

After Ahmadinejad: Who will be the next president of Iran?

Introduction And Summary

Last week witnessed the start of campaigning for Iran's 11th presidential elections under the Islamic Republic. The first round of voting is scheduled for 14 June with a run-off vote, if necessary, on 21 June.

These elections herald the end of President Ahmadinejad's second term and final mandate. The question of who will succeed is crucial, as tensions mount inside the country between the traditionalists surrounding the country's spiritual Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, and the various forces seeking any form of change. At stake is the future of Iran's failing economy, the desperate need for modernisation and reform and the continuing stand-off with the international community over Iran's ambitions to be a nuclear power.

Eight candidates have been cleared to stand in the first round polls – four "Principalist" supporters of the conservative status quo, two reformists (in Iranian terms) and two independents. It seems most likely that the election will fall to one of the Principalists, especially if they can agree to coalesce behind a single candidate. At present the front runner appears to be Saeed Jalili who is thought privately to be Khamenei's first choice.

We do not foresee at this stage the sort of unrest witnessed following the 2009 elections amid allegations of a rigged result. Partly this is due to the absence of an attractive reformist candidate to act as a focus for protestors; partly it is due to the prevailing cynicism and apathy among the electorate that may also lead to a low voter turnout on the day.

The rigorous managing of the pre-election process by Khamenei has ensured that no candidate is entirely unpalatable to the leadership. Thus, unlike 2009, an acceptable result has been engineered at these elections before any votes are cast, obviating the need for post hoc manipulation.

This is the first of two papers that FTI Consulting is producing to interpret Iran's presidential elections. The second will be issued following the declaration of a winner, to assess the results and what they mean for Iran, for business and for the wider international community.

Narrowing The Field

On 23 May the Guardian Council of the Constitution, a twelve man body effectively appointed by the Supreme Leader whose duties include vetting presidential hopefuls, winnowed a field of 686 candidates to just eight deemed to meet the constitutional standards for the office of President.¹ Notable exclusions included the former President and one time Khomeini protégé, Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the Chief of Staff of outgoing President Ahmedinejad, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai.

The Guardian Council's decision suggests that Khamenei wants to ensure the next president is firmly under his control, following the damaging division between the Supreme Leader and the presidency under Ahmedinejad. The differences in the political programs of the approved candidates are therefore limited.

The Campaign

Campaigning officially began on 24 May, and in the next three weeks the eight candidates will present their platforms in television debates, and on mainstream and social media, in an attempt to win the public and the Supreme Leader's support. The debates so far have centred on Iran's economic strategy and its relations with the West. These issues will remain at the heart of the election as sanctions combined with the debilitating effects of Ahmadinejad's economic mismanagement, have led to soaring unemployment, inflation and a collapse in the value of the riyal.

Whether the Iranian population will show enthusiasm in turning out to vote between such a narrow choice of candidates is unclear. Widespread voter apathy will call into question the credibility of the elections - but if it means that there is no repeat of the unrest in 2009, following alleged vote-rigging, the clerical leadership may think it a price worth paying. With the leaders of the 2009 Green Movement, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, still under house arrest, and former reformist president, Mohammad Khatami, opting to keep a low profile, there are no prominent figures around which protests might coalesce. The wild card remains Ahmedinejad; he may yet decide to throw a spanner in the works following Mashai's exclusion, with unpredictable results.

¹ The constitutional requirement for being considered a presidential candidate are to be of "Iranian origin and an Iranian citizen", a "religious person with political interest", to possess "managerial capability and leadership skills", to have "a good past-record"; to have "trustworthiness and piety" and a "convinced belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic."

The Candidates

The agendas of the candidates, who come from a narrow political spectrum, reveal little real divergence. However, there are small differences in background, constituencies, economic vision and international posture which may provide points of differentiation on which voter choices can be based. These nuances may also provide pointers to Iran's future course under whichever of the eight candidates is elected.

The presidential candidates can be broadly categorised into three main groups, listed below. Details of the candidates and their broad policies are set out in the accompanying Annex.

1. The Principalists

The "Principalists" faction consists of conservatives who emphasise their loyalty to the system of "Velayat-e-Faqih", or rule by Islamic Jurists, established by Ayatollah Khomeini. Four candidates from this tendency are standing for election and enjoy the support of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. They adhere to his guidelines in regard to economic policies and relations with the West. We judge it probable that the successful presidential candidate on 14 June will come from this camp.

The four candidates from the Principalist tendency are:

- **Haddad Adel**, former speaker of the Iranian parliament (2004 - 2008);
- **Ali Akbar Velayati**, former Foreign Minister (1981-1997), and current advisor to the Supreme Leader on international affairs;
- **Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf**, Mayor of Tehran's since 2005;
- **Saeed Jalili**, Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council since 2007 and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator.

Three of the Principalist candidates (Adel, Velayati and Ghalibaf) comprise the so-called "Progressive" or "2+1 coalition". The goal of the "2+1" is to reach a consensus on a single Principalist candidate, based on which one is judged to enjoy the greatest legitimacy, efficiency, and popularity.² Currently there is no indication that any of the candidates would stand aside for the sake of the others, and Jalili has not responded to an invitation to participate in the "2+1" pact. Any decision for the Principalist candidates to stand down in favour of the best placed among them may therefore be last minute, with the risk of weakening the front and splitting their vote.

2. The "Reformists"

Two candidates are standing with broadly pragmatist and reformist credentials (relatively speaking); what they may lack is popular following. The two candidates are:

- **Mohammad Reza Aref**, former first Vice President under President Khatami (2001 – 2005);
- **Hassan Rohani**, Head of the Expediency Council's Strategic Centre and Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator (2003 – 2005).

These hopefuls represent the only alternative, albeit limited, to the conservative status quo, with agendas slightly divergent from the other six candidates in regard to economic management and relations with the West. Their lack of profile may limit their impact, however, especially if turnout is low. One of the candidates may agree to withdraw in favour of the other in order to present a unified challenge to the Principalist bloc. This, combined with a decision by more prominent reformist figures - such as Khatami or Rafsanjani - to declare support for the unified candidate might break open the election and challenge Khamenei's attempt to engineer a sweetheart outcome.

3. The Independents

Two candidates are standing who are unaffiliated with either of the above factions. At present their political positions are unclear, as is their potential support base. For these reasons, it is unlikely that either of the two candidates will emerge victorious. The Independents are:

- **Mohammad Gharrazi**, former Minister of Oil (1981 - 85) and Minister of PTT (1985 - 1997);
- **Mohsen Rezai**, 58, Former Commander of the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq War, and former Secretary of the Expediency Council.

Further details of all the candidates and their policy platforms are set out in the Annex, below.

The Disqualification Of Rafsanjani And Mashai

One week after the Guardian Council announced the results of its vetting process, the exclusion of two candidates, in particular, remains controversial in Tehran:

- The disqualification of Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, Ahmadinejad's chief of staff and relative by marriage, was widely forecast. In 2009 Khamenei barred Ahmadinejad from appointing Mashai as First Vice President. Since then Mashai has been attacked by the leadership as the head of a "deviant current" and accused of sorcery due to his ideology - a combination of nationalism and anti-clerical populism.³

² According to the reports released, popularity will be measured by the polls taken about one week before the election.

³ He stated that Iran is a friend to the "nations" of Israel and the United States, being criticised by the Supreme Leader.

- The decision to dismiss Hashemi Rafsanjani was more of a surprise. Rafsanjani, 78, has held many senior positions, including a military commander during the war against Iraq and President between 1989 and 1997. He is currently head of the Expediency Discernment Council.⁴ In 2009 Rafsanjani came out in sympathy with the post-election protests, and was accused of being behind the unrest. In recent months, prominent reformists, such as former president Khatami, have supported his candidacy, confident that the Guardian Council could not prevent such a prominent revolutionary figure from competing.

Both Rafsanjani and Mashai represented a challenge to the smooth running of the elections envisioned by Khamenei, who chose to play it safe by excluding them. Although no specific explanation was given to justify the decision of the Guardian Council, rumours have emerged about the unsuitability of Rafsanjani to carry on presidential duties due to his age.⁵

While Rafsanjani has accepted the decision of the Council, Mashai has challenged it, asking the Supreme Leader for an explanation while enjoining his supporters to “stay calm”. The question is how Ahmadinejad will now react, given that his protégé has been side-lined and his alleged ambition to establish an Iranian version of Russia’s Putin-Medvedev model has failed. With nothing to lose, Ahmadinejad could decide to destabilize the election through his oversight of the voting process (though this has been curtailed by the January 2013 Election Law),⁶ or by releasing embarrassing information about corrupt elements in the leadership, as he has threatened in the past. Ahmadinejad, therefore, may still have the capacity to dash Khamenei’s hopes of an incident-free ballot.⁷

Turn Out

The extent to which these elections will mobilise voters remains uncertain. It seems unlikely that the 2013 presidential elections will excite the public, given the low profile of the competing candidates and the apathy that followed the 2009 repression. Many Iranians now question their influence over the electoral process. Expectations are therefore for a low turnout, similar to the 2012 parliamentary elections. Aware of such a possibility, and traditionally wary of the risk that a low turnout will delegitimize the regime both domestically and abroad, the leadership has scheduled the elections for local and municipal councils on the same day as the presidential elections, in an attempt to boost electoral participation.⁸

In the meantime, security around Tehran has increased visibly over last week. Checkpoints are in place around the city’s main squares and high-speed, filter-free Internet access has been restricted,⁹ indicating that intelligence services and the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) will not hesitate to control the process and contain any turbulence or unrest, if required.

And The Winner Is...?

The 14 June elections represent an important challenge for the Iranian regime, which will need to maintain a delicate balance between legitimacy and stability. Khamenei has stated publicly that he will endorse none of the candidates, but many speculate that in private he favours Jalili. Jalili is widely regarded as the frontrunner at this early stage; on 28 May he attracted the public support of the influential conservative cleric, Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. However, with no real economic or management experience and a colourless profile, Jalili may have a hard time winning enthusiastic popular support or the endorsement and withdrawal of the other Principalist candidates. Among the other Principalists, Ghalibaf is also regarded as a contender; he is deemed to have the best managerial credentials from his record managing the Tehran mayoralty.

It is clear is that Khamenei is looking to consolidate his power and is likely to endorse, even if tacitly, whichever candidate within the Principalist bloc emerges as the front runner. Should the Principalists fail to present a single candidate, votes might split to the benefit the other two groups, leading to an unpredictable outcome with the increased likelihood of a second run-off between the two leading candidates on 21 June.

Whoever ultimately comes out on top, and assuming there is no repeat of the extensive unrest witnessed in 2009, Khamenei is likely to emerge strengthened. He will be freed of his fractious current president in favour of a replacement who will be more inclined to toe the Supreme Leader’s line. None of the eight approved candidates has the independent power-base or charisma which could pose a challenge to Khamenei or his authority as Ahmedinejad has done or as Rafsanjani might threaten.

⁴ Among other responsibilities, the Expediency Discernment Council functions as an advisory body to the Supreme Leader.

⁵ The Parliament presented legislation last year to introduce age limits for presidential candidates (between 45 and 70), in a visible attempt to keep Rafsanjani out of the race. However the Guardian Council, declared the parliamentary legislation unconstitutional in order to maintain full control over the electoral process.

⁶ This law established a new “Central Executive Board”, composed of the Interior Minister, Intelligence Minister, Prosecutor General, one lawmaker, and a number of religious, political, cultural and social figures, which has diluted the previously exclusive role of the Interior Ministry in overseeing the elections, and diminished the government’s authority over the elections.

⁷ The information allegedly implicates family members of the Supreme Leader himself.

⁸ The activities of the Councils affect almost all aspects of people’s daily lives and candidates are generally better known than those for national elections. Local elections tend to attract a larger turn out among voters.

⁹ Social media websites such as Facebook and YouTube were used in 2009 to organise protests and to cover the crackdown on demonstrators

Annex – The Candidates

Principalists

1. Jalili: Justice, Resistance and progress

Saeed Jalili, 47, has served since 2007 as the secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. He is a veteran of the Iran-Iraq war who worked in the Foreign ministry in the 1990s and became an advisor to Ahmadinejad in 2005.

As his slogan "Justice, Resistance and Progress" suggests, Jalili is the most conservative of not just the Principalists but of all eight candidates for the presidency. He is likely to continue the current administration's policies, both in economic and international terms, albeit with milder rhetoric and less populist flair. He is distancing himself from secular parts of society and has criticised the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few as an obstacle to Iran's economic progress. Jalili has stated that resistance towards the West – "not prostration in the face of sanctions" - and commitment to extend Islam's influence worldwide should be the cornerstones of Iran's foreign policy.

Jalili's portrayal as "the man who will carry Iran's revolutionary torch into the future" and his fierce loyalty to Khamenei may compensate for his lack of popular charisma. Being a late-comer to the presidential race, it is as yet unclear how the various constituencies will react to his agenda.¹⁰ He is likely to be a strong contender, however, especially if other Principalists can be persuaded to stand down to give him a clear run at the presidency.

2. Ghalibaf: Better Economy and Life for People

Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, 51, has been Tehran's mayor since 2005 and, because of his effective urban planning and improvement in the delivery of services in this role, enjoys popularity in the capital – an important voting constituency. Prior to this post, Ghalibaf was Commander of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' Air Force from 1997 and the country's Chief of Police from 2000.

His motto, "Better Economy and Life for People", is supported by his vow to repair Iran's ailing economy in two years by reviving the "jihadi morale for work and perseverance". Although his campaign is mostly focused on domestic politics and economic management, Ghalibaf's position on relations with the West is also considered "jihadi"; he has called for "strengthening resistance under pressure" and rejects the argument that re-establishing relations with the US would solve all the country's problem.

Notwithstanding his popularity in the capital, Ghalibaf's path to establishing a position as the consensus Principalist candidate is unlikely to be smooth. His positioning as the most moderate

of this group were damaged last week when he was accused of being responsible for the beating of protesting students during the 1999 uprisings, while he was police commander.

3. Haddad Adel: Piety and Good Judgement

Haddad Adel, 68, is a former speaker of the Iranian parliament (2004 - 2008). In recent years he has been mostly absent from the political scene, focusing instead on cultural issues. He is related to Khamenei by marriage,¹¹ leading many to believe that he is in the Leader's circle of trust.

Adel's electoral slogan is "Piety and Good Judgement". He claims to have joined the Presidential race because of his extensive government and management experience, and vowing that he will fix the economy by using a "revolutionary mind-set". He endorses Iran's "obvious right" to nuclear energy and has stated that the country's stance on the nuclear issue should not be changed. In line with Khamenei, he has declared that negotiations with the West should be an option only if the US alters its approach.

As of today, Haddad Adel is not thought likely to attract much electoral support given his lack of charisma and experience, and his weak management credentials.

4. Ali Akbar Velayati: Moralism and Management Stability

Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, 68, served as Foreign Minister for 16 years until 1997; he currently advises the Supreme Leader on international affairs. A US-educated physician, he maintains friendly ties with political figures other than Khamenei, including Hashemi Rafsanjani, whom he served as foreign minister for eight years.

Velayati's slogan, "Moralism and Management Stability", suggests that he would follow Khamenei's line in both economic management and relations with the West, but with a greater focus on the latter given his knowledge of Iran's nuclear program and experience in relations with the US. He has stated that any direct negotiations with the US would need to be based on the Supreme Leader's guidelines. He has suggested that through skilled diplomacy, largely absent during the last administration, international cooperation could and should be improved, thereby alleviating sanctions and safeguarding Iran's national interests. Velayati has suggested he would restore the value of Iran's currency by arranging transfers of frozen payments as his main priority in economic terms.

Velayati is not believed to be a candidate able to gather a consistent popular support. Although his credentials with regard to international affairs are stronger than other candidates but his economic prescriptions, as suggested above, are unpersuasive.

¹⁰ It is speculated that he registered to enter the race only after Rafsanjani presented his candidacy to counter him.

¹¹ His daughter is married to one of Khamenei's sons.

Reformists

5. Aref: “Livelihood, Dignity and Rationality”

Dr. Mohammad Reza Aref, 61, received his PhD in the US. He was formerly first Vice President from 2001 to 2005 under President Khatami. His slogan, “Livelihood, Dignity and Rationality”, marks a focus on the economy, particularly housing and attracting foreign investment from the Iranian diaspora. Aref has highlighted the need to benefit from the experience of officials and experts from previous Reformist administrations, such as Khatami and Rafsanjani, to resolve the country’s economic woes and rebuild Iran’s status on the global stage. While Aref shares the prevailing view that Iran’s access to nuclear technology is a right, he supports cooperation and mutual understanding through negotiations rather than confrontation as a better means to defend Iran’s rights.

Although Aref’s vision is broadly in line with the reformist thinking of the 2009 Green Movement, his low profile is unlikely to garner a high degree of popular support.

6. Rohani: Government of prudence and hope

Hassan Rohani, 65, is a religious moderate and the only cleric standing in the race. He is the head of the Expediency Council’s Strategic Centre and the former head of Iran’s nuclear negotiating team from, 2003 – 2005. He resigned from this position following the election of Ahmadinejad.

As his slogan (“Governance of Prudence and Hope”) suggests, Rohani is the most moderate candidate running for president on 14 June and his agenda mostly focuses on taking a “rational direction” in foreign policy. Criticising Ahmadinejad’s diplomacy and blaming him for the economic sanctions and international isolation, Rohani stated that, if elected, he would start direct talks with the US, arguing that the stand-off is in neither of the two countries’ interests and that “no country can afford being cut off from the rest of the world.”

Although Rohani is well known in policy circles in the West, he is a largely unknown figure to the Iranian general public, and attracts criticism among conservatives for his handling of negotiations Iran’s nuclear rights.¹² It is difficult to see, therefore, that on his own and without the backing of more prominent reformists, he has the capability to generate enough popular votes to mount a clear challenge.

Independents

7. Gharazi: Anti-Inflation Administration

Mohammad Gharrazi, 72, is the oldest candidate and the least known. He served as Minister of Oil in Moussavi’s cabinet (1981 - 85) and was Minister of Post, Telegraph and Telephone under Rafsanjani (1985 - 1997). He is a member of the IRGC and the Parliament, but he has not held public office since 1997.

Gharrazi’s campaign, based on the motto “Anti-Inflation Administration”, focuses on the economy and the need to boost domestic production by creating job schemes that can help curb inflation.

His approval to stand for the presidency was a surprise, given his absence from Iran’s political arena for years and the disqualification of more established names. Besides his campaign statements, his views and his constituency linkages are mostly unknown.

8. Mohsen Rezaei: Political Ethics and Economic Efficiency

Mohsen Rezaei, 58, was appointed as the commander of the IRGC in 1981, during the Iran-Iraq War, and was a former Expediency Council secretary. He ran unsuccessfully for presidency twice (in 2005 and 2009).

He is campaigning on an economic and anti-corruption platform, as suggested by his slogan “Political Ethics and Economic Efficiency”. Rezaei promotes a federal economic model that would enable the nation “to dine at the same table as the government” and reduce disparities of wealth. He has promised to establish a union of Southwest Asian nations and has indicated his commitment to assign a powerful team consisting of the most seasoned Iranian diplomats to deal with the nuclear dossier.

Judging from his past results in presidential elections and his lack of any particular constituency, Rezaei seems unlikely to attract many votes.

¹² He was the key nuclear negotiator with the EU between 2003 and 2005 and had a substantial role in accepting suspension of Iran’s uranium enrichment program.

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