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## **The Start of the Iranian Presidential Campaign**

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Earlier than expected, the Iranian political system is preparing for the twelfth presidential elections, scheduled for May 19, 2017. Various political and media figures are discussing the issue, and names of candidates have already been tossed around.

The Iranian presidential election involves a structured process that includes a number of stages. After registering at the Interior Ministry, candidates are screened by the Guardian Council of the Constitution, which assesses their qualifications, ostensibly according to criteria stipulated in the constitution. In practice, however, candidates are evaluated in accordance with the wishes of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, as half of the members of the Council are personally appointed by him, while the others are appointed by the judicial authority, which is subject to him. The Guardian Council of the Constitution publishes the final list of candidates a month before the elections, and then the media campaign of the candidates approved by the Council begins, including public appearances at conferences and televised debates. A 50 percent majority of all voters is required in order to win the elections. If no candidate wins such a majority, a second round is held between the two leading candidates.

Since the riots of 2009, the period leading up to the elections in Iran has been characterized by heightened sensitivity on the part of the security establishment. In June 2009, upon publication of the election results, in what appeared to be a blatant distortion of the public will, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was reelected in the first round of voting. Masses went out into the streets and surprised the regime with their determination to protest the results of the elections. Against this backdrop, half a year before the upcoming election, Khamenei himself is already attempting to set rules of conduct and provide the public with the sense that the election process will be transparent and "democratic" (in Iranian terms). Within this context, on October 15, 2016, Khamenei published a document comprising 18 guidelines for the elections and for the campaigns of the various candidates. These include urging the candidates to be transparent, prohibiting foreign campaign financing, and prohibiting any intervention by the Revolutionary Guards. Khamenei also emphasized that the Guardian Council of the Constitution would indeed have the last word in approving candidates, but demanded that it operate transparently and allow those disqualified to receive an explanation for the decision.

At the same time, Khamenei is involved personally with potential candidates. One prominent example is his unusual intervention in what appeared to be the election campaign of former President Ahmadinejad, who held meetings with the public throughout Iran, and whose associates spread rumors regarding his intention to run against the incumbent, Hassan Rouhani. Khamenei met with Ahmadinejad and reportedly requested that Ahmadinejad not participate in the upcoming elections. This was confirmed publicly a few days later: On the one hand, nothing was heard from Ahmadinejad, and on the other hand, it was reported that the Supreme Leader relayed to Ahmadinejad that his participation in the elections "does not serve his interests or those of the country." Indeed, on September 29, 2016, after this development, Ahmadinejad declared that he did not intend to run in the upcoming elections. Another person who withdrew his candidacy after many months of media buzz surrounding his potential candidacy is the commander of the Quds Force, Major General Qasem Soleimani, who declared (on September 15) that he did not intend to run in the upcoming elections and that he "intends to remain a soldier of the revolution." With the withdrawal of Soleimani and Ahmadinejad, the Iranian media has mentioned the names of potential candidates from the Supreme Leader's inner circle who would compete in the elections on behalf of the extreme-conservative camp. This camp, which suffered a setback in the recent elections to the Majlis, where the Rouhani camp succeeded in expanding its power, has a clear interest in putting forward attractive candidates. At this point, none of the candidates whose names were mentioned have confirmed their intention to compete, and it appears that the extreme-conservative camp is still considering its tactics for running against Rouhani.

Meanwhile, the reformist camp appears to be united around the candidacy of the current President, even though Rouhani is not a clear representative of this camp. The disappointment with the President's lack of success in advancing a more moderate civic agenda is extensive, but in the absence of another strong candidate, it is willing to support him. For the moment, it is not clear whether the moderate camp will have other candidates in the elections, but presumably even if a more clearly reformist candidate runs, he will withdraw and leave the stage clear for Rouhani, as occurred in the previous elections. On October 25, 2016, Rouhani's associates confirmed unequivocally that he intends to run in the upcoming elections.

The election atmosphere has stirred up debate on a variety of issues. Especially prominent is the continued debate on the nuclear agreement, in which the deal's extreme-conservative opponents exploit the lack of a significant economic improvement to portray the agreement as a failure of the Rouhani government, which did not succeed in leveraging the conditions of the agreement to benefit Iran, and did not bring about a significant improvement in the economic situation. For his part, the President has taken every opportunity to defend the nuclear agreement, and emphasize its importance in rehabilitating Iran's economy. Along with criticism of the United States for not fulfilling its commitments in the agreement, Rouhani's repeated emphasis has been that the

Iranian people must wait patiently for the results of the agreement. On the central issue of the government's anti-corruption campaign, anti-Rouhani activists have slammed the government in light of revelations of a scandal surrounding the salaries of senior public sector officials. Most of the criticism has focused on the Rouhani's government failure to reduce social gaps and eliminate corruption in Iran.

The cultural realm also serves as fertile ground for tensions between the camps and for the conservative camp to slam the Rouhani government. Since the beginning of his presidency, Rouhani has sought to increase the leeway of citizens in the public sphere and expand civil freedoms. The government's relatively liberal approach has led to widespread criticism by the religious establishment, which opposed the government's objectives and sought to change its approach. The climax of the dispute came when the Rouhani government's Minister of Islamic Guidance, Ali Jannati, resigned after three years in office, during which he attempted to promote more liberal trends. He was forced to resign due to pressure from the religious establishment. At the same time, the new composition of the Majlis has played into the hands of President Rouhani, who approved the appointment of three new ministers whom the previous Majlis refused to approve three years ago, when the current government was formed.

The struggle of the extreme-conservative camp against Rouhani was also reflected in the past year after the signing of the nuclear agreement, with the arrests of individuals with dual US-Iran citizenship and others who were accused of spying. The aim of these arrests is to demonstrate, mainly to the United States, the limits of the President's power.

In conclusion, although the presidential elections are only expected to take place in half a year, the Iranian political system is already in their midst, and various figures are speaking out and working to promote themselves in advance of the elections. The Supreme Leader is very involved in order to ensure proper conduct vis-à-vis the public. The historical record shows that after the consolidation of the Islamic Republic's political system (in the early 1980s), each incumbent president has continued for a second term, even if his powers of maneuver often ebbed. It is therefore likely that Rouhani has a good chance that he will be reelected, as part of the aim of maintaining the regime's stability.

In the international arena as well, there are many who presume that Rouhani will be elected, and the assumption that the regime's stability will be maintained motivates the West's effort to return to "business as usual." The United States Congress will face this issue in the near future, as the legislation on sanctions against Iran (ISA) is set to expire at the end of the year. On November 14, 2016, the House of Representatives decided, by a large majority, to continue the sanctions that are not related to the nuclear agreement for another decade, and now the approval of the Senate and the signature of President Obama are required. It is not yet clear whether the Senate, which has a Republican majority, will attempt to toughen the sanctions, or support the decision

made in the House of Representatives. President Obama's position is also still unclear – he sees it as important that Iran continue to honor the agreement, and may consider a veto. At this stage it is not clear how President-elect Trump will act on the various issues connected to the nuclear agreement with Iran; he has said that he would reopen the agreement for renewed negotiations and perhaps even cancel it. Rouhani, in his initial response to Trump's election, made it clear that the agreement cannot be canceled, and emphasized the importance of its continuation. This issue will undoubtedly be at the center of the struggle in Iran between Rouhani and opponents of the agreement in the presidential election campaign.

