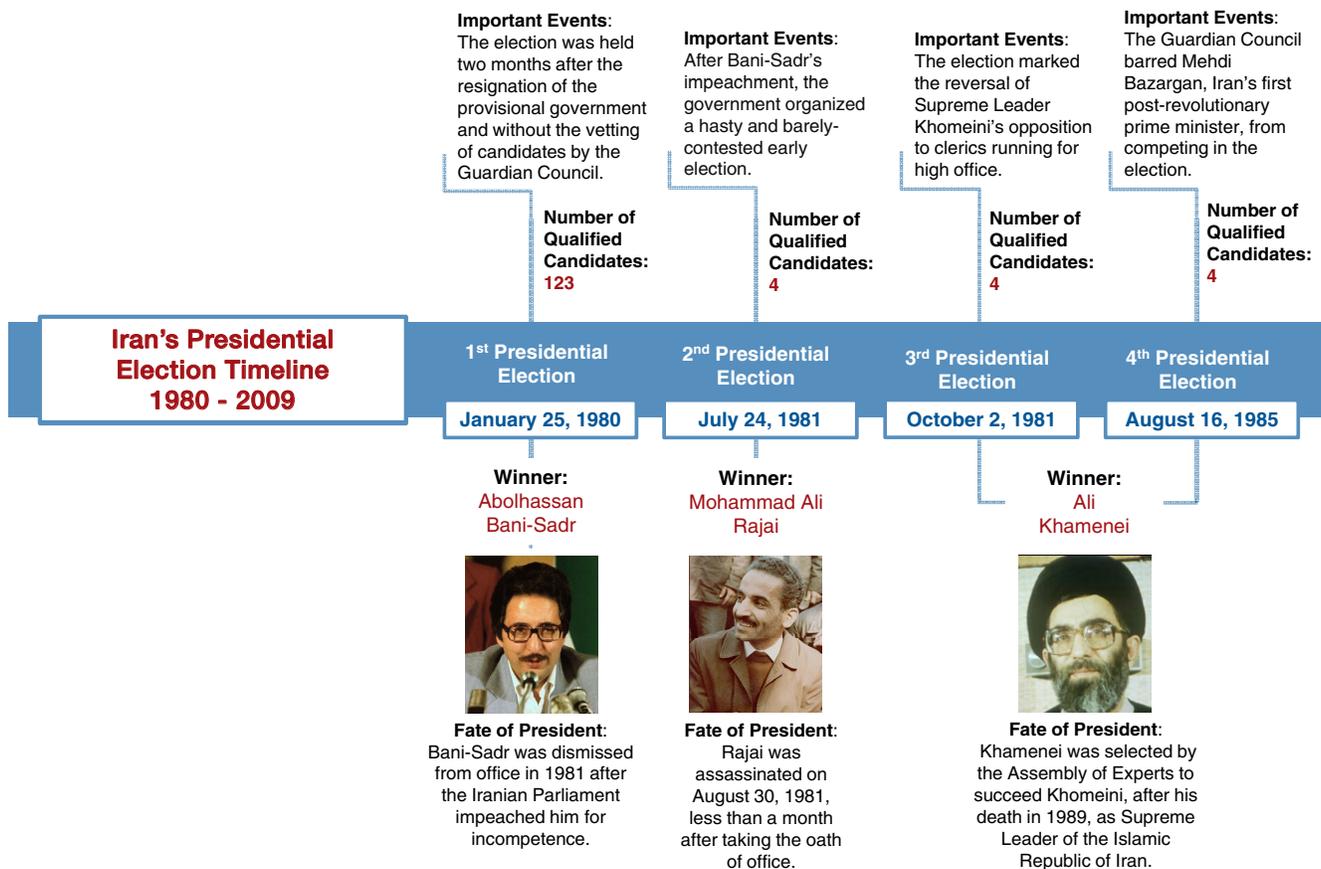
The Iran Task Force is a project of the Atlantic Council's South Asia Center, and is supported generously by a grant from the Ploughshares Fund.

revenues have been halved to under \$70 billion last year<sup>1</sup> and inflation and unemployment are at record levels. Iranian citizens will be voting in an atmosphere of extreme vigilance by the security services that fear a repeat of the 2009 demonstrations. The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, will seek to balance his desire for a respectable turnout with his reluctance to allow a popular candidate with an independent power base to run. Khamenei's preferred replacement for Ahmadinejad would be someone who combines loyalty to the regime with a

<sup>1</sup> David Bird, Sanctions Cut Iran's Oil Exports to 26-Year Low, *The Wall Street Journal*, April 29, 2013 (<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323528404578452121121218106.html>)

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proven record of managerial competence. A frustrated and disillusioned electorate, to the extent it is willing to turn out, may be seeking the same. “Everyone is looking for a competent CEO,” said Farideh Farhi, an expert on Iran at the University of Hawaii.<sup>2</sup>

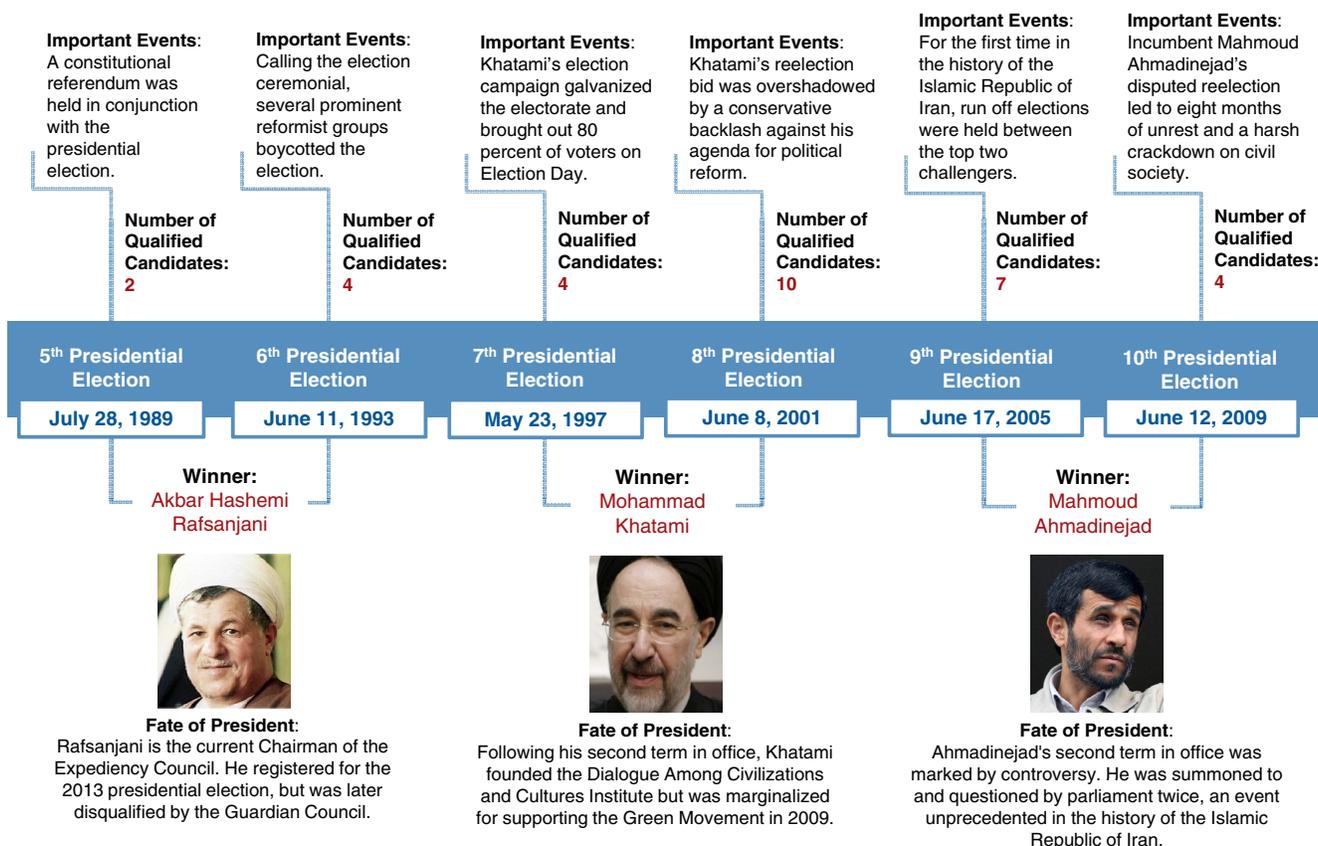
The pool from which this competent steward can be chosen is smaller than at any period in the history of the Islamic Republic. Since he came to power in 1989, the Supreme Leader has marginalized major factions in Iran, including pragmatists and reformists, and reduced space for authorized political expression.<sup>3</sup> However, he has also failed to reduce the country’s endemic factionalism. New coalitions, which often represent important economic constituencies, are fighting over diminishing spoils. They

<sup>2</sup> Comment to co-author, April 12, 2013.  
<sup>3</sup> Yasmin Alem and Barbara Slavin, “The Supreme Leader Grows Ever Lonelier at the Top,” Atlantic Council Iran Task Force, March 2012 ([http://www.acus.org/files/publication\\_pdfs/403/031912\\_ACUS\\_IranInternal.PDF](http://www.acus.org/files/publication_pdfs/403/031912_ACUS_IranInternal.PDF)).

include members of the Revolutionary Guards who control large portions of the Iranian economy and industrialists and importers struggling to contend with sanctions. The Leader will seek to engineer the vote and might resort to fraud if necessary to anoint his preferred candidate. Tensions could still flare if the outgoing president tries to thwart the Leader’s desire to marginalize the Ahmadinejad camp.

### History of Iranian Elections

Frequent elections have been a salient feature of the Islamic Republic. Subject to state intervention and manipulation—and thus far from inclusive conduits for genuine power contestation—the outcomes of Iranian elections still matter. Although the Supreme Leader makes the final and key decisions on both foreign and domestic policy, important aspects of Iran’s management have switched from the hands of pragmatists (1989-97) to reformists (1997-2005) and then conservatives (2005-13). These electoral shifts were reflected in more than

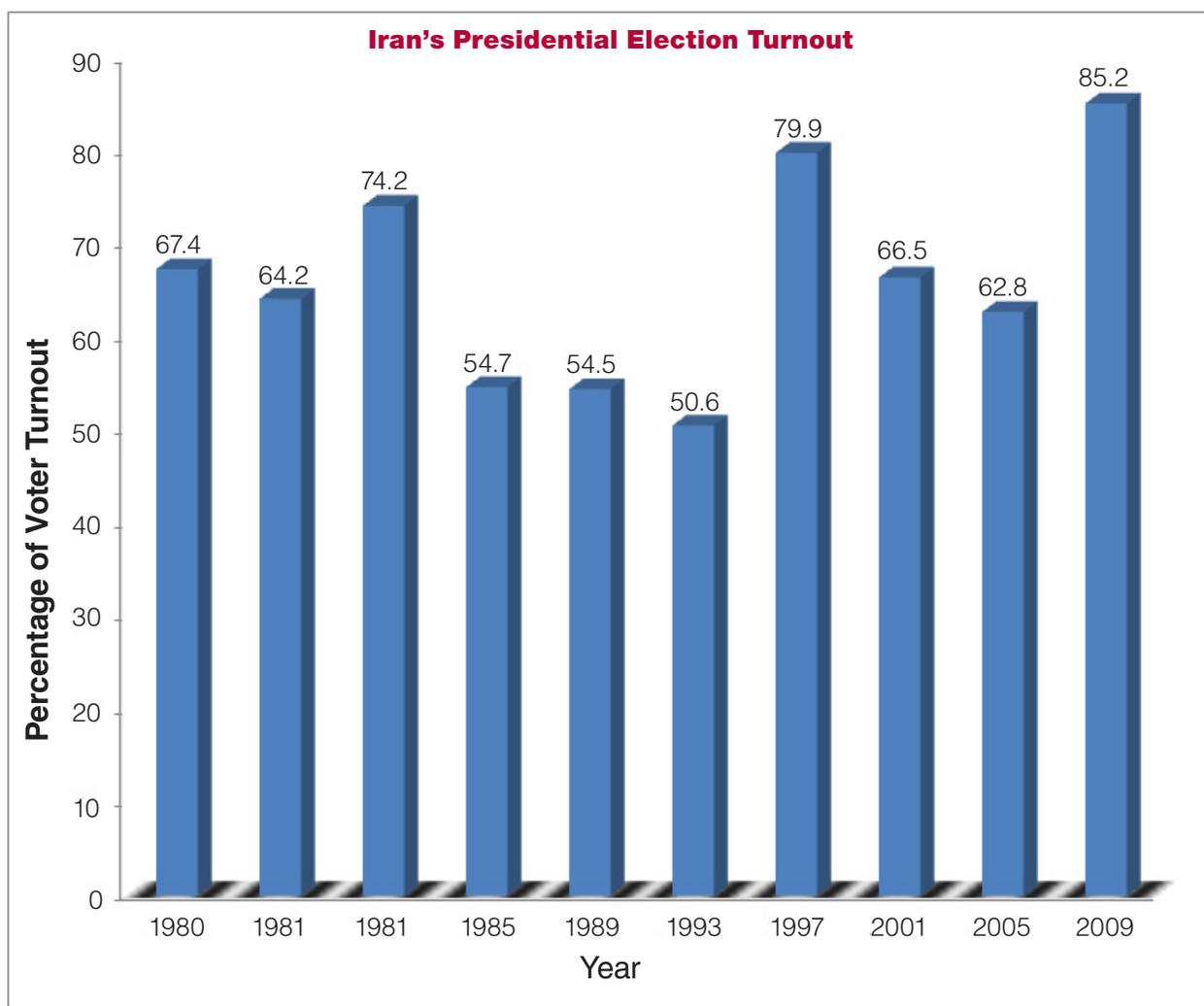


just a change of tone and at times resulted in genuine overtures to the West and internal relaxation of strict Islamic rules. During the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, for example, restrictions on the press and on the dress and public participation of women eased. Iranian officials under Khatami also made repeated efforts to begin a comprehensive dialogue with the George W. Bush administration, which were largely rebuffed.<sup>4</sup> Essential for the ethos of a regime born out of a popular uprising, elections have at times reinforced the regime's legitimacy. This function has become more important as revolutionary fatigue and disillusionment have set in over the years. The state has continuously encouraged mass participation in elections in order to demonstrate a broad base of support to domestic and foreign opponents alike. But energizing the electorate has also proven to be destabilizing. In fact, exceptionally high turnouts in recent presidential polls—79

<sup>4</sup> See Barbara Slavín, *Bitter Friends, Bitter Enemies: Iran, the US and the Twisted Path to Confrontation* (St. Martin's, 2007).

and 85 percent in 1997 and 2009, respectively—have occurred at the height of popular dissatisfaction with the country's political course. In both instances, citizens used elections to register their grievances and challenge the status quo. In 1997, the ruling establishment heeded the call for change and respected the landslide victory of Khatami, a relative moderate in Iranian terms. In 2009, however, the Supreme Leader chose repression over reform, thus undermining the legitimacy of elections at home and in the eyes of the international community.

Second, elections have served as a vehicle for managing intra-elite competition and tempering factional rivalries. Presidential elections in particular have provided an important arena for factional jockeying. The last three presidents rose from different groups within the ruling elite and adhered to disparate socio-economic worldviews. However, instead of reducing factional rivalries, the last two presidential contests aggravated them. In 2005, two



prominent candidates—former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and former Speaker of the Parliament Mehdi Karroubi—openly accused institutions close to the Supreme Leader of electoral fraud.<sup>5</sup> Their complaints fell on deaf ears, prompting Rafsanjani to publically state that he would “complain to God.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in 2009, the challengers of the incumbent president Ahmadinejad refused to accept the election results. Months of violent confrontation between security forces and protestors culminated in mass arrests, show trials, and the house arrest of former Prime Minister Mir Hossein Mousavi and Karroubi. Third, presidential elections have brought to the surface inherent contradictions in Iran’s hybrid political system, which blends

the democratic notion of popular sovereignty with the Islamic principle of *velayat-e faqih* or divine sovereignty. Through elections, the pendulum has oscillated between the Islamic Republic’s republican and theocratic identities. The first presidential election in 1980 bolstered the republican nature of the newly established regime. More than a hundred presidential contenders participated in a poll that was largely seen as competitive. Less than two years later, however, theocratic forces impeached Iran’s first president, Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, and swung the pendulum towards divine sovereignty. In a hastily organized new election, only four regime insiders among the seventy-one registered candidates were deemed fit to run by the Guardian Council. Influential to this day, the Guardian Council is a body that vets candidates for public office and is dominated by direct and indirect appointees of the Supreme Leader. Between 1981 to 1997, Iran’s presidential elections remained largely uncontested. But in

5 Michael Slackman, “Iran Moderate Says Hard-Liners Rigged Election,” *New York Times*, June 19, 2005 ([http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/international/middleeast/19iran.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/international/middleeast/19iran.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0)).

6 Muhammad Sahimi, “Rafsanjani’s Exit from Power: What Next?” *Tehran Bureau*, PBS, March 14, 2011, (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/04/the-middle-road-of-hashemi-rafsanjani.html>).

1997, the pendulum swung back to popular sovereignty, when Khatami won against the establishment's candidate, a conservative speaker of the parliament. Khatami's efforts at political reform and strengthening the republican aspects of the regime, however, were soon stymied by Khamenei. In both 2005 and 2009, the theocratic nature of the regime prevailed, and there were credible allegations of fraud, particularly in 2009.

### Unprecedented Challenges in 2013

The 2013 election will take place at a time when the Islamic Republic is mired in economic hardship. Draconian unilateral and multilateral sanctions, increasing international isolation and mounting financial restrictions have halved the country's oil revenues, severely shrunk its industrial sector, and slashed the value of its national currency by nearly 80 percent. Economic mismanagement and endemic corruption have contributed to Iran's economic decline, while its population has been forced to deal with the consequences of out of control inflation and high unemployment.

Partly because of the economic crisis, the domestic political landscape is more fractured and polarized than ever. The hard-line elite that orchestrated the 2009 election and ensuing crackdown has splintered again. The animosity between Ahmadinejad and Khamenei—who back in 2009 declared Ahmadinejad's re-election a "divine blessing"—became public in 2011 and has only gotten worse, putting in question the orderly administration of the 2013 vote. While the president's administration is in charge of conducting the elections, the Leader's allies will be responsible for monitoring the process and tabulating the results. Amendments to the election law enacted earlier this year have diminished the Ahmadinejad government's authority to interfere in the final counting of votes nationwide. Instead of the Ministry of Interior, that crucial task is being delegated to a new eleven-member council dominated by Khamenei's allies.<sup>7</sup>

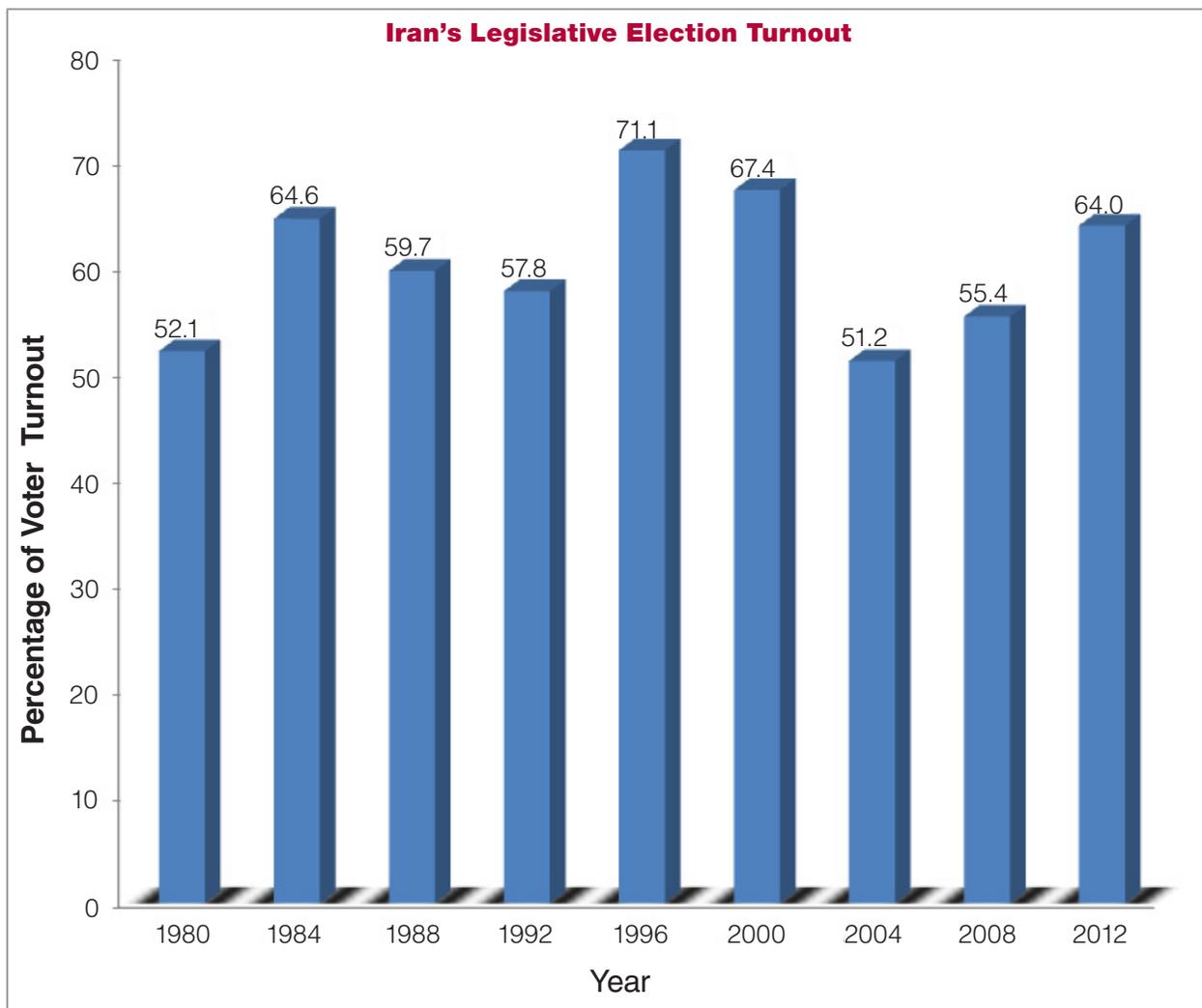
7 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Iranian Election Reform Could Favor Establishment Candidate," *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, March 11, 2013 (<http://www.rferl.org/content/iranian-election-reform-candidates-favoring-establishment/24790156.html>).

The current predicament is not new to the man at the helm of power in the Islamic Republic. The election that brought Khamenei to office in 1981, as Iran's first clerical president, was marked by a fierce power struggle between the clerical establishment's loyalists and armed opposition forces, rival Islamic groups, secular nationalists, and liberals. His re-election campaign in 1985 took place at a time of daunting external threats and economic challenges. Iran was in the midst of a bloody war with Iraq and was largely denied access to arms (apart from those provided by Israel and the Reagan administration during the Iran-Contra episode) and financial aid after being designated as a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States. Yet the scale and scope of challenges that the seventy-four-year-old Khamenei has to simultaneously manage in the run up to the 2013 elections are truly unprecedented. Given his age, it is entirely possible that these are the last presidential elections the Leader will oversee. Moreover, the June 14 election is the first presidential poll since Iran's strongest post-1979 political earthquake—the still-disputed 2009 presidential vote and its tumultuous aftermath. As such, conducting a relatively incident-free election and choreographing a peaceful transition of power are critical for the regime's stability.

Iranian authorities are trying to pre-empt a repeat of the 2009 imbroglio, even if it that requires breaking with their previous electoral customs. Despite the state's long tradition of relaxing social restrictions and tolerating a more politically vibrant atmosphere during presidential campaigns, Iran's security forces have arrested and harassed dozens of journalists and political activists, shut down newspapers, disrupted the Internet and launched a concerted intimidation campaign through state-owned media.<sup>8</sup> Former President Khatami recently described the level of political securitization as "suffocating."<sup>9</sup> The challenge of holding a calm election and marshaling a high turnout, however, could be partially mitigated by another unique characteristic of this election: the presidential

8 Omid Memarian, "Why Iran's June Election will be Different," *Lobe Log*, May 6, 2013 (<http://www.rferl.org/content/iranian-election-reform-candidates-favoring-establishment/24790156.html>).

9 Arash Karami, "Rafsanjani Says he Won't Run Without Khamenei's Consent," *Al-Monitor*, May 6, 2013 (<http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/05/1941/rafsanjani-says-he-wont-run-without-khameneis-consent/>).



poll will be conducted in conjunction with local council elections.<sup>10</sup> Familial, tribal, and ethnic affiliations tend to motivate voters to participate and choose from among nearly one million candidates vying for councilor seats across the country.

### **Electoral Landscape: Factions within Factions**

By the end of the registration period on May 11, 686 candidates had thrown their hats and turbans in the ring to become the Islamic Republic's seventh president.<sup>11</sup> The field of registered candidates was crowded with former

luminaries and current officials. But, by the time the results of the Guardian Council's vetting were released on May 21, the field of presidential hopefuls had been narrowed down to eight. Of the slate of approved candidates all are loyal to Iran's Supreme Leader. Six are his direct appointees to the Expediency Council—a body that is supposed to mediate disputes between government branches—and include Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign minister and the Leader's chief foreign policy advisor; Gholam Ali Haddad Adel, the parliament's majority whip and former speaker and the father-in-law of the Leader's influential son, Mojtaba; Saeed Jalili, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council; Mohsen Rezaei, current Secretary of the Expediency Council and former commander of the IRGC; Mohammad Reza Aref; and Hassan Rowhani, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator from 2003 to 2005. Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, a former commander of the Air Force of the

<sup>10</sup> Local council elections, initially slated for the winter of 2011, were postponed following the 2009 controversial presidential election and its tumultuous aftermath.

<sup>11</sup> Iran's Minister of Interior: 686 Candidates Register for Presidential Election," *Khabaronline*, March 11, 2013 (<http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/292353/politics/election>)(in Persian).

Revolutionary Guards and the current mayor of Tehran is another close ally of the Supreme Leader. A final candidate, Mohammad Gharazi, was a minister in the cabinets of Mousavi—the former prime minister and presidential candidate who is under house arrest—and Rafsanjani, but has not held public office since 1997.

The 2013 race has been marked by several 11th hour twists including the last minute registration of Rafsanjani and Esfandiari Rahim Mashaei, a close ally of Ahmadinejad—and their subsequent disqualification by the Guardian Council. Even now that the list of approved candidates is out, the race could still change substantially if some of those approved drop out. However, it is clear that the Supreme Leader intends the vote to be an exclusive race among members of his entourage and his preference will likely be decisive come June 14. In a speech to election officials in early May, Khamenei described the ideal candidate as someone who is “brave and fearless in the international arena and in the face of arrogant powers, and who has planning, wisdom and foresight in the domestic arena, and believes in the resistance economy.”<sup>12</sup> Khamenei seems to be seeking unquestionable fealty and subservience in the next president. As such, his ideal candidate would lack ambition, an independent power base and pro-Western tendencies. With the circle of elites around him shrinking and his list of criteria for prospective candidates growing, the pool from which the leader could choose his preferred executive is small. Although Iran’s nebulous factional borders are in constant flux, there remain four main political groups vying to send their candidate to the presidential palace:

- **Conservatives close to the Supreme Leader.** This group encompassed individuals who have an established record of loyalty to Khamenei and subscribe to his worldview. A number of these individuals formed coalitions including the 2+1 Coalition, a troika of Velayati, Haddad Adel, and Qalibaf. Calling their alliance “the Coalition for Progress,” they have pledged to field one candidate

<sup>12</sup> “Election Manifest Iran National Might: Leader,” *Press TV*, April 27, 2013 (<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/04/27/300527/election-manifests-national-might/>)(in Persian).

based on polling results and the opinion of the country’s clerical leaders.<sup>13</sup> The 2+3 Coalition, a fragile alliance between a number of influential players including Manouchehr Mottaki, a former foreign minister fired by Ahmadinejad, and Mohammad Reza Bahonar and Mohammad Hassan Abutorabi Fard, both deputy speakers of the parliament, withdrew from the race. The third conservative coalition, the so-called Steadfast Front, which revolves around hard-line cleric Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, once considered Ahmadinejad’s spiritual mentor, initially chose Bagher Lankarani, Ahmadinejad’s former minister of health, as its official candidate. Lankarani, however, withdrew his candidacy in favor of Jalili, the secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, who entered the race without an affiliation. A final conservative coalition, the Society of the Followers of the Islamic Revolution, comprised of a group of hardline politicians from the ranks of security and military organizations, failed to get its main candidate past the Guardian Council.

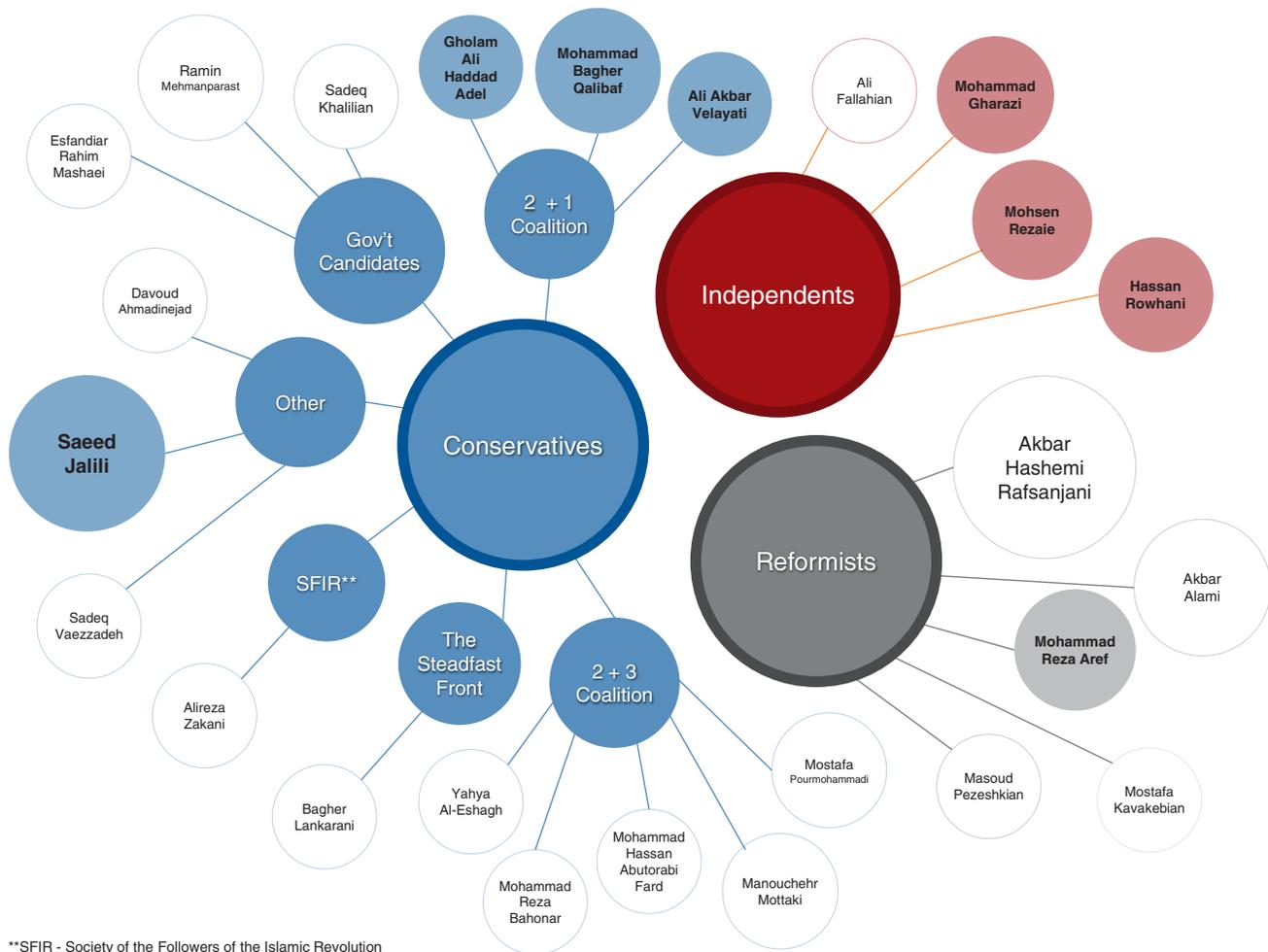
- **Conservatives close to Ahmadinejad.** Hoping to maintain influence beyond his second term, Ahmadinejad encouraged, and in some cases openly supported, members of his entourage to join the race. The most controversial of these is Mashaei, Ahmadinejad’s former chief of staff and the current secretary of the Non-Aligned Movement, whose daughter is married to Ahmadinejad’s son. Mashaei, who was disqualified by the Guardian Council, has been accused by the political establishment of leading a “deviant current” pursuing an anti-clerical nationalist-cum-sectarian agenda. Mashaei called his disqualification “unjust” and pledged to appeal the decision to the Supreme Leader.<sup>14</sup>
- **Pragmatists.** This faction revolves around former President Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani, seventy-eight, has

<sup>13</sup> “Hadad Adel: We are Ready to Include Jalili in our Coalition,” *Fars News*, May 22, 2013 (<http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920301001019>)(in Persian).

<sup>14</sup> Marcus George and Yeganeh Torbati “Iran Bars Candidates for Presidential Election,” *Reuters*, May 21, 2013 (<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/05/21/us-iran-candidates-idUSBRE94K0Y920130521>).

## Candidate Ideology Chart

This chart reflects some of the candidates who registered by May 11, 2013. Bold candidates have been approved by the Guardian Council as of May 22, 2013.



\*\*SFIR - Society of the Followers of the Islamic Revolution

been increasingly sidelined since 2009, and lost his key position as head of the Assembly of Experts, which is tasked with choosing the next Supreme Leader as well as control over a large system of public universities in 2011. Two of Rafsanjani's children were jailed for periods of time following the 2009 elections and continue to face judicial proceedings. However, Khamenei, in what appears to have been an effort to shore up regime legitimacy, allowed Rafsanjani to remain as chairman of the Expediency Council. Composed largely of technocrats, Rafsanjani's group, known as the Servants of Construction, pursues liberal policies regarding the economy and greater moderation than the current crop of officials in foreign affairs. With Rafsanjani's disqualification, many observers believe he is likely to throw his support

behind another prominent member of the group, Hassan Rowhani, who served as secretary of the Supreme Council on National Security under both Rafsanjani and Khatami.<sup>15</sup>

- Reformists.** This group has been marginalized since 2005 and sidelined after the 2009 election, which resulted in the imprisonment of their main leaders and the banning of their major factions. Members adhere to the vision of Khatami, who strived but largely failed to implement gradual political reforms. After an unsuccessful attempt to convince Khatami to run again,

15 Barbara Slavin, "Former Nuclear Negotiator Join's Iranian Presidential Race," *Al-Monitor*, April 11, 2013 (<http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/hassan-rowhani-iran-presidential-race-nuclear-negotiator.html>).

second and third tier reformists threw themselves in the race in an unorganized fashion. The Guardian Council, however, only approved the credentials of Mohammad Reza Aref. It remains unclear if Aref and Rowhani will both remain in the race or one of them will withdraw in favor of the other. In the end, it might not matter too much as both lack the gravitas and political weight to convince a disillusioned and apathetic voter base to turn out in large numbers.

### **Wild Cards**

Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, is fond of saying that Iranian elections are “unfree, unfair and unpredictable.”<sup>16</sup> There is the possibility that Iranians will use the election period to demonstrate their unhappiness with the regime and provoke a new crackdown that elicits outrage within and outside Iran. Already, despite the harsh security atmosphere, presidential hopefuls and their supporters have criticized Ahmadinejad and voiced unhappiness about the dismal economic situation in the country.

Another wild card is the behavior of Ahmadinejad himself. He has frequently threatened to expose corruption among his elite opponents and appears determined to maintain influence after the vote. With Mashaei’s disqualification by the Guardian Council, Ahmadinejad could finally unveil some of these dossiers, further damaging the system. Khamenei could respond by jailing the president, spoiling the Leader’s plans for an orderly, engineered vote.

### **Impact of the Vote on Iran Internally and in Foreign Affairs**

Whoever is elected will seek to replace Ahmadinejad’s cronies with new officials. Their abilities—or lack thereof—will affect how well Iran copes with economic sanctions, inflation and unemployment as well as the nuclear question and Iran’s turbulent neighborhood. While Khamenei will remain paramount, the tone and temperament of the new president and his cabinet could ease Iran’s predicament or deepen it. While Jalili’s stated policy of “resistance” appears

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16 “Iran’s New Year Challenges,” Council on Foreign Relations, March 27, 2013 (<http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-new-year-challenges/p30334>).

more confrontational,<sup>17</sup> Ali Akbar Velayati, a more seasoned diplomat, has pledged to improve Iran’s bilateral and international relations with other countries.<sup>18</sup> Whoever wins, the election will give Khamenei the opportunity to name a new nuclear negotiator and to soften Iran’s negotiating position in the P5+1 talks. He could also accept US offers for a bilateral dialogue which he has so far spurned. For the United States and the rest of the international community, the departure of Ahmadinejad could also facilitate compromise. Although Ahmadinejad has made repeated overtures to the US since he came to office in 2005, their credibility has been ruined in the eyes of Washington and much of the rest of the world because of his rhetoric against Israel, his denial of the Holocaust and his conspiracy theories about 9/11. A more seasoned politician could be easier to make a deal with, if the Supreme Leader is in a deal-making mood.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

Upcoming Iranian elections could be extremely anti-climatic if they result in victory by a docile, uncharismatic supporter of Khamenei. Nevertheless, they present an opportunity for US policymakers. Criticized for failing swiftly to condemn the human rights abuses of 2009, the Obama administration should be vigilant this time for instances of fraud and restrictions on the freedom of expression of the Iranian people. Even with pending nuclear negotiations, the Administration should speak publicly and clearly about any vote fraud, and more broadly, about the lack of genuinely open, free, and fair elections.

It is not the role of the United States to dictate who should be Iran’s next leader. This was already done in 1953 in a CIA-backed coup that put the Shah back on the throne and haunts US-Iran relations to this day. However, Washington should not be reticent about commenting on the behavior of the Iranian government.

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17 Najmeh Bozorgmehr, “Iran’s Nuclear Negotiator Will ‘Resist’ West if Elected President,” *Financial Times*, May 16, 2013 (<http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/c8cd8c90-be45-11e2-bb35-00144feab7de.html#axzz2TYE0R5Bk>).

18 “Velayati Vows to Improve Iran’s International Ties,” *Press TV*, May 6, 2013 (<http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/05/06/302145/velayati-vows-better-international-ties/>).

At the same time, the United States should continue to pursue nuclear talks with Iran, should the country's leadership be capable of doing so. If the Iranian leadership is not willing to negotiate until after the elections, the United States should make use of the time to consult with allies and to float trial proposals that may be more attractive to Khamenei once the elections are over. The United States can walk and chew gum at the same time by conducting arms control negotiations and honestly appraising Iran's performance on human rights. Most Iranians care far more about the latter than the former.

Finally, once a new Iranian president is in office, the Obama administration should urge him to engage constructively with the international community and seek to ease the isolation that Iran has suffered because of its nuclear program and support of anti-Israel and anti-US militant groups. The next president of Iran may be able to unclench his fist if the United States again extends a hand.

*MAY 2013*

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