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Could Iran Elect a Female President?

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In late December 2016, Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei, the spokesman of the Iranian Guardian Council, declared that women would be allowed to run in the next presidential election, scheduled for May 19, 2017. Nonetheless, he took pains to note that the Guardian Council has yet to determine the binding constitutional interpretation of the issue. Section 115 of the Iranian constitution says that one of the criteria for presidential candidates is *rajol-e siasi*. The phrase can be interpreted as banning women from holding the office of president, as the word *rajol* in Arabic and Persian is “man” or “male.” However, the phrase as a whole could be understood as a “political person” regardless of gender. The writers of the Iranian constitution after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 apparently used the phrase intentionally, to appease both those who felt women should be able to serve as president and those who felt women should be barred from that office.

Women have submitted their candidacy to the presidential election since the 1990s, but all have been disqualified by the Guardian Council, which chooses to read Section 115 as restricted to men. In advance of the last presidential election, in June 2013, some 30 women submitted their candidacy. The Guardian Council, authorized to screen the pool of candidates running for public election to political institutions, rejected all of them.

Kadkhodaei’s announcement reignited the internal debate in Iran on the right of women to run for president. Responding to the statement, Azar Mansouri, a political activist on women’s rights, said that the very fact that the Guardian Council was raising the issue was a step in the right direction, as for years the Council had in principle refused to approve women candidates. Mansouri stressed that although the path to women’s participation was still blocked, the spokesman’s announcement may make it possible to formulate a strategy that would provide a response to women’s demand for inclusion in senior regime positions. Mansouri raised the need for affirmative action for women in politics, saying that Iranian women do not have opportunities equal to those of men, and their involvement in the political system is still quite limited. Tayyebeh Siavoshi, a female member of the Iranian Majlis joined the demand for women presidential candidates, and called on the Guardian Council to remove the obstacles confronting women wanting to run for president. She maintained that the concept of *rajol* in the Qu’ran does not refer to men specifically but denotes human beings in general, and that the Guardian Council must deal immediately with the question of women’s candidacy, given Iran’s supportive atmosphere and the significant increase in the number of women serving in the Majlis.

In contrast, the more conservative camp opposes any change in the traditional interpretation of female candidacy for president. Conservative politicians like Mohammad Reza Bahonar, the former deputy speaker of the Majlis, announced their opposition to a female president, partly on the basis of the claim that Iranian society is not yet ready to accept a woman as president. Hossein Anvari, a member of the Central Committee of the conservative Islamic Coalition Party, stated that in an Islamic society, women are not permitted to hold the reins of government. He noted that the Iranian constitution sees the president as the head of the executive branch of government and as the highest political authority after the Supreme Leader, and it is therefore outside of a woman's capacity to serve in that position.

After the Islamic Revolution, women were not included in senior political positions in the regime. Women maintained their right to vote and run for the Majlis, but were virtually excluded from decision making processes at the national level. Only in the mid-1990s was a woman appointed deputy minister, and in 1997 Mohammad Khatami, the reformist president, appointed a woman to serve as vice president for the first time. As his deputy for environmental issues, he chose Masoumeh Ebtekar, who served as the spokesperson for the student group that seized control of the US Embassy in 1979 and subsequently became one of the dominant figures in the Iranian reformist movement. In 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad wanted to appoint women to serve as ministers in his government. He submitted the names of three candidates to the Majlis for approval, but only one – Marzieh Dastjerdi – was approved by the conservative parliament. Dastjerdi (58), a doctor and former Majlis member, has served in senior positions in the Health Ministry and was a hospital director. Her name was recently floated in the Iranian media as a possible candidate for the presidential election, though she has denied interest in running.

After the last presidential election President Hassan Rouhani failed to make good on his campaign promise to appoint women as ministers in his government, fearing they would be rejected by the Majlis, which was then controlled by a conservative majority. He did, however, appoint four women as vice president. He also appointed women to serve as deputy minister of the Foreign Ministry and as the Foreign Ministry spokesperson. At the end of her term in 2015, Marzieh Afham, who served as the Foreign Ministry's spokesperson, was appointed Iranian ambassador to Malaysia, thus becoming the first female ambassador since the Islamic Revolution.

The Guardian Council's willingness to discuss the candidacy of women for president once again indicates that the religious establishment is increasingly aware that it must provide a response to the public's demand to end some of the discrimination against women practiced in the Islamic Republic. In recent years, Iranian women's and human rights activists have called publicly for changes to legislation that discriminates against women. In late 2015, human rights advocates launched a PR campaign to change the law preventing a married woman from traveling abroad

without her husband's consent. Other legislative demands have concerned women's legal status, their rights in marriage and divorce, employment, and the enforcement of the Islamic dress code.

Demands have also been made concerning the inclusion of women in politics. Before the parliamentary election in February 2016, dozens of social activists began a public campaign designed at raising significantly the number of women serving in the Majlis. The campaign's leaders worked in a range of formats at the political and public diplomacy levels, including encouraging women to submit their candidacy, promoting the inclusion of women on the party lists of the different political factions, supporting the campaigns of female candidates, and encouraging the public to vote for candidates supporting gender equality. The campaign was crowned with partial success: the new Majlis seated a record number of 17 women, even though as a percentage of the total (290), this remains a small number.

Realizing the demand to change legislation that discriminates against women is difficult, given the opposition of the religious establishment, which sees this as a danger liable to undermine the values of the Islamic Revolution. Despite its recent announcement, chances that the Guardian Council will allow the participation of a woman in the presidential election anytime soon are slim. Amir Mohebbian, an Iranian political analyst, said recently that the chances for a female presidential candidate are close to zero given Iran's social conditions. However, the social and demographic changes in Iran encouraging women's inclusion in the public sphere are creating growing pressure on the clerics and politicians to adapt the law to the changing reality. Therefore, even if the announcement of the spokesman of the Guardian Council currently lacks practical political significance, it does reflect the cultural and social changes occurring in Iranian society and may encourage – albeit in the longer term – political change.

