

## Ayatollah Khamenei's slow motion power grab in Iran

Peter Jones    The Globe and Mail    May. 28 2013

The field has been set for the June 14 presidential election in Iran. The list of approved candidates to replace Mahmoud Ahmadinejad tells us a lot about where the country is going.

The selection of presidential candidates reflects the mixture of theocracy and republicanism that characterizes the Islamic Republic. Technically, any Iranian adult male is entitled to run, but all candidates must be approved by the Guardian Council.

This body is composed of 12 men – half of whom are appointed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and half by Parliament from a list drawn up by the head of the judiciary (who is also appointed by the Supreme Leader). In addition to reviewing all legislation, the Guardian Council supervises elections and disallows candidates it deems not qualified.

The [eight](#) approved candidates (out of some 686 candidates who registered) are almost entirely supporters of the Supreme Leader. There is one candidate with links to the reformist faction, Hassan Rouhani, but he isn't seen as having much chance. At least two high-profile candidates who would have challenged the Supreme Leader's view of the future were disqualified by the council: former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Rahim Mashaei, a high-level adviser to Mr. Ahmadinejad.

In short, the Supreme Leader, and the institutions that back him, such as the Revolutionary Guards, are not going to take the risk of being surprised as happened in 1997, when reformer Mohammad Khatami won the presidency, or when Mr. Ahmadinejad, an apparent supporter of the Supreme Leader, won in 2005 but then tried to chart his own course.

So, the Supreme Leader and his allies have hobbled the last major office capable of challenging his rule. In the recent past, when Mr. Ahmadinejad was proving especially troublesome, Ayatollah Khamenei mused about abolishing the presidency in favour of a prime ministerial system in which the PM would simply carry out the Supreme Leader's wishes in Parliament. This would have fundamentally altered Iran's system, which was supposed to achieve a balance between the theocratic and republican branches of government, although with the theocratic holding the upper hand.

It seems that the Supreme Leader has opted to forgo the constitutionally complex job of abolishing the presidency, at least for now, in favour of the simpler task of engineering the election of a president who will do as he is told. The result is the same, and he still has the option of moving to abolish the presidency down the road.

All of this represents the continuation of a slow-motion power grab by the conservative religious elites and their backers. Revolutionary Iran was never a democracy, but it did once display pluralistic politics within which a variety of viewpoints genuinely fought for office

(from within a limited spectrum of system loyalists). That has been shut down. The credibility of the system in the eyes of the Iranian people is suffering accordingly.

In terms of the nuclear question, there are several ways this could go. One is that the current policy of edging closer to a bomb and testing the world's resolve to stop it will continue. Another, counterintuitive possibility is that, with power assured, the Supreme Leader and his backers may be more willing to deal. The nuclear program has never been so much about making a bomb as about assuring the Iranian leadership that the system will survive. Perhaps, with all the political challenges at home seen off, the Supreme Leader may be willing to entertain a deal.

We will likely face a choice when this election is over. We can try to make a deal with an odious regime – a deal that will mean that we accept the regime's survival and are willing to live with an Iran that has the knowledge of how to build a bomb. The alternative involves facing the prospect of conflict with Iran, which could well be as difficult, costly and dangerous as the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan put together. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems willing to live with the latter, but U.S. President Barack Obama is more cautious and may accept the former, if Tehran will accept a deal including strong enough guarantees that Iran will not be able to clandestinely build a bomb – a big “if.”

Meanwhile, for Iranians who really want democracy (and there are many of them), these are disheartening times. Those reformists who criticized Mr. Khatami and others who tried to change Iran from within did so because they felt he was naive – that the system would never allow itself to change from within. This election may well prove them right.

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