



სტრატეგიული, საგარეო და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევითი ფონდი  
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**PRE-ELECTION POLITICAL CLIMATE IN  
THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN**

*LEVAN ASATIANI*

**EXPERT OPINION**



**2016**



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი  
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## Introduction

Since the 1990s, a “constant battle” has been underway in the Islamic Republic of Iran between the so-called pragmatists and conservatives. Traditionally western, European-style political parties with strong, clearly defined ideologies are virtually nonexistent in the country. The majority of the organizations, referred to in Iran as political parties, constitute amorphous political movements that lack clear organizational structure and membership institutions. Therefore, this “battle” in Iran tends to resemble an acute political polemic among traditional alliances. It should be noted that the division of the Iranian political establishment into pragmatist and conservative camps is in fact conditional - both branches are composed of high-level Shiite representatives and sharp ideological differences among them are difficult to discern. Regardless, in the Iranian Consultative Assembly or the Majles (the Parliament), which is a strong independent institution, obtaining supporting votes for either branch plays a significant role in the country’s politics.

## The Political System of the Islamic Republic

The unique government hierarchy of the Islamic Republic of Iran calls for a brief clarification for the reader, as follows:

The highest-ranking official and the Head of State of the Islamic Republic is the country’s Supreme Spiritual Leader, or the “Rahbar,” who is **not elected** via popular vote. The Islamic Republic is founded on the principle of the **Vilayat-e Faqih**, which states that custodianship of the country prior to the emergence of the Hidden Imam must be temporarily held by the most authoritative Islamic jurist. The founder of the system was the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Imam (Ayatollah) Ruhollah **Khomeini**. Since his death in 1989, the post has been invariably occupied by Ayatollah Ali **Khamenei**.

Despite being elected via popular vote, the **President** of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the second-highest authority in the country (since 2013, the post has been held by Hassan Rouhani). His credentials are limited to the functions of Head of State and Prime Minister, although this post bears a rather weighty political significance.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran envisions several counterbalancing and monitoring state institutions, in particular: one of the principal government agencies of the country is the **Council (Assembly) of Experts**, whose prerogative is to determine the capacities of the **Supreme Spiritual Leader** (the so-called “Rahbar”) of Iran and elect a new candidate if necessary.<sup>1</sup>

Besides the Supreme Leader, the President, the Majlis, the government and the “Council of Experts,” the other constitutional state agencies are the **Guardian Council** and the **Expediency Discernment Council**. The function of the former is to determine the compliance of the bills adopted by the Majlis with Islamic law, while the latter is tasked with mediating possible disputes between the Guardian Council and the Majlis. The members of the Councils are not elected via popular vote but rather appointed partly by mutual agreement and partly by the quota of the country’s Supreme Leader Khamenei. These members are frequently the very same people as make up the highest-ranking representatives of the Shia clerical hierarchy.<sup>2</sup>

In reviewing today’s political conjuncture of Iran, one must certainly take into consideration the fact that the entire armed forces of the country reports directly to the Supreme Leader and Commander-in-Chief - not only the Ministry of Defense, but also the powerful and elite Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps- the so-called “pasradan” that was established during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and is responsible for the protection of the gains of the Revolution and the Islamic regime. Today, the “Corps” is a military organization that is frequently better armed than units in the Ministry of Defense. Proceeding from the country’s foreign policy interests, the Corps takes an active part in military operations in the Middle East (Syria, Lebanon, Yemen). It was as a member of the Corps, that President Ahmadinejad began his political career and has accordingly enjoyed its support. During Ahmadinejad’s presidency, the influence of the Corps

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1 *In the current 88-member “Council of Experts”, conservatives hold a larger share of votes (56). In March 2015, the 85 year-old ultraconservative Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi was elected chairman of the Council.*

2 *One of the features of the Islamic Republic is that the individual elected to the highest-ranking post has almost always also been a high-ranking cleric. Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all of the presidents of Iran, except for Ahmadinejad (who was trained as an engineer, but was no inferior to the clergy with his accentuated piety) were either Ayatollahs or Hujjat al-Islams. The current president of Iran, Hassan Rouhani, himself holds a clerical rank. The only exception is the current chairman of the Mejlis, Ali Larijani, who is a civilian.*

increased and today it is actively engaged in the country's politics. The Guard Corps is seen as a supporter of the conservative political wing.

### **Pre-Election Situation**

The political "battle" between conservatives and pragmatists has acquired new features in 2016. In February, the elections of the 260-member Iranian Parliament (Majlis), which take place every four years, coincided with the elections of the **Council of Experts**(mentioned above), which wields the power to select the Supreme Leader of the country and is itself elected every eight years. The Council is to be composed of 86 Islamic clerics and jurists.

During the lifetime of Imam Khomeini and after his death, the **Vilayat-e Faqih** principle of custodianship over the country accumulated numerous opponents among the highest Shiite circles. Iran's current highest clerical hierarchy includes extremely influential political heavyweights, who are also more inclined towards the collective governance of the country. In particular, the former president of Iran (1989-97) and the current chairman of the Expediency Discernment Council, "pragmatist" Ayatollah **Rafsanjani** has repeatedly raised the issue of the establishment of a collective governing body, the so-called "Leadership Council." Together with several influential ayatollahs, he believes that no worthy candidate for the country's future leadership has yet been identified. *\*Rafsanjani himself is considered one of the possible candidates for leadership.*

A rather popular figure in Iran, Seyyed **Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah (Imam) Khomeini** has expressed his willingness to partake in the elections of the Council of Experts as an independent candidate. He is a moderate politician opposed to ultraconservative ideology. His emergence on the political arena has resonated considerably with the conservatives - having perceived the association of a politician carrying such a well-known family name with reformers or pragmatists, or even moderate "Principlists," as a threat to the fragile political balance.

Diligent consultations have already commenced among political groups in order to secure mutual support. The Iranian press has begun covering private meetings among four influential political figures: the known moderate "Principlist" Ali Akbar Velayati(former Minister of Foreign Affairs

and advisor to the Supreme Leader of the country), Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri (former chairman of the Majlis), Ali Larijani (incumbent chairman of the Parliament of Iran (Majlis)), and Ayatollah Saeed Mortazavi (former Prosecutor General of Iran). Active movements have emerged among the ranks of the so-called “reformists” and “pragmatists.” Talks are underway regarding consolidation around President Rouhani and his team and participation in the parliamentary elections under a joint list.

**Hassan Rouhani** has always enjoyed the endorsement of the country’s Supreme Leader, Khamenei. For years, he has been the Leader’s representative in the Security Council, and during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2003), he held the post of Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. His name is associated with the 2003 suspension of Iran’s enrichment program and the subsequent enforcement of the additional protocol to the “Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty,” following which international observers were permitted to inspect Iran’s nuclear facilities. In 2005, after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president, the Majlis overturned these decisions and the confrontation with the West once again entered an acute phase, which ultimately resulted in the imposition of sanctions against the country by the US, EU and UN.

Following the election of Hassan Rouhani, undoubtedly with the consent of the Supreme Spiritual Leader,<sup>3</sup> the dialogue with the West on Iran’s nuclear issue was resumed. As a result of talks held in the summer of 2015, a mutual understanding was reached on the key parameters of Iran’s future nuclear activity and the lifting of the sanctions imposed by the UN, US and EU. The termination of the confrontation with the US and the West, as well as the prospects for the abolition of banking sanctions were met with great enthusiasm by the population of Tehran. This fact has further boosted the popularity of the President and his team of “reformers” (pragmatists).

## Conclusion

Given the age (77) and the health condition (he has undergone a series of complex surgeries) of Iran’s current Supreme Leader, the Ayatollah

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<sup>3</sup> *Khamenei has stated that he does not trust the United States and the West, but would not interfere in Rouhani’s attempts to reach a negotiated resolution to the country’s economic sanctions.*

**Ali Khamenei**, it is likely that the **Council of Experts** elected this year will be tasked with the selection of a new Supreme Leader. Thus, this year's elections bear a twofold significance - Iranian society, including both the Shiite clerical hierarchy as well as civil society, may in fact face the decision to determine the future course of the country's development; and the composition of the Council of Experts will largely determine the essence of the institute of the "Supreme Leader."

The identification of possible substitute candidates for the Supreme Leader is associated with the determination of the principal directions of the country's development.

President Rouhani is an experienced and cautious politician and it is unlikely that his team will engage in an open conflict with its opponents. A rather significant part of Iranian society is traditionally conservative and continues to hold anti-Western (anti-American) dispositions. One reason for this, of course, is the recent statements of the country's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei: "No further negotiations with the United States, beyond the nuclear issue."

The upcoming parliamentary and Expert Council elections will demonstrate the outcome of **the second attempt** by the Iranian liberal political elite and the relatively younger society to change the country's political course. The first such attempt took place during the tenure of President **Mohammad Khatami**, although it concluded with only a partial liberalization of the country's internal rules of life.

With the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013 and the support of his successful negotiations with the West, Iranian society has reiterated its desire to initiate actual change in the country. The decision to lift economic sanctions against the Islamic Republic of Iran, announced on **18 January 2016** by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini and citing the report produced by the UN's International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), will have a distinct effect on the current pre-election environment in Iran.

The situation will now depend on the factional affiliation of the members of the Majlis, as well as the selection of the Supreme Leader by the **Council of Experts**, and the subsequent orientation of his outlook.