



Brandeis University

Crown Center
for Middle East Studies

Mailstop 010
Waltham, Massachusetts
02454-9110

781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
www.brandeis.edu/crown

*Judith and Sidney Swartz Director
and Professor of Politics*
Shai Feldman

Associate Director
Kristina Cherniahivsky

*Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor
of Middle East History and
Associate Director for Research*
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Research Fellow
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Neubauer Junior Research Fellow
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Jean-Louis Romanet Perroux, PhD
Ahmad Shokr, PhD

Middle East Brief

What Does the 2017 Presidential Election Tell Us about the State of the Islamic Republic of Iran?

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi and Naghmeh Sohrabi

After a campaign that focused on the need to resolve the nuclear crisis and lift UN sanctions, in June 2013, Hassan Rouhani was elected president of Iran. In July 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which set forth a plan according to which sanctions on Iran would be lifted in return for verifiable curbs on its nuclear program, was signed between Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent Security Council members plus Germany). But as the JCPOA lifted crippling sanctions on the Iranian economy, it also raised the Iranian population's expectations regarding tangible improvements in their everyday lives—and by all accounts, these expectations have not yet been met. On May 19, more than a year after “implementation day” of the deal in January 2016, Iranians go to the polls to choose among six candidates vying for the presidency.

The fact that the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, clearly supported the signing of the JCPOA and that a majority of the population continues to support it has meant that the debate over the signing of the deal itself is over. But this does not mean that the JCPOA is no longer a political fault line. Rather, it is subsumed under other issues that are now emerging from under its shadow.

Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi is a former member of the Central Council of Mujahedin Inqilab, a reformist party in Iran, and on the editorial board of several reformist newspapers. He is currently a Researcher at the Crown Center and a graduate student at Harvard University.

Naghmeh Sohrabi is Associate Director for Research at the Crown Center and the Charles (Corky) Goodman Professor of Middle East History.

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Iran's short presidential election cycle reveals the deep political currents and continuous elite competition that run through its political system.¹ And the importance of Iranian presidential elections lies not just in who gets to be president, but that every four years Iran's opaque political system becomes temporarily more transparent, as debates that are usually conducted behind closed doors become public. This occurs for a variety of reasons, the most important of which is that over four decades the Islamic Republic has become invested in voter participation as a show of its legitimacy. Voters in turn have come to expect a modicum of openness in return for their participation.

This Brief analyzes three issues that have come to the fore of public debate owing to the opening provided by this election period:

1. *the effects of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's death in January 2017 on the reformist-centrist alliance.* Rafsanjani was critical in convincing centrists and reformists to create the alliance that enabled Rouhani's electoral victory in 2013, an alliance that was also victorious in the 2016 parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections. The 2017 election is a test of the durability of this alliance in his absence;
2. *the question of the successor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the planning around that succession.* The Supreme Leader and his close allies have begun planning for his succession and are using this election as a step in that process; the candidacy of Ebrahim Raisi, a potential successor, has brought this issue to the forefront; and
3. *the unemployment crisis in Iran and mobilization of the populist vote.* This has emerged as the defining issue in this election. It serves as shorthand for criticizing the Rouhani government's negotiation of the JCPOA and has also revived the populist rhetoric that was used by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in the 2005 elections and that continues to have traction despite the disqualification of Ahmadinejad's candidacy in the current election.

Election Timeline and Background

Every four years, Iran holds a presidential election. These elections follow the same schedule: Over a period of five days, anyone interested in becoming a candidate submits their name to the Ministry of Interior. (This year, over a thousand people submitted their names.) The Guardian Council (GC) has the constitutional responsibility of vetting these names and determining the final list of candidates allowed to run—and they are under no obligation to explain their decisions. In the 2013 election year, the GC caused a stir by disqualifying former president Hashemi Rafsanjani; this year, it created a similar stir by disqualifying former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Once the GC announces the final list of candidates, the official election campaign begins and continues until 24 hours before voting day. For close to a month, the candidates will be allotted equal time on state television and radio, participate in three live debates, blanket social media and cities, towns, and villages with campaign materials, and hold rallies all across the country. If no candidate wins a majority of the votes, the election goes to a second round between the top two candidates.

Electoral politics in Iran revolve not around parties but around evolving factions, which are built around personalities and small parties or quasi-parties that are often short-lived. In the 1980s, the political elite was mainly divided into (Islamic) Left and Right, distinguished at the time primarily by their views on a state-controlled vs. free market economy. Having been pushed out of most positions of power after Khomeini's death in 1989, the left-wing faction began to rethink its core values, and by 1997 it emerged as the reform movement, with a discourse based on civil society and rule of the people. In reaction to the reformists, by the mid-2000s a new faction, the principlists, emerged from the old right wing, consisting of supporters of Khamenei whose main "principle" was allegiance to the Supreme Leader.

The main political battles this year are being fought along reformist, principlist, and centrist lines. These factions differ on a wide variety of issues, from political liberalization to relations with the West. And they have the flexibility to create alliances and electoral lists that bring together their factions' resources in the service of a particular election. For example, a reformist-centrist alliance worked to get Hassan Rouhani elected in 2013, and this year, various principlist factions have come together to support the candidacies of Ebrahim Raisi and Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf.

The Death of Hashemi Rafsanjani

The presidential election on May 19 will be the first election in the history of the Islamic Republic to take place in the absence of one of its founding members, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Over four decades, Rafsanjani worked to move the Islamic Republic toward a model of practical governance. He was the Speaker of the Parliament throughout the Iran-Iraq war and the most vocal and powerful voice for the then right-wing faction (characterized primarily by their pro-business economic stance) during the 1980s.² At the time, a wide swath of the government, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), and some of Ayatollah Khomeini's closest allies belonged to the Islamic Left faction, advocating a stronger state-controlled economy and the export of the revolution beyond Iran's borders.

Rafsanjani believed that the Islamic Republic's long-term survival depended on the primacy of governance over ideology, implemented by a technocratic government, not a revolutionary one. To that end, he was instrumental in convincing Khomeini of the futility of continuing the war with Iraq, which by 1988 had devolved into a bloody

war of attrition. After the end of the war, Rafsanjani was elected president (from 1989 to 1997), and in order to reconstruct post-war Iran and open up the economy, he empowered the right-wing religious factions to marginalize the Left. In 1989, he was also critical in engineering, in the Assembly of Experts, Ali Khamenei's election to succeed Khomeini as Supreme Leader.

Rafsanjani stood in the 2000 parliamentary elections and was defeated by the reformists—including former leftists he had marginalized in the 1990s; in the 2005 presidential elections, he was defeated by Ahmadinejad in the second round. At the time, Khamenei believed that Ahmadinejad would be an obedient president who would help rid the political system of technocrats and reformists (supporters of former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, respectively). As a result, a purge of the upper echelons of power began, leading to immense gains by the IRGC and the filling of government positions by its younger cadres.

It was at this point that the reformists, led by Khatami, and Rafsanjani saw themselves as confronting a common enemy and came together to create a united front.³ This Khatami-Rafsanjani alliance, which continued through the presidency of Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2013, had important consequences, beginning with the rise of the Green Movement in 2009 and the election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013. It also saw crucial victories in the 2016 elections for Parliament⁴—when all 30 elected MPs for Tehran came from the alliance's list—and for the Assembly of Experts, when 15 out of Tehran's quota of 16 did. This presidential election will be the first test of this alliance in the absence of Rafsanjani.

There are two ways in which Rafsanjani's absence could impact this election. First, some believe that Rafsanjani was using the reformists as a pawn in his power struggle with the Supreme Leader, whom he resented for supporting Ahmadinejad in 2005 and beyond. With Rafsanjani's death, it may have become possible for the reformists to improve their relationship with Khamenei without Rafsanjani as their go-between. Several signs point to this development. For example, a month after Rafsanjani's death, Khatami, as the leader of the reformists, suggested a national reconciliation that would publically bring the reformists and the principlists together; he also emphasized reformists' respect for Khamenei and his position as Leader. The Supreme Leader reacted negatively to this idea, however, remarking that "the people are already united and the concept of reconciliation makes no sense."⁵

While Rouhani remains the official candidate of the reformist-centrist alliance, he does not represent the

reformist faction and does not intercede for them with Khamenei. The reformists have thus continued to try to create communication channels with the Leader. In the weeks that followed Rafsanjani's death, Ishaq Jahangiri—head of the Kargozaran Party (a political association of technocrats close to Rafsanjani), Rouhani's vice president, and current reformist candidate for president—announced after meeting with Khamenei that he would be the link between the Supreme Leader and the reformists. The deputy head of Mehdi Karrubi's reformist party, Rasoul Montajabnia, also managed to meet with Khamenei and purportedly began talks with him about the conditions under which Khamenei would agree to lift Karrubi's and Mousavi's house arrests. This issue has haunted the presidency of Rouhani, who has repeatedly been criticized for not doing enough (or anything) to lift the house arrests. In his meeting with Montajabnia, the Supreme Leader seems to have indicated that he would like to find a way for the principlists and reformists to cooperate.⁶ There are currently no clear signs that there will be negotiations between the reformists and Khamenei; yet, there are indications that Khamenei's clear victory over the reformists (as seen in the banning of their political parties, Karrubi's and Mousavi's house arrests, and Khatami's being banned from traveling and from attending public gatherings) may have given him the confidence to open up the possibility in the future.

The second way in which Rafsanjani's absence might play a role in the current election involves the fact that in the past decade he had helped shape both the reformist and centrist strands in the Iranian political system and had acted as their go-between, both from one to the other and vis-à-vis other centers of power, particularly the clerics in Qum. This position gave him the final say in intra-alliance disagreements. The loss of Rafsanjani increases the chance that the winning alliance between the reformists and the centrists will not hold, and hence that their vote will be split in the 2017 elections. The odds of such a split are exacerbated by the fact that the current alliance between the reformists and the centrists is made up of personalities and groups who have a history of hostility toward each other. For example, Ali Larijani, the current Speaker of the Parliament, during his time as head of state media continuously clashed with, criticized, and undermined the government of then President Khatami. It was Rafsanjani who enabled Larijani and Khatami to come together in the alliance that brought Rouhani to power in 2013; now, with Rafsanjani's absence, it is unclear if or how that can continue.

The candidacy of the reformist Jahangiri is ostensibly intended to support Rouhani during the live public debates; Jahangiri announced that closer to the election,

he would withdraw his name and direct his supporters to vote for Rouhani. Yet, this is not guaranteed. As of this writing, Jahangiri's forceful attacks on the principlists' candidates—particularly the mayor of Tehran, Qalibaf—and his clear identification as a reformist candidate during the first debates made him a darling of the reform-leaning electorate. If Jahangiri's popularity continues, and he stays in the election after all, then he would split the reformist-centrist vote and effectively end the alliance between the two factions, bringing to a close the electoral successes they have had since 2013. On the other hand, his withdrawal, despite his rising popularity, would point to the durability of this alliance in the aftermath of Rafsanjani's death.

In the Shadow of Succession

Amidst the swirl of rumors surrounding the health of the 78-year-old Ayatollah Khamenei, political actors in Iran have naturally begun to think about his possible successor. The question of succession and the identity of the Islamic Republic's third Supreme Leader has even been raised by Khamenei and his closest allies in public. It has undoubtedly played an important role in their choice of candidates to stand against Rouhani in the 2017 election.

According to the Iranian constitution, the Supreme Leader is chosen in a two-stage election by the Assembly of Experts. The current Assembly was elected by direct vote in March 2016 for an eight-year term and is likely to be in power when the time comes to choose the next Supreme Leader. Based on the makeup of its executive committee, this Assembly is closely aligned with Khamenei. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the right-wing cleric who is also the head of the Guardian Council, received the least number of votes for the Assembly of the 16 clerics representing Tehran—more than a million less than the first-place Rafsanjani—but was chosen by more than half of the 88 members of the Assembly for its leadership.⁷

Additionally, the high-ranking officers of the IRGC, who control a wide number of institutions across Iran, from banking and trade to the media, avail themselves of every possible opportunity to prevent any kind of change that would lead to their eventual loss of power and profits. With the lifting of the sanctions, the decrease in external threats to Iran, and the economic growth rate of over six percent, the IRGC may believe that the 2017 presidential election is a perfect opportunity for them to further their grip on power. The widespread economic dissatisfaction would allow them to mobilize the poorer segments of society, which, combined with those loyal to the Islamic Republic (e.g. those who continuously vote for candidates

close to Khamenei such as Saeed Jalili), could hand them an electoral victory.

As important as the Assembly of Experts and the IRGC is the role played by the family, and particularly the sons, of religious leaders. The role of sons in the political-religious life of Shi'a sources of emulation (*marja'*) is an old tradition. Usually, it is one of the sons who takes over the running of the *marja'*'s office when the cleric gets old and who, after the cleric's death, takes control of his belongings and of his income from religious payments (*vujihat-e shar'iya*). In this vein, the sons of both Khomeini and Khamenei (the only two Ayatollahs in the Shi'a world to have been political leaders of a country) have played important roles in Iranian politics. Ahmad Khomeini, the second son of Khomeini, by most accounts was responsible for two important decisions near the end of his father's life: the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988⁸ and the removal in 1989 of Ayatollah Montazeri as Khomeini's successor (for a variety of reasons, including Montazeri's criticism of the mass executions). And Mojtaba Khamenei, the second son of the current Supreme Leader, has, at least since the 2005 presidential election, had a hand in influencing election results, most famously in 2009.⁹

The unsavory fate of the deposed ruling families during the Arab Spring as well as the old age of his father has increased Mojtaba Khamenei's stake in the current presidential election. Both for the central command of the IRGC and for him, it is important that when there is a change in leadership in Iran, the reformists not gain significant power. A second term for Rouhani, hand in hand with the results of the 2016 parliamentary elections that saw the success of the reformist-centrist alliance, poses a threat to them, even if they do not perceive it to be an existential one. As a result, Rouhani's critics have entered the 2017 presidential elections with two candidates, Ebrahim Raisi and Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf: The belief is that their combined presence will siphon enough votes from Rouhani (who won in 2013 with just 50.8 percent of the votes) to take the election to a second round, between Rouhani and one of these two men, and thus turn the election into a referendum on the former's first term in office.

Ebrahim Raisi, age 56, has held several important positions in the judiciary (the only branch of the Iranian system that has no direct voting for any of its positions), including as attorney general, which in Iran is part of the judiciary. Last year, he was chosen by Khamenei as Trustee of the Shrine of the Eighth Imam (the Imam Reza shrine) in Mashhad, one of the most important and richest religious sites in the Shi'a world. Raisi is black-turbaned, signifying his descent from the prophet Muhammad's family, and a close friend of

Khamenei's son, Mojtaba. The trusteeship of the Imam Reza shrine has allowed him to use the resources of this rich shrine to build up not only his religious credentials but also his populist ones by providing food to the needy and hosting poor pilgrims. During the two weeks of holidays for the Persian New Year, for example, 25,000 packages of food blessed by the shrine of the Imam Reza were distributed to the poor not only in the province of Khorasan in northeast Iran, where the shrine is located, but as far down as Ahvaz in the southeast.¹⁰

Raisi represents the most radical religious parts of Iranian society and those most loyal to the Supreme Leader. These segments voted for Ahmadinejad both in 2005 and 2009 and for Saeed Jalili in 2013; based on their voting patterns, they represent roughly 12 percent of the electorate. The election of Raisi would allow the anti-Rouhani forces to capture the presidency and to eventually make him the next Supreme Leader. In Iran's only other experience with choosing a new Leader, in 1989, Ali Khamenei had been president for two terms and was also a member of the Assembly of Experts. That experience perfectly conforms with Rouhani's current position as both president and member of the Assembly of Experts, who was elected in 2016 with the third highest number of votes. This places him in a possible position—though this is not a likely scenario—to eventually be elected as Supreme Leader, particularly when the passing of Khamenei would lift his current control over an Assembly of Experts that contains a high number of clerics that came to power through the reformist-centrist alliance. This explains why Raisi, who is also a member of the Assembly of Experts, is currently being put forth as the favorite candidate for president of the pro-Khamenei faction.

The other candidate close to the Supreme Leader's office is Mohammad Baqir Qalibaf, who succeeded Ahmadinejad as mayor of Tehran in 2005 and stood in both the 2005 and 2013 presidential elections, when he received 13.8 and 16.5 percent of the votes, respectively.¹¹ Qalibaf has the distinction of being one of the most technocratic managers in both IRGC and Leadership circles. He was trained as an Airbus pilot, massively expanded Tehran's metro and its highways, and has created modern public spaces such as cinemas, parks, and theaters. He is a clean-cut, well-spoken, non-clerical figure who is often seen by Western analysts as a "moderate" politician.¹² But for much of the electorate, particularly in Tehran, his history as a commander in the IRGC, his role in the repression of the 2009 protests, and most recently, the fire in the Plasco building that killed roughly 30 people amidst revelations of the Tehran municipality's negligence¹³ and corruption paint a different picture.

Qalibaf is not liberal enough to get reformists' votes nor conservative enough to get the principlists' votes. Nonetheless, in an election such as the one on May 19, where employment and economic issues have trumped all else, he could present a real challenge to Rouhani as the mayor of a relatively successfully-run city. He has attacked Rouhani's government as old and tired and highlighted Rouhani's failure to fulfill his promise to create a million jobs over the course of his first term. Whereas, if elected president, Qalibaf promises that he would "increase the country's income by two and a half times, create 5 million jobs, and change the political system in favor of the country's 96%."¹⁴ Although Qalibaf's election would not directly affect the choice of the next Leader, it would help ensure a smooth transition. As a former officer in the IRGC and an ally of Khamenei, he would be ideally situated to help maintain order and stability should the Supreme Leader die during his term in office.

Unemployment and the Mobilization of the Populist Vote

In previous election cycles, no issue emerged as the singular topic that defined the elections; rather, each candidate spoke to whatever topic they believed was most significant to the population at the time. In 1997, for example, Khatami raised the importance of civil society, while his competition spoke of continuing the reconstruction policies of Rafsanjani's presidency. Similarly, in 2013, Rouhani emphasized improving relations with the international community and Iran's re-entry into the world economy, while Jalili spoke of a "resistance economy" and economic self-sufficiency. But with respect to the May 19 election, all of the campaigns agree that unemployment is the single most important issue that will define the election. Even Khamenei brought up living wages and employment as the theme for this election in his New Year speech,¹⁵ signifying the importance this issue now has for both the political elite and the electorate.

The unemployment rate in Iran has reached 13 percent overall¹⁶ and is up to 42 percent among those with a university degree.¹⁷ During the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq war, Iran's population almost doubled.¹⁸ The cohort born during this time reached employment age during the Ahmadinejad presidency. Yet between 2005 and 2013, despite the high price of oil and the value of Iran's currency being at its highest level since the founding of the Islamic Republic,¹⁹ the rate of job growth remained close to zero.²⁰ In other words, the numbers of employed at the beginning and end of Ahmadinejad's terms in office were roughly the same.

Revenues from oil allowed previous Iranian governments to increase university capacity as a way to delay students' entry into the job market.²¹ By doubling the acceptance rate of students at the bachelor's level, quadrupling the acceptance rate at the Master's level, and tripling it at the PhD level, the number of enrolled students went from 2.4 million in 2005 to 4.4 million in 2013.²² But delaying the entrance of the 1980s generation into the job market has meant that Rouhani's government, which came to power in 2013, has seen roughly 1 million people per year enter the workforce. And at the height of its economic growth, in 2004, the Iranian government was able to create fewer than 800,000 jobs,²³ while in its first year since the lifting of sanctions, the government has been able to create only 700,000 jobs.

The presence of unemployed youth in roughly 3 million Iranian families has meant that, despite the support that the nuclear agreement enjoys from the majority of the population, people do not feel that it has improved their daily lives.²⁴ To create widespread popular support for the nuclear negotiations, Rouhani linked the solution to all economic problems in Iran to the lifting of sanctions, and since many of these problems have not yet been solved, his election campaign is in trouble.

The root of Iran's unemployment crisis lies in its negative investment rates. In 2016, despite the relative improvement of Iran's economy as compared with previous years, the investment rate remained negative. The low price of oil has minimized the government's ability to invest; and foreign investors, worried about the future of Iran-U.S. relations, have not invested in the Iranian economy. What this means for Rouhani is that he has depicted his opponents in the principlist camp as destabilizing factors in the current economic situation, who will chase away investors. And he may use issues such as the arrests of several businessmen who had defaulted on massive bank loans,²⁵ the imprisonment of dual nationals by the IRGC,²⁶ last year's attacks on the Saudi embassy, and the IRGC's provocative actions in the Middle East to deflect blame for the low level of investments in Iran's economy.

Rouhani's opponents, on the other hand, have pointed to the average age of Rouhani's cabinet—roughly 59 years—as evidence that his government is tired and uninspired. Building on that, Qalibaf has contended that he would solve the unemployment crisis through a "jihad management" of the economy, meaning an invigorating, youthful style of management that is presented as in contrast to Rouhani's supposedly tired cabinet. And he has argued that just as "revolutionary youth" were able to save the revolution in the 1980s during the war, so too the youth, through adherence to a revolutionary ideology, can solve the unemployment issue now.²⁷

It was against this backdrop that Ahmadinejad, with the intention of introducing himself as a “third way,” registered as a candidate for president. His goal was to get elected using three strategies. First, by attacking Rouhani and the now deceased Rafsanjani as members of the oligarchy and aristocracy, he hoped to mobilize the impoverished masses. Second, he unambiguously distanced himself from the core of power in Iran, and by indirectly criticizing (and directly defying) the Supreme Leader, he hoped to present himself as the “outsider” candidate.²⁸ Finally, he hoped to attract those dissatisfied with the current economic situation by reminding them of the direct cash distributions he enabled during his presidency and by promising increased cash subsidies should he once again become president. Unofficial opinion polls²⁹ showed him coming in second to Rouhani in popularity, above Qalibaf.

But Ahmadinejad was disqualified to run in the current election, and in a joint statement with his former advisor Hamid Baqai shortly after the final roster of candidates was released, he announced that he would not be endorsing any other candidate.³⁰ He forcefully repeated this stance halfway through the campaign season. Which begs the important question: Who will get the votes of Ahmadinejad’s supporters? The rush to attract these voters has meant that this election has seen more and louder populist slogans than in 2013. As noted above, Qalibaf has introduced himself as the representative of the 96 percent, while depicting Rouhani as that of the rich 4 percent.³¹

Yet despite this seeming movement toward populism, it is important to note that previous elections have shown that the Iranian electorate does not fall under any clear class-based division in their voting patterns. Rouhani, with his campaign motto of solving the nuclear crisis, was victorious in 2013 by winning 27 out of 30 provinces³². He received large pluralities of 48 and 46 percent of the votes in Tehran and Esfahan, the richest provinces, and 56 and 45 percent of votes in Ilam and South Khorasan, the poorest provinces. Similarly, in the first round of the 2005 election, where three reformists and three conservative/Right candidates competed against each other, every candidate came in first in the provinces from which they came or the provinces where they had tribal or ethnic connections. The votes of the top two candidates, Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, did not fall along rich/poor provinces. Tehran voted for the populist Ahmadinejad while Ilam went for Rafsanjani.³³ As such, there is little reason to believe that the forthcoming election will be one in which the haves vote for Rouhani while the have-nots vote for candidates such as Raisi or Qalibaf, whatever their campaign slogans.

Looking Past the 2017 Election

Regardless of who wins the 2017 presidential election, what has emerged from the political scene so far is an image of a far more confident Supreme Leader—and by extension, regime—than has been seen in the last decade or more. Correctly or not, Khamenei and his allies believe that they have finally gained control over almost all the levers of power in Iran and have marginalized the threats posed by figures such as Khatami and Ahmadinejad. This confidence is what has allowed Khamenei to publically set the stage for his succession by introducing Ebrahim Raisi as a presidential candidate.

Raisi’s mere candidacy is a victory for the Khamenei camp as it has introduced him to the public on the kind of national stage that only a presidential election would allow. A Raisi or Qalibaf presidency would be preferable in the planning for succession for the reasons laid out above, but their failure would not pose the kind of threat that the prospect of Ahmadinejad’s loss did in 2009. In Rouhani, Khamenei seems to have found a president who, while not fully in his camp, has not posed the kinds of destabilizing threats that his predecessors did.

After the election, the issues discussed in this Brief will continue to affect the Iranian political system in a variety of ways. First, if Ishaq Jahangiri’s performance in the first debate on April 28 showed anything, it is that the reform movement still has enormous support among the population, as well as roots within the political elite. In response to Qalibaf’s comment that his candidacy was merely intended to shore up support for Rouhani, Jahangiri retorted: “You’ve deprived a movement—the reformists—of all their rights. You don’t even want them to have a representative in the elections. I’ve come as the candidate of the reformists, to use all the opportunities to highlight what some have done to them.”³⁴ The reaction to his performance, particularly among the youthful users of social media, was immediately positive: One joke noted that people should vote for Rouhani just to keep Jahangiri as vice president. But while the rise of reformists may seem like a threat to Khamenei, it actually is not, particularly if it leads to the breakup of the Rafsanjani/Khatami-engineered alliance between the reformists and centrists either during or after the election.

Another possible consequence: Although the election might not reveal the name of Iran’s next Supreme Leader, it may well determine one or two likely candidates for the Leadership position. As mentioned before, this election is a great opportunity for Raisi to elevate himself to the national political level: If he becomes the next president,

he will be in an advantageous position to become Khamenei's successor as Supreme Leader. In that case, his proximity to the Leadership and his position in the Assembly of Experts may even create a situation like that of Cuba in 2008, whereby the successor became the face of the country's leadership even though the leader was alive and technically still in power. Another possibility is for the Assembly to pick Raisi as the leader before Khamenei's death, as when Ayatollah Khomeini directed them to choose Ayatollah Hussein-Ali Montazeri in 1985. Raisi could also remain hopeful of becoming Iran's third Supreme Leader if he withdraws from the presidential race before the election; in this scenario, he would have elevated his "brand" while staying in Mashhad, above the fray of national politics.

Raisi will be eliminated from the list of possible successors list only if he remains in the election and loses. The same dynamic applies to Rouhani, who will also lose his chance of becoming the next Supreme Leader if he loses the presidential election, no matter who controls the next administration. If he can get elected with more than 20 million votes, however, Rouhani will be in good shape to become a major player in post-Khamenei Iran.

Finally, even though the unemployment crisis is used to criticize Rouhani's government in connection with signing the JCPOA, the crisis is real, with roots that go further back than the nuclear issue—and no candidate, regardless of their rhetoric or political leaning, will be in a position to solve it in a short time span, even if candidates such as Qalibaf and Raisi believe they can use it to mobilize the populist vote. But their doing so, combined with Jahangiri's popularity, has pushed Rouhani to distinguish himself from the field by pivoting away from insoluble economic issues and discussing the need for more political opening in the system. This was already seen in his indirect critique of the IRGC in the second debate and in his far more forceful statements in campaign rallies. In doing so he might be seen as posing a challenge to the Supreme Leader and his allies, but it is unclear if that would actually be the case. The unemployment crisis particularly impacts the younger and educated segments of society, a group that propelled the 1979 revolution into victory. With full control over the security apparatus, Khamenei may come to see that in order to prevent social unrest, the only solution may lie in tolerating a controlled and partial political opening.

Endnotes

- 1 The reasons for why elections act as temporary windows into elite dynamics in Iran are beyond the scope of this Brief. Arang Keshavarzian elaborates on this idea more extensively in "Contestation without Democracy: Elite Fragmentation in Iran," in *Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Regimes and Resistance*, ed. Marsha Pripstein Posusney and Michele Penner Angrist (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2005), pp. 63–88.
- 2 The authors have described in more detail the meaning of Iran's Right and Left factions and their development over the past four decades in previous Middle East Briefs. See, especially, Naghmeh Sohrabi, "The Curious Case of Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani," *Middle East Brief*, no. 38 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, November 2009) and Seyedamir Hossein Mahdavi, "'Worried' or 'Valiant'? The Dialectic between Iran's Nuclear Negotiations and Its Domestic Politics," *Middle East Brief*, no. 81 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, June 2014).
- 3 For more information, see Naghmeh Sohrabi, "The Power Struggle In Iran: A Centrist Comeback?" *Middle East Brief*, no. 53 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, July 2011).
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- 21 Our colleague, Nader Habibi, has written in greater detail about Iran’s overeducation problem in “Iran’s Overeducation Crisis: Causes and Ramifications,” *Middle East Brief*, no. 89 (Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, February 2015).
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781-736-5320
781-736-5324 Fax
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