



Iran's Conservative Pragmatism

by [Avner Golov](#) · March 14, 2016

For many, the Iranian elections on February 26, 2016 were a first test for the Iranian public's reaction to the nuclear deal signed in July 2015. For those who anticipated a dramatic result, either in favor or against the regime, the elections tempered these notions. The main conclusion to draw from the formal results is that Iran's domestic political dynamic will remain as it was: a conservative dominancy challenged by pockets of pragmatist forces.

Before the elections President Hassan Rouhani had managed to form a coalition of pragmatic, though not very moderate, forces with the reformist camp led by former president Mohammad Khatami, and the pragmatic group from the conservative faction led by the speaker of the Iranian Parliament (the *majlis*), Ali Larijani. This coalition presented relatively limited political goals before the elections. In 2012, the reformist opposition advocated boycotting the elections, publicly challenging the legitimacy of the regime. However, this time, instead of challenging the legitimacy of the conservative regime, the opposition challenged its dominance in the *majlis*, and in the Assembly of Experts – the institution that will likely elect a successor to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. In order to enhance their power, leaders from the pragmatic camp urged their followers to participate in the elections, rather than stage a boycott.

This campaign resulted in several domestic achievements. First, the pragmatic coalition significantly increased its power in both institutions. However, the conservative camp will remain the stronger group, though much less powerful than it was prior to the election.^[1] Second, the pragmatic coalition managed to win all the seats allocated to the Tehran district (30 out of 290) and lost only one seat allocated to the Assembly of Experts (total of 16 out of 88).^[2] Not only is this district Iran's most politically powerful due to the number of seats it has in the two institutions (15 out of the 88 seats in the Assembly of Experts) but it also enjoys political prestige as its representatives tend to deal with national issues rather than focus mainly on local ones. While the victory in Tehran is a notable achievement for the reformists, it also sharpens the disparity between this district and the rural parts of Iran that are characterized by a strong conservative constituency.

The final achievement of this aforementioned campaign was the ouster of conservative leaders, such as the outspoken Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi from the Assembly of Experts. In the past year, many of the conservative leaders [led a vocal campaign against Rouhani's government](#) and its policy towards the West,^[3] including voicing strong opposition to the nuclear deal Iran signed with the

United States in July 2015.[\[4\]](#) Their absence from the Assembly may leave Rouhani with more room to maneuver in the political arena.

Nevertheless, in the aftermath of the recent elections, conservative politicians continue to dominate these key institutions. The pragmatist camp will remain a minority, albeit a large one. This means that the *majlis*, which is perceived as the representative body to Iranian society, and the Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for choosing the next supreme leader, among other tasks, are going to be led by hardliners that oppose further reforms in the domestic arena and openness to the West in the international arena.

What remains to be seen is precisely how this outcome will affect Iranian foreign policy. It seems that in the short term the main impact will be the continuation of the pre-election Iranian trajectory: Iranian politics' focal point will constitute disputes and confrontations in the domestic arena. President Rouhani will likely take advantage of his camp's growing political power to secure a foothold in foreign policy areas that have traditionally been ruled by the Revolutionary Guards: the Syrian portfolio, Iran's regional policy and the military budget.

The conservative camp, led by the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC), will likely try to block Rouhani's attempts to gain any influence on regional matters in response. Qasem Soleimani, the commanding general of the Quds Force (the special unit responsible for Iran's extraterritorial operations), has a direct channel to the Supreme Leader, which directly undercuts presidential authority over the military.[\[5\]](#) The IRGC leadership will not concede this political leverage; on the contrary, they may seek to wield their power against the president by symbolically challenging the framework of the nuclear agreement signed by Rouhani's negotiating team. [The recent Iranian test](#) of several ballistic missiles may be an outgrowth of this post-election policy.[\[6\]](#) If these actions occur, high ranking Iranian and American government officials would likely use back channels to temper any potential IRGC sabotage. Therefore, it seems that there is a low probability that internal rivalry in Iran will significantly threaten the implementation of the nuclear agreement in the coming year.

Two main factors are essential to determining the future of the Iranian political struggles: the policy of the Supreme Leader and the judiciary in Iran, and President Rouhani's capability to preserve unity within his pragmatic coalition. If Ayatollah Khamenei and the Iranian judges continue to support hardliners in the *majlis* in their campaign against Rouhani, the Iranian president will have to ensure unity among his camp to undermine their hegemony. However, without a shift from the Supreme Leader or within the justice system, Rouhani will find it difficult to promote tangible change in Iran, as many expect of him. As long as the balance of power between the conservatives and pragmatists in Iran's government remains static, Iran's foreign policy will reflect the domestic struggle for power.

As the Iranian elections resulted in no clear victory, the chances for a significant change in Iranian foreign policy in 2016 are low. In the near-term, the two camps will busy themselves preparing for the imminent succession battle over the office of the Supreme Leader upon Khamenei's anticipated departure, while they bide their time awaiting the winner of the 2016 American general election.

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[1] “Results of Iranian Elections,” *Iranian American Forum*, March 1, 2016, <http://www.iranian-americans.com/results-of-iranian-elections/>; Patrick Goodenough, “Hardliners Will Continue to Dominate Iran’s Government,” *CNS News*, March 3, 2016, <http://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/patrick-goodenough/hardliners-will-continue-dominate-irans-government>.

[2] Babak Dehghanpisheh, “Iran Reformists Cheer Election Gains, Conservatives Play down Shift,” *Reuters*, February 29, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-election-idUSKCN0W218K>.

[3] Arash Karami, “Rouhani Accused of Trying to Separate Religion, Administration – Al-Monitor: The Pulse of the Middle East,” *Al-Monitor*, June 5, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/rouhani-accused-separating-religion-state.html>.

[4] Department Of State., “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” July 21, 2015, <http://www.state.gov/e/eb/tfs/spi/iran/jcpoa/>.

[5] Dexter Filkins, “The Shadow Commander,” *The New Yorker*, September 30, 2013, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/09/30/the-shadow-commander>; Ilan Goldenberg et al., “After the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action: A Game Plan for the United States,” 29–33, accessed March 13, 2016, <http://www.cnas.org/game-plan-after-the-jcpoa>.

[6] Bozorgmehr Sharafedin and Doina Chiacu, “Iran Fires Ballistic Missiles, U.S. Hints at Diplomatic Response,” *Reuters*, March 9, 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-missiles-idUSKCN0WA0UY>.

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