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The Iran Primer

**Mehrzad Boroujerdi's Blog**

## Khamenei Consolidates Control Amid Other Power Shifts

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**Mehrzad Boroujerdi**

Since Iran's presidential election in 2009, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has evolved into a micromanager of Iranian politics. He curtailed President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his allies. He turned the lights off on Iran's reformists. He emasculated all other major institutions, including parliament, the judiciary, the Experts Assembly and the 12-man Guardian Council. And he subdued the religious seminaries as the citadel of clerical power.

Today, neither the press nor other governmental bodies can effectively investigate any of the organs under the Supreme Leader. Nor can any institution overrule him. Iran is technically a semi-presidential system in which executive power is bifurcated between the president and the Supreme Leader. But during 23 years in office, Khamenei has amassed disproportionate power by manipulating institutions so he can bypass the democratic rules (based on French and Belgian law) enshrined in the Iranian constitution.

Iran has undergone other key changes since the 2005 election of Ahmadinejad:

- The most consequential competition in the Islamic Republic today is between two key factions of conservatives. The old establishment traditionalists are losing ground to a new generation of conservative Young Turks who have even more humble backgrounds; they also hail largely from the security forces and veterans of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. There is no clear cut line between these two factions, however, as people freely move between them.
- Popular support for the regime has shrunk significantly due to the cumulative impact of economic discontent and troubled elections in 2005 and 2009. As a result, the theocracy has become increasingly reliant on Iran's diverse security forces.
- The number of clerics elected to office, such as parliament, has also increased the political leverage of security forces both within and on the political system.
- Key reformists-- sidelined in the 2005 election and unofficially expelled from the game in the disputed 2009 election--basically opted to retain their legitimacy rather than have to cohabit with their nemeses in power.
- Yet newcomers are entering elite ranks. Iran's factional infighting, political maneuvering, and theological acrobatics are helping newcomers to enter elite ranks.
- Iran's political system is today more Byzantine than ever. It is characterized by hyper-politicization, a top-heavy state, parallel institutions, and lack of transparency.

Iran has some of the characteristics of both a “sultanistic” and “Praetorian” state, yet it is still premature to label the state completely one or the other. But the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) are the undisputed second power in Iran today. Its veterans, especially of the Iran-Iraq War, have increasingly permeated the bureaucracy, economy and government. They are in charge of the hydra-headed military-security institutions, and they champion the initial élan of the revolution.

This constituency largely shares the Supreme Leader’s security outlook, but also has the power to set the agenda. It will almost certainly retain influence for the foreseeable future, although the Revolutionary Guards do not have the requisite cultural capital or street credibility to appeal to the broad urban public.

As of mid-2012, the regime is more stable now than it was after the controversial 2009 election. Its regional power has also been boosted thanks to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Having subdued their internal opponents, the Supreme Leader and his lieutenants now feel most threatened by the outside. As a result, chances of reaching a compromise with the United States before the U.S. presidential election in November 2012 are slim. And sanctions, while painful, will not lead the leadership to concede much ground on the nuclear issue.

**Mehrzad Boroujerdi** is a Professor of Political Science at Syracuse University. He has compiled a database with detailed information on nearly 2,000 people in the political elite of Iran--from cabinet and parliament members to religious authorities, military officer, members of the judiciary and presidential advisers.

*Read Mehrzad Boroujerdi's chapter on Iran's political elite in “The Iran Primer”*

Tags: *Elections, Iran Politics, Khomeini*

## Revolutionary Guards Soar in Parliament

September 19, 2011 | 12:07am

**Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosch Rahimkhani**

*This is the sixth in a series on parliamentary elections due in March 2012:*

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) was established to protect domestic security, but the elite military wing has always had an implicit political role in protecting the revolutionary ideology. Its veterans have been represented in all eight parliaments, although in relatively small numbers--in single digits--between 1980 and 2004. The Revolutionary Guards involvement in politics has grown to unprecedented levels since 2004, when IRGC veterans won at least 16% percent of the 290 seats. (Reliable data for the political affiliation of about 7 percent of MPs is not currently available.)

Overall, the numbers of parliamentarians with IRGC pedigrees at least doubled between elections in 2000 and 2008. The elected IRGC veterans tend to pursue a hardline foreign policy agenda, although there are significant differences among them especially on domestic issues.

One factor behind the increase in 2004 was the Guardian Council's massive disqualification of other candidates. But the broader factor was the shift in political winds. By 2003, Iranians had grown increasingly disillusioned with the reform movement under President Mohammad Khatami, as a new hardline faction made steady gains. A group of lesser-known political figures formed the Coalition of the Developers of Islamic Iran (*E'telaf-e Abadgaran-e Iran-e Islami*), which managed to win the absolute majority of seats in Tehran's municipal elections in 2003. The council subsequently appointed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as mayor of Tehran. A year later, the *Abadgaran* coalition, made up of mainly former Revolutionary Guards and war veterans, performed well in the 2004 parliamentary elections.

The seventh parliament (2004-08) included many former members of the Revolutionary Guards. The number of incumbents reelected in 2004 was, in turn, the second lowest since the 1979 revolution. The rise of the hardline faction was followed by Ahmadinejad's election as president a year later. Ahmadinejad, a former Revolutionary Guard, is allied with many of the veterans now in parliament.

Most of the former Guards were reelected in the 2008 elections. Besides former IRGC members, the seventh parliament (2004-08) and the eighth parliament (2008-2012) have also included many veterans who fought in the 1980-1988 war with Iraq.

The Revolutionary Guards in parliament cannot be classified in a single category because of deep cleavages that reflect Iran's evolving political spectrum. Interaction between different factions of former Guards can be quite acrimonious. The largest group is loyal to the supreme leader. But many in the Majles identify with the faction known as *Osulgarayan*, the main bloc of conservatives often referred to as "principlists," which encompasses the supporters of Ahmadinejad as well as unaffiliated conservatives. And some former guards have joined the ranks of the reformist movement.

In one striking shift, the latest generation of Revolutionary Guards in parliament is neither close nor beholden to linchpins of the early conservative political establishment—such as the *Hezb-e Mo'talefeh-ye Islami* (Party of Confederated Islamic Formations) or *Jame'eh-ye Eslami-ye Mohandesin* (Society of Islamic Engineers).

The divisions have been reflected in parliament's actions. Since 2004, the seventh and the eighth parliaments have boldly rejected nine ministers proposed by Ahmadinejad. They also have not shied away from launching impeachment procedures against sitting ministers or criticizing legislation initiated by the presidency.

The former Guards now in parliament differ on domestic policy and economic interests; they also have different constituency pressures. On policy, the veterans tend to be hardline on foreign policy, including the nuclear issue and support for Hamas and Hezbollah. They also usually advocate projects to help veterans and families of martyrs killed in the Iran-Iraq war.

The former Revolutionary Guard MPs managed to deter the seventh and eighth parliaments from meddling in controversial issues related to the Guards and the supreme leader—in contrast to the sixth parliament (2000-2004), which tried to investigate Revolutionary Guards' finances and institutions operating under the supervision of the Supreme Leader.

In other words, the Revolutionary Guards bloc is often more sympathetic to fellow Guards on government benefits but does not necessarily protect former Guards now in other government branches. For example,

Ahmadinejad's first and second cabinets—which were roughly one-third former guardsmen—torpedoed initiatives by Tehran Mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, a former brigadier general in the Revolutionary Guards. Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani, another veteran Guards commander, has not hesitated to challenge the president and his ministers, particularly over the latter's often dismissive attitude toward the parliament.

Amid deepening discord between Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Ahmadinejad, the IRGC has also begun to target some of the president's allies. In a recent interview with the semi-official Mehr News Agency, Revolutionary Guards chief Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari claimed that the IRGC serves as an enforcement arm for the judiciary and was within its rights in arresting some of Ahmadinejad's lieutenants. In another radical departure from past practice, Jafari also outlined conditions for what reformists would be allowed to take part in the 2012 parliamentary elections.

Current political tensions between Supreme Leader Khamenei and Ahmadinejad could lead the Guardian Council to disqualify some Revolutionary Guard candidates for the next elections, particularly politicians identified with the Ahmadinejad's controversial chief of staff *Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei*. Despite factionalization, however, the IRGC bloc is widely expected to expand its parliamentary representation in the 2012 poll.

*Mehrzaad Boroujerdi is associate professor of political science and director of the Middle Eastern Studies Program at Syracuse University. As a USIP grantee, he is engaged in a study of political elite in post-revolutionary Iran and co-manages the Iran Data Portal at <http://www.princeton.edu/irandataportal/>.*

*Kourosh Rahimkhani is an independent scholar specializing in Iranian affairs. He worked as a journalist for a number of reformist newspapers in Iran before moving to the United States.*

*View a chart on the structure of power in Iran*

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Tags: *Election, Kourosh Rahimkhani, Parliament, Revolutionary Guards*

## Iran's New Foreign Minister: Ali Akbar Salehi

January 31, 2011 | 9:41am

**Mehrzaad Boroujerdi**

The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) is better noted for its dense, jargon-filled technical reports than for grooming future political personalities. Yet former IAEA officials have recently catapulted into the political spotlight of two pivotal countries in the Middle East.

Ali Akbar Salehi, a former Iranian envoy to the U.N. nuclear watchdog, has been appointed Iran's foreign minister. And Mohamed ElBaradei, who headed the IAEA until 2009, has now emerged as a leading opposition leader in Egypt. The two men, who quarreled for years over Iran's nuclear program, are expected to play critical roles in their countries' future.

Salehi has academic and administrative pedigrees in Iran as well as extensive experience with the outside world. Born in Karbala, Iraq in 1949, he earned an undergraduate degree in physics from the American University of Beirut in 1971. He then spent five years at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working on a doctorate in nuclear engineering.

In Iran, Salehi climbed the academic ladder quickly. He worked at Isfahan University then moved to Tehran's Sharif University of Technology, which is widely considered Iran's MIT. He served for seven years as chancellor in the 1980s and early 1990s.

After the 1997 election of reformist President Mohamed Khatami, Salehi was appointed Iran's envoy to the IAEA, where he earned a reputation as a smart yet moderate negotiator during his seven year stint from 1997 to 2004. From 2007 to 2009, he worked as deputy secretary general of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) in Saudi Arabia.

In 2009, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad appointed him to serve as one of several vice presidents and to head Iran's Atomic Energy Organization.

Salehi was born into a religious family and, true to his pious upbringing, his dissertation on "Resonance Region Neutronics of Unit Cells in Fast and Thermal Reactors" begins with the Koranic verse, "In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful."

Other members of Salehi's family also have American connections. His brother Javad, who was born in 1956, worked on a doctorate in electrical engineering at the University of Southern California and is an acclaimed specialist on fiber optic communications. In an ironic twist, the younger Salehi and 124 colleagues at Sharif University of Technology sent an open letter to Ahmadinejad in June 2009—the same year his brother was appointed vice president and just days before the disputed presidential elections—that was highly critical of Ahmadinejad's style of statecraft.

Ali Akbar Salehi was confirmed by Iran's unicameral parliament as foreign minister on January 30, 2011. He won 60 percent of the vote.

Salehi has lived in Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Austria and the United States. He is also fluent in Arabic and English. He has become a specialist in both the science and statecraft of Iran's controversial nuclear program. As a former envoy, he has extensive experience in international diplomacy. And he has close ties with Islamic conference Organization Secretary General Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu.

Given his background, he may have a stronger voice in articulating Iran's positions than his predecessor Manoucher Mottaki, who was dismissed abruptly by Ahmadinejad while on a mission to Senegal. He served for five years as foreign minister.

Salehi is more of a technocrat than an ideologue. He has worked with both reformist and hardline administrations in Iran and has close friends in both camps. Although he was handpicked by Ahmadinejad, his influence on policy and his personal relationship with either the president or Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei are not clear.