



The Cambridge Security Initiative

## IRAN'S UPCOMING MAJLIS ELECTIONS UNLIKELY TO RESULT IN REDISTRIBUTION OF POWER

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Iran is scheduled to hold elections to the 290-member *Majlis*, or Consultative Assembly, on 21 February 2020. Given recent public opposition to the regime, the elections could prove a trigger for further challenges to its authority and legitimacy. The electoral contest between reformists and conservatives may be less significant than the deeper question of the constitutional basis on which they serve. Whoever is elected, the *Majlis* will still be operating under severe constraints.

The Iranian constitution stipulates the qualifications for any candidate for public office and, more importantly, vests the Guardian Council with the power to disqualify a candidate. Already the Council has disqualified one third of the candidates, including 90 sitting members of the *Majlis*. The reaction has been anger from, amongst others, President Hassan Rouhani who has cast this as a “one-party election.” His rhetoric will resonate widely but it has no grounding in Iran’s Constitution, which specifically makes Islam, not the people, sovereign.

The ultimate power-holders are the religious establishment—the Supreme Leader, The Guardian Council, and the Assembly of Experts—who collectively represent a sovereign Islam. The Guardian Council not only vets candidates for the *Majlis*, they vet all its legislation, as well as candidates for election to the Assembly of Experts, a body of jurists with the power to elect the next Supreme Leader. Power has consolidated in the hands of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council. Whether the Council will now tolerate a redistribution of that power will be reflected in the candidates they allow to stand for election. So far it suggests they won’t.

This comes at a time when eruptions of internal dissent are unpredictable. Demonstrations against corruption, food or power shortages are predictable, but the reaction to the downing of the Ukrainian International Airlines flight and the subsequent handling was less predictable and suggests a volatile underlay of discontent. Neither is the religious establishment the only target. Reformists who failed to deliver on their promises are also criticised. In Iran, as in Iraq and Lebanon, the opposition is less against a party than against a whole system. In Iran that system is a direct product of its Constitution.

An additional complication for the Regime is the damaged position and reputation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), their tool for handling dissent, following the UIA disaster. For all its successes abroad, the IRGC at home, where it really counts, will now have to

recalibrate how far its actions alienate the public it is supposed to protect. Restraint will be hard if the IRGC feel the whole system of which they are product and beneficiary is at risk.

### **OUTLOOK**

There are further tests for the Constitution ahead, not least the presidential elections in 2021 and the need to replace the ageing Supreme Leader. His appointment, above all, will test whether the Revolution can become an institution fit for a new generation. The Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts have a constitutional responsibility to protect the Islamic Revolution and the powers to match. More absolutism is unlikely to be the answer. The ascendancy of the clerical establishment, and the contorted constitution that guarantees it, need a minimum of credibility and assent if they are simply to avoid obsolescence.