



Are Iran's Conservatives An Insurmountable Obstacle?

Nabeel Birghal



Are Iran's Conservatives An Insurmountable Obstacle?

Nabeel Birghal

Al Sharq Forum takes no institutional or partisan positions on policy issues. The views and opinions expressed in this publication belong to author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of Al Sharq Forum.

Copyright © 2016 by Al Sharq Forum
All rights reserved
Art design&Layout: İsra Ebubekir Nalbant
Printed in Turkey

This publication may not be reproduced in whole or in part, in any form without prior permission from Al Sharq Form. If any extract from the publication is used, the author(s) and Al Sharq Forum should be credited.

Address: Yenibosna Merkez Disrict. 29 Ekim Street.
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 Block Floor:6 No.:52 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org



Contents

Abstract	4
Introduction	5
Lack of A Decisive Domestic Backer	5
The Voting Public	6
Powerful Political Actors	7
Interference of the IRGC	8
Missed Opportunities	11
Common Interests and Mutual Needs	13
Conclusion	14
Endnotes	17



Abstract: The triumph of reformists in the Iranian elections has led some in international and regional political circles to feel a sense of relief. However, the question still remains as to whether the reformists will be able to gain the power to change Iran's course.

This paper argues that despite the achievements of the reformists in the elections, they will still be stymied in any attempts to normalize Iran's relations with its neighboring countries, the United States and the West or to carry out major political, social and economic reforms at home. These limitations are derived from a number of key factors:

First, that the hardline conservatives are still dominant players in most of the influential political institutes. Second, the coalition the reformists formed with the pragmatists led by Rafsanjani is fragile since it was formed on the basis of common interests and could be vulnerable if the interests of the two camps clash in future.

Finally, the public's influence on political outcomes is limited, meaning that the reformists' popularity will only take them so far.



Introduction

The remarkable results of the parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections held in Iran on February 26, 2016, and the second round election¹ held on April 28, 2016 undoubtedly delivered a clear message from the Iranian people expressing their desire to repair and change the political landscape of their country. The triumph of the reformists in both the parliament (the Majles)² and the Assembly of Experts³ was considered a sign that the moderate camp was aiming to implement their policies to reform Iran in terms of foreign policy and domestic affairs as well.

The significance of these elections is their timing, with the parliamentary vote coming soon after the 'Iran Nuclear Deal Framework and Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action'⁴ signed between Iran and 5+1 world powers in July 2015 to limit Iran's nuclear sensitive capabilities. Meanwhile, due to Khamenei's failing health, it looks as though the newly elected Assembly of Experts may end up selecting his successor. Constitutionally, the main function of the Assembly of Experts is to choose the supreme leader of Iran, and theoretically they are also able to fire him. Although this authority has never been used before, the health of the current supreme leader, 76-year old Khamenei, is questionable, and the assembly might use its power to appoint the new supreme leader before Khamenei's term has finished.⁵ This would set a precedent in the history of post-revolutionary Iran.

However, it is not the first time that the reformists have won a majority in the parliament. The same happened with the Sixth Parliament in 2001, which took place after they had won the Presidential elections in 1997 with Khatami. Yet they failed to achieve their goals by reforming Iran's political and social life. The question remains unanswered as to whether the reformists will be able to achieve their goals this time, or if they will repeat their previous failure.

To answer this worthwhile question, it is necessary to understand the factors which contributed to this previous failure and ask whether they still exist now. It seems there are three key factors that represent obstacles to the moderates' ambitions; first of all, the lack of a decisive internal backer; second, the interference of the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); and finally, the geopolitical game.

Lack of A Decisive Domestic Backer

One factor that has represented a serious restraint to the moderates' achievements in the past was that they did not form a strong political party which could stand consistently behind their political ruling elite. For example, during both his presidential terms, Mohammad Khatami (1997 – 2005) was not decisively backed by any political party, despite receiving 70% of the public vote, weakening his position greatly.



The absence of a strong political party in the parliament left the president alone and weak in the face of the conservatives, who have always been better at organizing and aligning themselves with political parties. To strengthen their position, the reformists have always depended on strong influential political figures, such as Hashem Rafsanjani, in addition to the public vote in order to take power through political office.

It seems there are three key factors that represent obstacles to the moderates' ambitions; first of all, the lack of a decisive internal backer; second, the interference of the Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC); and finally, the geopolitical game.

The Voting Public

Experience has shown that the support of the public vote is unreliable because of the way the political system in Iran works. The voting public is not free to elect the candidates they want because the candidates themselves cannot be nominated freely and fairly. In Iran all parliamentary and presidential candidates must be vetted by the Council of Guardians, a powerful institution which has always been controlled by conservative clerics with close ties to the Supreme Leader. For example, in the recent parliamentary election, around half of all proposed candidates were disqualified by the Council of Guardians (12,000 people registered as candidates but only 6,200 were allowed to campaign).⁶

One factor that has represented a serious restraint to the moderates' achievements in the past was that they did not form a strong political party which could stand consistently behind their political ruling elite.

As mentioned above, the system leaves little room for the votes of the general public to have a real impact on political outcomes. If the system changed, their votes would still remain marginalized. Consequently, any benefit for the reformists from their strong public support will continue to be limited. This limitation is clearly understood by the public, as shown by the Green movement in 2009 which disobeyed electoral rules and tried to encourage changes through street demonstrations. However, the movement was strongly suppressed by the IRGC, and their leaders, Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were placed under house arrest. This brutal reaction showed how limited the tolerance of the state is to opposition.

The absence of a strong political party in the parliament left the president alone and weak in the face of the conservatives, who have always been better at organizing and aligning themselves with political parties. To strengthen their position, the reformists have always depended on strong influential political figures, such as Hashem Rafsanjani, in addition to the public vote in order to take power through political office.

In addition to the electoral system, another factor plays a role in weakening the public's ability to make a significant impact on Iran's policies. The absence of a vibrant civil society in Iran deprives the public of the right to act as an influential actor in shaping Iran's political and economic agenda. It is often argued that the existence of an active civil society is a pre-condition and a pre-requisite for judging whether a state is vigorously democratic or not. As Abootalebi (2000) has argued, the expression "civil society" is used today to indicate how private clubs, organizations, and groups act as a buffer between state power and citizens' lives. But



in the absence of organized and vibrant agents of civil society (e.g., labor unions, professional associations, business groups, and an independent media) society remains susceptible to the authoritarian whims of the ruling elite. Therefore, the emergence and effectiveness of civil society is undermined where society itself is underdeveloped (e.g., by low socio-economic development or a low adult literacy rate) or where the state, through its control of resources, remains overwhelmingly dominant.⁷

In Iran all parliamentary and presidential candidates must be vetted by the Council of Guardians, a powerful institution which has always been controlled by conservative clerics with close ties to the Supreme Leader.

In Iran these organizations and institutions are still fragile. It appears that the clerically-dominated regime in Iran is still able to keep civil society submissive through two main tactics; first, the regime has often labeled the efforts of its opponents, who call for an expansion of civil rights, un-Islamic, which means those who support such a claim are considered to be infidels whose goal is to dismantle the Islamic regime.

The absence of a vibrant civil society in Iran deprives the public of the right to act as an influential actor in shaping Iran's political and economic agenda.

Secondly, the regime have created parallel entities that it can rely upon to be loyal, such as the Dispossessed Foundation and the Martyrs Foundation, which have contributed enormous financial and social assistance to the urban and rural poor and to the families of the war veterans and those martyred for

the revolution respectively. There are also the Revolutionary Guards and the Mobilization Corps (the Basij), which are used as an iron fist to protect the principles of the Islamic regime and suppress those who pose any threat to it, either internally or externally.

To sum up, for the foreseeable future, the election system in Iran is not likely to change because the regime has already set up strong functional political institutions that will keep the scope of the public vote as weak as possible. The percentage going to the polls in Iran is rather high in comparison to other democratic countries, but in accordance to the way the Islamic regime runs, these votes are then used to strengthen the legitimacy of the regime at the expense of civil society. Thus, the reformists always need to try to gain support from powerful political actors in Iran in order to bolster their position in the political game.

Powerful Political Actors

Throughout the reformists' first term in control of the presidency and the majority seats of parliament, they were backed by Rafsanjani and his pragmatic group. At that time, Rafsanjani⁸ had just accomplished two terms as president and still enjoyed a very strong influence in the Iranian political arena. This led Mackey to argue that Rafsanjani was working as,

*"A power behind the scenes in concert with Servants of Construction, (Rafsanjani) may well facilitate many of the reforms Khatami hopes to make. But if Rafsanjani sees the swing of the pendulum going too far, threatening his own considerable ambition to remain a powerful player within the Islamic Republic, then he too could become a foil to widespread reform the voters apparently want"*⁹

What Mackey tried to explain was that the pragmatists might well take another side,



or at least remain neutral, if they see that their tactical alliance with the reformists could harm their position. One example of this was during the political crisis which occurred immediately after the presidential election in 2009 between the hard-liners, who supported ex-president Ahmadinejad, and the green movement. In this instance, Rafsanjani clearly adopted a neutral position. He “embodies politicians who vacillate between supporting the movement and siding with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.”¹⁰ His main goal was political survival. He understood that it was not wise to engage in a tit-for-tat confrontation with Ahmadinejad and the strong support he was receiving, predominantly from the IRGC, but to some extent, from the Supreme Leader Khamenei.¹¹

For the foreseeable future, the election system in Iran is not likely to change because the regime has already set up strong functional political institutions that will keep the scope of the public vote as weak as possible

However, the situation has just changed. More recently, Rafsanjani and his pragmatic group have moved to ally themselves with the reformists once again; in the 2016 elections they formed a coalition with the reformists specifically aiming to block the hardline candidate in order to dominate the parliament and the Assembly of Experts. As Rafsanjani was the most well-known and influential figure in this alliance, the list of members in this coalition became known as the “Rafsanjani list”¹² instead of the Hope List. It was clear that this coalition would be successful, and this was confirmed by the election results. Candidates from the Rafsanjani list won 15 of the 16 seats for the province of Tehran in the Assembly of Experts, with Rafsanjani and Rouhani receiving some of the highest numbers of votes. Meanwhile,

in the parliamentary election the Rafsanjani-Rouhani list won all 30 seats in the province of Tehran.

The reformists always need to try to gain support from powerful political actors in Iran in order to bolster their position in the political game.

Despite the coalition's success in Tehran, it was not repeated elsewhere in the country, meaning that it was not a truly decisive victory over the conservatives' camp. Although the reformists, backed by the pragmatists, now have more breathing space in which to implement their own policies, they will not have a completely free hand to reshape Iran's economy and politics. The conservatives still hold the upper hand in most of the political and economic institutions in Iran, including the Assembly of Experts in which they have retained the majority of seats (approximately 75 percent of Assembly of Experts' seats remain under the hardliners' control) despite recent election results favoring the reformists.

Interference of the IRGC

The big challenge to reformists however, might not be the weak value of the public vote or the marriage of convenience with the pragmatist camp. In fact, it is more likely to be the hardline conservatives, who continue to dominate Iran's political and socio-economic life. The three main positions that the conservatives still exclusively dominate are: the executive (the Supreme Leader), the Armed Forces (through senior officers), and the strongest interest group – the Dispossessed Foundation.¹³ As is well-known, the reformists' main platform has always been reconciliation with the West (in particular the United States), the expansion of social liberties, and economic liberalization.¹⁴ They argue that the solutions



to economic and political ills can be achieved only in “connection with a more open and democratic society”.¹⁵ This agenda always clashes with that of the Supreme Leader, Khamenei, and his perspectives since the Islamic Revolution.

Khamenei believes that the reformists' policies could harm the founding principles of the Islamic Revolution and pave the way for external superpowers to interfere in Iran's domestic affairs, thus threatening national independence. During the reformists' first term in power, Khamenei cast doubt on the purpose of president Khatami's reforms. He alleged that

“[They] were being enthusiastically supported by outside powers, including the United States and England. What is the enemy's objective when he expresses support for Iranian reforms? The answer: Foreign enemies sought to destabilize and destroy the Islamic Republic, just as they have helped destroy the Soviet Union through Gorbachev's reforms. Khatami and other officials have repeatedly said our reforms are Islamic and revolutionary. Very well, that is fine. But we need more precise explanations and a clear picture.”¹⁶

Before the winners of the February 26, 2016 elections took office, Khamenei repeated the same tone during his last meeting with the outgoing members of the Assembly of Experts. He said that “we have to have relations with the world —except America and the Zionist regime, naturally — but we have to know that the world is not limited to Europe and the West.”¹⁷

Some observers thought that recent rumors about the health of 76-year old Supreme Leader Khamenei, and the possibility of the newly elected Assembly of Experts selecting his successor would represent good news for the reformists. However, this optimism may well be unjustified. Despite the blow dealt to

the conservatives in the Assembly of Experts Council election in April, they still control 75% of seats and have enough power to appoint the next Supreme Leader. In addition, it should not be forgotten that Rafsanjani, who played a decisive role in choosing the supreme leader after Khomeini's death and is supposed to play the same role in the coming election of Khamenei's successor, is 80 years old, and his health is not much better than that of Khamenei. This has led several observers to be skeptical as “to what extent a moderate bloc will end up being in a position to actually select the next supreme leader by itself.”¹⁸

Although the reformists, backed by the pragmatists, now have more breathing space in which to implement their own policies, they will not have a completely free hand to reshape Iran's economy and politics. The conservatives still hold the upper hand in most of the political and economic institutions in Iran, including the Assembly of Experts in which they have retained the majority of seats (approximately 75 percent of Assembly of Experts' seats remain under the hardliners' control) despite recent election results favoring the reformists.

It is also clear that the position of the next Supreme Leader, who has the first and last word in all Iran's foreign and domestic affairs, will be a red line for Iran's hardline conservatives. In this, the hardline conservatives are strongly supported by the IRGC, whose basic role according to the Iranian constitution is to protect the country's Islamic system and prevent foreign interference, as well as coups, by any other military or “deviant movements”.¹⁹ However, the IRGC's roles expand beyond security and military missions. It has become a major player in both the political and economic spheres too.



For example, the IRGC brought voters to the ballot box in the 2005 presidential elections in favor of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Arjomand argued in his book that “the 2005 election results could be accurately described as the first electoral coup d'état for the IRGC after their first intervention in the political sphere began, albeit experimentally, in the municipal election of 2003 and the parliamentary election of 2004”²⁰

The three main positions that the conservatives still exclusively dominate are: the executive (the Supreme Leader), the Armed Forces (through senior officers), and the strongest interest group – the Dispossessed Foundation

In 2009 the IRGC showed its ability to suppress ‘deviant movements’ by brutally crushing the pro-democratic, moderate street demonstrations which were part of the Green Movement. The IRGC’s success in putting an end to the Green Movement may have led to a “transformation of the Islamic Republic into a military dictatorship led by the Revolutionary Guard”.²¹ Increasing IRGC interventions in political issues would leave the Iranian ruling elite hostages in their hands. Even Khamenei, whose position as Supreme Leader includes the role of commander-in-chief of the entire armed forces, became worried about the IRGC’s increasing role in political and economic affairs. In a meeting held on September 17, 2014, with IRGC commanders, Khamenei stated:

"The IRGC is the guardian of the Islamic Revolution. I do not want to suggest that the IRGC should be guardian in all fields: scientific, intellectual, cultural, economic. No... It is not necessary for the IRGC to go into the political field in order to guard it, but it has to know the political field..."

It is naive to reduce the challenges that the Revolution faces to political, partisan, and factional challenges. These are not the main challenges for the Revolution. This is the fight between political factions... The main challenge for the Revolution is offering humanity a new order... You are the guardian of the Islamic Revolution; this does not mean that you should be present in all fields and realms.”²²

It could be argued here that whenever reformists pose no imminent threat to the Islamic Republic’s principles or to the absolute control of the conservatives, Khamenei would prefer a reduction in the IRGC’s influence. After the Green Movement was crushed, no such threat remained. It is true that President Rouhani is closer to the reformists than to conservatives, but at the end of the day he is far from a ‘pure’ reformist. His previous position as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (from 1989 to 2005) had given him a central role in tackling the IRGC peacefully. Instead of a direct confrontation with IRGC, Rouhani decided to use Khamenei’s influence to put pressure on them to reduce their interference. Rouhani argued that facilitating a lifting of socio-economic sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community would attract foreign investors. This would have huge benefits for the Iranian economy and that would “be much easier [to achieve] if the IRGC agreed to curb its economic appetite.”²³

Despite the blow dealt to the conservatives in the Assembly of Experts Council election in April, they still control 75% of seats and have enough power to appoint the next Supreme Leader

In summary, the political and economic interference of the IRGC would remain limited as long as the mutual understanding with



President Rouhani remains in place. Despite his modest criticism of the role of the IRGC in the domestic realm, President Rouhani stays far away from intervening into the regional policy of IRGC, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The IRGC still has the upper hand in shaping and leading Iran's foreign policy towards Arab's countries.

Despite his modest criticism of the role of the IRGC in the domestic realm, President Rouhani stays far away from intervening into the regional policy of IRGC, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. The IRGC still has the upper hand in shaping and leading Iran's foreign policy towards Arab's countries

Taking courage from the election results, the reformists may try to change this mutual understanding in their favor. One of the steady strategies of the moderates' camp is a policy of opening up to the international community as well as to neighboring countries. That means the reformists must be able to change the regional policy of the IRGC from "subversive military plots" to constructive withdrawal; otherwise their policy of openness will be rendered meaningless. It may be difficult to predict the reaction of the IRGC to any efforts to limit its influence, but what is certain is that the IRGC's generals will not let the reformists sabotage their powerful regional assets and will interfere to put an end to the reformists' ambitions again.

The Geopolitical Game

Following the long fight between the conservatives and the reformists lead by Khatami during his first term from 1997 – 2000, the latter felt relieved by the results of the year 2000 elections when the reformists seized the majority of seats in the parliament. President Khatami thought that

the parliament would ultimately back him as well as the reformists, who believed that it was the right time for them to play their cards. Paradoxically, the outcome instead frustrated them more for a number of reasons.

Missed Opportunities

The challenge for the reformists this time came from abroad, as 2001 was not an ordinary year. With the September 11 attacks on the United States, it was clear that the world was going to enter a new era. In the immediate aftermath of the attack, the Bush administration blamed Al Qaida for the attack and ordered the American army to carry out a full scale attack on Afghanistan, where Al Qaida was believed to be based.

Initially, Khatami and the reformists publicly denounced the September 11 attacks as terrorism and implicitly offered to help the United States. The reformists argued that;

"The crisis [the 9/11 attack] offered Iran the chance to dissociate itself from its previous practices and turn over a new leaf. Above all, it was an opportunity to act assertively in the diplomatic field to stake out Iran's interests. The crisis offered Iran an opportunity to use its overlapping interests with the United State to start long-delayed dialogue."²⁴

One of the steady strategies of the moderates' camp is a policy of opening up to the international community as well as to neighboring countries. That means the reformists must be able to change the regional policy of the IRGC from "subversive military plots" to constructive withdrawal; otherwise their policy of openness will be rendered meaningless



However, the conservatives, along with the Supreme Leader, rejected the reformists' viewpoint that the crisis should be used as a basis for rapprochement with the United States and the West. Shahram Chubin argues:

"Ayatollah Khamenei effectively prevented the exploitation of the crisis by the reformists, who clearly hoped to use it to strengthen links with the West and improve Iran's overall image. His intervention and his unwillingness to envisage formal or public cooperation with the United States, even when interests converged, stopped moves that might have led to a process of reconciliation. The Supreme Leader was explicit: 'not only the relationship with America, but also negotiation with that country is against our national interest.'"²⁵

It could be argued here that the Bush administration prevented this contradiction from strengthening the Iranian reformists' hand. In contrast, Bush's unilateral interventionist policy made the Iranian reformists more suspicious and pushed them to take sides with the conservatives and Khamenei.

The Bush administration's policy of including Iran in the 'axis of evil' had the effect of redistributing the balance of power among the Iranian ruling elite by strengthening the conservatives and hardliners whilst weakening the moderates and reformists. This external factor, along with the conservatives' retention of control over the most influential political institutions in the country, impeded the moderates and reformists in their efforts to implement their desired political and social reforms.

President Bush surprisingly declared that Iran was part of the so-called 'axis of evil' and that it "aggressively pursues weapons of mass destruction and exports terror."²⁶ The ruling elite in both camps in Iran greeted this message with deep suspicion and fear, which was only aggravated by the subsequent invasion of Iraq and the new pre-emptive doctrine of the Bush administration, which wanted to 'democratize' the Middle East region by toppling totalitarian regimes. In fact, these combined developments convinced the Iranians that the United States' aims in Iraq would reach across the border and also target Iran. Subsequently, the Bush's administration's reaction to the September 11 attacks actually weakened the Iranian reformists, despite the initial willingness of Iran to cooperate with the United States.

The balance of power between reformists and conservatives in Iran once again shifted in favor of the latter. For example, the reformists' position on so-called Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) changed as a result. The reformists sought to decrease their disputes with the conservatives with regards to the nuclear issue, having come to the conclusion that having nuclear capabilities was in fact a necessity in order to deter American adventures against Iran. On the other hand, the increasing United States military presence was used by hardline conservatives as fuel to feed their propaganda machine and strengthen their political position.

In conclusion, the Bush administration's policy of including Iran in the 'axis of evil' had the effect of redistributing the balance of power among the Iranian ruling elite by strengthening the conservatives and hardliners whilst weakening the moderates and reformists. This external factor, along with the conservatives' retention of control over the most influential political institutions in the country, impeded the moderates and



reformists in their efforts to implement their desired political and social reforms. This failure on the part of the reformists led to overwhelming successes for the conservatives in the Seventh Parliament elections of 2004 and the presidential elections of 2005.

Common Interests and Mutual Needs

During Ahmadinejad's period in power from 2005 to 2013, Iran's relations with the West and its regional neighbors experienced increasing diplomatic tensions over its apparent assistance to 'terrorist' groups, its nuclear program and the fiery speeches of its hardline president against Israel. However, this kind of tension, in particular with the United States, did not escalate to any direct physical confrontation, arguably because America was already facing substantial difficulties on both its fronts in Iraq and Afghanistan. At this point in time, the last thing the Bush administration needed was to open a third front by starting a war with Iran.

The Iranian nuclear deal was a fruit of President Obama's perspective, and it seems that the next president of the United States is unlikely to share the same perspective

In light of this, and the need for a reliable partner to address the issues that American foreign policy was creating in the region, think tank circles in Washington began to advocate a shift in American perspectives towards Iran. This indicated that, on reflection, the United States previous policy towards Iran of 'dual containment'²⁷ and confrontation had not succeeded, and the time had come to think about new approaches. The new approach was a shift away from confrontation towards engagement.²⁹ This appears to have formed the theoretical framework of President Obama's policy towards Iran, and helped to

build trust between Obama and his Iranian counterpart, Hassan Rouhani.³⁰

It could be argued here that common interests and mutual needs converged between the Obama administration and its Iranian counterpart. Bearing in mind that Obama's foreign policy in the 'pivotal' Asia-Pacific region required a reduction in the American presence in the Middle East and the withdrawal of troops from Iraq and Afghanistan. To make this withdrawal 'safe', the Obama administration looked to cooperate with Iran, as it has been the most influential player in both countries in recent years. In the same context, Rouhani openly pursued the policy of reintegrating Iran with the international community and rebuilding its economy. This required the lifting of economic and diplomatic sanctions against Iran and a move towards a normalized relation with the United States, which could only be accomplished if an agreement were found with regard to Iran's nuclear program.

Taking this mutual interest into account, the United States and P5+1 group on one side, and Iran on the other set up an intensive marathon of negotiations which ended with the signing of a "landmark deal to curb the Islamic Republic's nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief"³¹ in July 2015. Since the discussion of the strategic regional impact of this deal is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth simply noting that its immediate impact on the Iranian political landscape was clear: it was seen as a deal that gave the pragmatists, reformists and their supporters more encouragement to make their voices heard. Subsequently they won a majority in the parliament elections at the expense of the conservatives.

If the patrons of the deal are able to keep it alive without any fundamental violations, it will work as a first step on the long road to comprehensive normalization between



the United States and Iran. However, the fragile deal has many vulnerabilities, which its opponents, of whom there are many in both camps, can use to undermine the deal and bring about its collapse. One of these vulnerabilities is that the talks with Iran were not comprehensive. Instead, they were unilaterally restricted to the nuclear question, without taking into account other issues which remain controversial, such as Iran's foreign policy, and in particular its assistance to organizations that the United States and the West label as terrorists, plus the perceived destabilizing actions that Tehran is carrying out in some Arab countries.

It should not be forgotten that the level of distrust between Washington and Tehran is still very high, and any mistake or misunderstanding by either side could lead to a rapid deterioration in relations once again. For example, the ballistic missiles that IRGC has tested recently with messages written in Farsi and Hebrew (some of which allegedly read "Israel must be wiped off the face of the earth") are a clear indicator of the differences and tensions that still exist between Iran and the United States.³² However, it could be argued that this rocket's launch was a domestic message to expand the conservatives' popularity before the Parliamentary run-off elections.³³

The risk of deterioration will surely remain if the talks are not expanded to become more comprehensive through bringing all the outstanding issues on the table. The reformists and pragmatists are well aware that what brought the deal to the table in the first place and eventually forced it through was common interests between the incumbent Obama Administration and Iran. However, these interests are not sustainable. The Iranian moderate elites are well-aware that Iran under current circumstances has a historical opportunity to advance its relations with the international community,

particularly the United States, before the international and regional mood shifts against their will. The Iranian nuclear deal was a fruit of President Obama's perspective, and it seems that the next president of the United States is unlikely to share the same perspective. Republican front-runner Donald Trump roughly denounced³⁴ the deal while Hillary Clinton, the Democratic candidate, publicly announced her approach towards Iranians as "distrust and verify".³⁵ It could be argued that any future deterioration between Iran and the United States is likely to lead to a new phase of moderate failure, which will pave the way to the conservatives' full dominance.

Conclusion

The reformists and pragmatists' camp allied with President Hassan Rouhani came out strongest in the elections of 2016 in Iran. They managed to secure the majority of the parliament with 143 seats out of 290. Meanwhile, the conservatives and independents have 86 and 61, respectively. Although their majority is not decisively comfortable, it is enough to pass some moderate legislative resolutions. However, the conservatives will remain a powerful force and could limit the moderates' ambitious social reforms.

The conservatives' power derives from the fact that they still control influential political institutes such as the Assembly of Experts,³⁶ the Guardian Council, and the heads of the armed forces. In addition, the supreme leader, Khamenei, is on their side. This fact gives the reformists a narrow margin of maneuver. With the exception of the nuclear agenda, the reformists are unlikely to achieve any breakthrough regarding social reforms, human rights, or foreign policy, in particular.

In accordance with its controversial foreign policy, the nuclear deal had no direct impact on Iran's foreign behavior. Iran is



still sending more troops to Syria, vowing to fight the "terrorists" to the end; returning to its traditional policy on the Palestinian Question by restoring support to resistance movements, and in particular the Islamic Jihad movement, whose head met with Khamenei in Iran recently; and finally insisting that the talks with Americans be limited to the nuclear issue and will not expand to other issues.

The conservatives' power derives from the fact that they still control influential political institutes such as the Assembly of Experts, the Guardian Council, and the heads of the armed forces. In addition, the supreme leader, Khamenei, is on their side

Domestically, strong critics of the reformists have recently emerged. A bitter row has broken out publicly between Supreme Leader Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani, an influential politician who gained the highest vote in recent election, over recent missile tests. In the same context, just few days before the second round elections, Mahdi Abdi, a member of the coordination council of the fundamentalist organization Hezbollah Iran, which is affiliated with Iran's ideological circles, warned leaders of Iran's pragmatic camp, including Expediency Council chairman and former president Hashemi Rafsanjani and former president Mohammad Khatami, not to undermine the status of Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. These critics have sent a clear message that the hardline conservatives will show no tolerance in the political game with the reformists, and will do everything to undermine them.³⁷

On the other side, what would also play a role in undermining the reformists' plans is that

the reformists' recent election triumph was due in part to the coalition that they formed with the pragmatic camp led by Rafsanjani. He has always had his own political agenda and will surely only stay allied with the reformists as long as this serves his interests. In this respect it is apparent that the coalition between the reformists and pragmatists will remain fragile.

However, the support that the reformists take most seriously into account is that of the public, which is strong as can be seen from the results of the recent vote. Notably, President Rouhani and the reformists gained more popularity after the nuclear agreement and the resulting lifting of the economic sanctions imposed on Iran. Nonetheless, the political system does not heavily weight the public vote as a decisive factor, as Iranian people are only allowed to give their votes to candidates approved and vetted by the predominantly conservative Assembly of Experts. As long as the system operates in this way, the public's influence on political outcomes will remain marginalized unless there are important reforms changing the basic rules at the root of the system. In the short-term at least, this is unlikely to happen.

Finally, the conciliatory tone of diplomacy which President Obama implemented towards Iran is considered a significant factor in the reformists' favor. This diplomacy bore fruit with the Nuclear Agreement between Iran and 5+1 global powers. Needless to say, this diplomacy is labeled the Obama doctrine, and it is widely accepted that there is a strong possibility it could be abandoned with a new president taking office in the White House. A return to the American policy of old towards Iran could be a big blow to the reformists, as it would allow the hardline conservatives to again gain ascendancy over them.

Despite this pessimistic outlook, the end result of the Iranian elections in 2016 remains



an important indicator of the direction of Iranian public opinion towards more reform policies, conciliatory relations and the desire to make socio-economic changes. Undoubtedly, the road to change is a long one, and recent election results are only one incremental step toward it.



Endnotes:

- 1- "Of the 68 legislative seats being contested on Friday, 33 went to the pro-Rouhani List of Hope coalition and 21 to conservatives" see more: Iranians Vote in Parliamentary Run-Off Elections, Friday Apr 29, 2006, Fars news agency, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13950210000755>
- 2- "The Majles has forced a degree of accountability on the executive branch through its powers over the budget, confirmation or impeachment of ministers, and interpellation, or issuing formal questions that the government is required to answer," See more, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/parliament>
- 3- "The Assembly of Experts for the Leadership (Majles-e Khobragan Rahbari) is Iran's only constitutional body with the authority to appoint and dismiss the supreme leader," See more, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/assembly-experts> .
- 4- Or "known commonly as the Iran deal, is an international agreement on the nuclear program of Iran reached in Vienna on 14 July 2015 between Iran, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States—plus Germany),[a] and the European Union," see more, European Union EXTERNAL ACTION: http://www.eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf
- 5- Khamenei underwent successful prostate cancer surgery in September 2014, see more. <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/09/08/Iran-s-supreme-leader-undergoes-operation.html>
- 6- For more read; "Iran elections: why are they important and who is running?, Saeed Kamali Dehghan, the guardian, Tuesday 23 February 2016. <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/23/iran-elections-why-are-they-important-and-who-is-running>
- 7- Abootalebo, Alip;. "The Struggle For Democracy in The Islamic Republic of Iran"; Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2000).
- 8- After leaving office, Rafsanjani became the president of the newly expanded Expediency Council, and served as Deputy Chair of the Assembly of Experts from 2007 until 2011. It was claimed that Rafsanjani would be dismissed as head of the Expediency Council but he was re-appointed for another five-year term on 14 March 2012 by Ali Khamenei. See more, WIKIPEDIA, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Akbar_Hashemi_Rafsanjani
- 9- Mackey, Sandra. (1998). The Iranians: Persian, Islam and the Soul of Nation. A Plume Book.
- 10- See more; Abbas Milan, The Green Movement, The Iran Primer, UNITED STATES INSTITUTE OF PEACE. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement>
- 11- See also: Rafsanjani's future at stake in Iran turmoil, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-rafsanjani-analysis-idUSTRE55P3Wl20090626>
- 12- Read more, "Rafsanjani, Rouhani top Tehran Assembly of Experts list", MEHR NEWS AGENCY, <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/114819/Rafsanjani-Rouhani-top-Tehran-Assembly-of-Experts-list>
- 13- "The Mostazafen Foundation – successor to the Pahlavi Foundation – more than doubled its original assets when the new regime confiscated the property of some fifty millionaires. Because of the war with Iraq, its official name was expanded into the Foundation for the Oppressed and Disabled (Bonayad-e Mostazafen va Janbazan). By the late 1980s, its assets, totaling more than \$20 billion, encompassed some 140 factories, 470 agrobusinesses, 100 construction firms, 64 mines, and 250 commercial companies. It also owned CocaCola – renamed ZamZam Cola – and the former Hyatt and Hilton hotels, as well as Ettela'at and Kayhan. Likewise, the other foundations – all with specific missions—began with confiscated properties and grew with government subsidies and foreign



exchange currencies far below the official rates". Abrahamian, Ervand., 2008. *A History of Modern Iran*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press.

14- Smadi, Fatima (2012). "Political Currents In Iran"; Arab Center For Research and Policy Studies; Qatar.

15- Abootalebo, Alip;. "The Struggle For Democracy in The Islamic Republic of Iran"; Middle East Review of International Affairs, Vol. 4, No. 3 (Fall 2000).

16- Bakhsh, Shaul (2001). Reformists, Conservatives, and Iran's 2000 Parliamentary Elections". In Kechichian, Joseph A. (2001). *Iran, Iraq and the Arab Gulf States*. Palgrave.

17- Arash Karami, Khamenei laments 'loss' of hardline Assembly of Experts members, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/03/iran-khamenei-assembly-of-experts-west-rouhani.html#>

18- See more, "Why Iran's 2016 Assembly of Experts Elections Matter", MAJLIS MONITOR. February 2, 2016. <https://majlismonitor.com/en/2016/02/why-irans-2016-assembly-of-experts-elections-matter/>

19- Lavee, Thierry., 1984. Iran's Revolutionary Guards in Power Bid. *Executive Intelligence Review*. Volume 11, Number 35, September 11, 1984.

20- Arjomand, Said., 2008. *After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successor*. New York: Oxford University Press, P. 151.

21- Alfoneh, Ali. All the Guard's Men: Iran's Silent Revolution, *WORLD AFFAIRS*, October 2010, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/all-guards-men-irans-silent-revolution>

22- Khalaji, Mehdi, "President Rouhani and the IRGC", THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE, January 8, 2014, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/president-rouhani-and-the-irgc>

23- Ibid

24- Chubin, Shahram. (2002). *Whither Iran? Reform, Domestic Politics and National Security*. The international Institute for Strategic Studies. Oxford University Press; Oxford and New York.

25- Ibid. p, 98.

26- See more Bush State of the Union address; Transcript of President Bush's first State of the Union address, delivered to Congress Tuesday night. WASHINGTON (CNN), January 29, 2002. <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/ALL-POLITICS/01/29/bush.speech.txt/> [April 24, 2015]

27- Dual containment was an official United States foreign policy aimed at containing Iraq and Iran, Israel and the United States's two most important strategic adversaries in the Middle East. It was first outlined in May 1993 by Martin Indyk at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and officially announced on February 24, 1994 at a symposium of the Middle East Policy Council by Indyk, then the senior director for Middle East Affairs of the National Security Council (NSC).[1][2] It represented Bill Clinton's attempt to formulate a Persian Gulf strategy after the end of the Cold War and America's eviction of Iraq from Kuwait. See more, Dual containment, Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dual_containment.

28- For more information about this new approach read: "Restoring the Balance: A Middle East Strategy for the Next President"; a project of the Saban Centre at Brookings and the Council on Foreign Relations, November 2008. <http://www.brookings.edu/research/books/2008/restoringthebalance>.

The authors of the report argued that engagement paradigm "offers a serious prospect of decisively altering the enduring antagonism between Tehran and Washington and enhancing the context for promoting and protecting American interests in the region".

29- In his speech on November 3, 2009 Obama said: "I have made it clear that the United States of America wants to move beyond this past, and seeks a relationship with the Islamic Republic of Iran based upon mutual interests and mutual respect. We do not interfere in Iran's internal affairs. We have condemned terrorist attacks against Iran. We have recognized Iran's international right to peaceful



nuclear power. We have demonstrated our willingness to take confidence-building steps along with others in the international community. We have accepted a proposal by the International Atomic Energy Agency to meet Iran's request for assistance in meeting the medical needs of its people. We have made clear that if Iran lives up to the obligations that every nation has, it will have a path to a more prosperous and productive relationship with the international community".

30- The confidences building measures were echoed in the historical phone call between Obama and Rouhani. See more, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-un-assembly-iran-idUSBRE98Q16S20130928>

31- Read more: "Iran and world powers clinch historic nuclear deal", Aljazeera, 14 Jul, 2015. <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2015/07/iran-world-powers-clinch-historic-nuclear-deal-150714042342330.html>

32- See more; THOMAS ERDBRINK. "Iran Tests More Missiles in Message to Israel and Biden", New York Times. March 9, 2016. <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/10/world/middleeast/irans-revolutionary-guards-stage-second-day-of-missile-tests.html?action=click&contentCollection=Middle%20East&module=RelatedCoverage®ion=Marginalia&pgtype=article>

33- The rocket launch took place in March, 2016 while the second round of elections took place in April, 2016.

34- See more; Ishaan Tharoor. "Donald Trump is right about tearing up the Iran deal — says a leading Iranian hard-liner", the Washington Post. April 4, 2016. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/04/04/donald-trump-is-right-about-tearing-up-the-iran-deal-says-a-leading-iranian-hard-liner/>

35- See more; William A. Galston. "Hillary Clinton on the Iran nuclear deal: 'Distrust and verify'", BROOKINGS. September 9, 2015. <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2015/09/09-hrc-iran-nuclear-agreement-galston>

36- Hard-line cleric Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati was elected to head Iran's Assembly of Experts on May 24, 2016. See more; Iran: Ahmad Jannati to head Assembly of Experts, Aljazeera, 25 MAY 2016. <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2016/05/iran-ahmad-jannati-assembly-experts-160524142917150.html>

37- See MEMRI Special Dispatch No .6409, Iranian Hezbollah Organization Issues Threats Of Physical Harm Against Former Iranian Presidents Rafsanjani And Khatami, Calls On President Rohani To Cancel JCPOA, May 3, 2016.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nabeel Birghal is political researcher. He received his Master Degree in Global Affair from Bahçeşehir University – Istanbul in 2015. The topic of his thesis is Iran’s New-Realist Foreign Policy towards the Palestinian Question from 1948 to 2009. He is living in Istanbul preparing for his PhD program in International Relations and Political Science. He is columnist about key issues related to Iran and Global Order Changes.

ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. It will do this through public-spirited research, promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue and social justice.

Address: Yenibosna Merkez Mah. 29 Ekim Cad.
Istanbul Vizyon Park A1 blok kat:6 No.:52 34197
Bahçelievler/ Istanbul / Turkey
Telephone: +902126031815
Fax: +902126031665
Email: info@sharqforum.org

sharqforum.org



Are Iran's Conservatives An Insuperable Obstacle?

The triumph of reformists in the Iranian elections has led some in international and regional political circles to feel a sense of relief. However, the question still remains as to whether the reformists will be able to gain the power to change Iran's course.

This paper argues that despite the achievements of the reformists in the elections, they will still be stymied in any attempts to normalize Iran's relations with its neighboring countries, the United States and the West or to carry out major political, social and economic reforms at home. These limitations are derived from a number of key factors:

First, that the hardline conservatives are still dominant players in most of the influential political institutes.

Second, the coalition the reformists formed with the pragmatists led by Rafsanjani is fragile since it was formed on the basis of common interests and could be vulnerable if the interests of the two camps clash in future.

Finally, the public's influence on political outcomes is limited, meaning that the reformists' popularity will only take them so far...