

# MERIA

## IRANIAN REFORMISTS: BETWEEN MODERATION AND REVOLUTION

By Alex Grinberg\*

*Iranian moderates made significant gains in the country's February 2016 legislative elections. The reformists won 85 out of 290 seats compared with 75 seats for the conservatives. However, the reformists represented in the new parliament have no historical continuity with the reformist camp of the former President Mohammad Khatami; those reformists who might challenge the supreme leaders ideologically were disqualified by the Guardian Council. President Hassan Rouhani's supporters, though moderate, are not reformists. They support the existing regime but also support Rouhani's policy of greater openness toward the West and less oppression at home. Supreme Leader Ali Khamene'i has thus taken all necessary measures to block any dissent.*

The outcome of Iran's February 2016 parliamentary elections was no surprise. Paradoxically, the results were positive for both the "hardliners" and the "moderates," though in the longterm each side of the Iranian

political spectrum poses a threat to its rivals on the opposite end. The "reformists" or "moderates" gained a majority in the 290-seat parliament. The numbers are represented as follows:

Group	Number of Seats
"Principlists" or conservatives ( <i>usulgerayan</i> )	75
"Non-aligned" or "independent"	58
Reformists	83
Minorities (Zoroastrians, Christians, and Jews)	5

For 69 seats, there was no clear winner.<sup>1</sup> The second round of runoff elections--scheduled for April 29, 2016--will determine who gains these remaining seats.<sup>2</sup> While the elections are important and this may initially appear to be a clear reformist victory, the results should not be seen as a harbinger of drastic change in Iran.

The names of the Iranian political factions are intentionally placed in quotes in the current article. Political parties are forbidden in Iran and have not existed since the 1979 revolution, with the exception of the Islamic Republic Party, which was dissolved in 1987. Iranian elections thus cannot be viewed as democratic elections with various political parties. Given that there is no clear formal political affiliation with all its consequences such as party vote discipline, Iranian politicians can easily switch sides and be at

the same time rivals and allies of other politicians.

### ELECTIONS: A NECESSITY FOR THE REGIME

The Iranian electoral process itself is relatively fair, which creates the illusion of normative political life with rivals, deals, swaps, and even politicking. Indeed, politics in Iran exist in this sense, unlike in Egypt or Russia, where all political moves depend heavily on the president. However, Iran's powerful Guardian Council (*Shura-ye Negahban*) oversees the elections and vets out "undesirable" candidates. Shortly before the legislative elections, the council disqualified all hardliner reformists as well as the more moderate reformists, namely those who, in its eyes, could challenge the regime. Former

President Hashemi Rafsanjani criticized the exclusion of so many candidates, stating that “the Council’s disqualification was unconvincing for the majority of the people.”<sup>3</sup> His criticism of the Guardian Council was in fact directed at the supreme leader, since Khamene’i directly supervises and appoints the members of the council.

Elections are considered so important, that in the 2013 elections, Khamene’i urged even those who did not share the Islamic Republic’s values to vote.<sup>4</sup> It is vital for the Iranian regime to hold elections, as is reflected by the significant attention they receive in its official media outlets.<sup>5</sup> Why is this the case? While Iran is a theocratic authoritarian regime, it is unique and differs from the “classic” dictatorships of Saudi Arabia or Pakistan, for example. Within the regime, there is constant friction between its “republican” and “Islamic” dimensions. Since the revolution, whose role cannot be underestimated, Iran has been defined as a “republic,” with an emphasis on the representative function of a republic. Iran has always trumped its “republican” stance against the background of its rival contention with the Gulf monarchies. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) was declared following a referendum held on March 30, 1979. Thus, this element of representability has always existed within the IRI’s political system. The problem is that free elections and representability can hardly coexist with theocracy and non-elected bodies. Thus it is what occurs before and after the elections that are of crucial importance, rather than what goes on during the electoral process.

The regime knows it cannot afford outright oppression and that it must maintain the visibility of the democratic process. It thus resorts to manipulation, including the Guardian Council’s crucial task of filtering candidates, while acquiring legitimacy through the fairness of the formal electoral process. The Guardian Council wields the real power and vets out undesirable candidates running for the other institutions. It can stop any opposition in its ebb. The council has refused to approve over 7,300 of 12,000 would-be nominees for the 2016 parliamentary

elections. As a result, genuine reformists will be present in the next *Majlis*. Among the barred candidates are not only reformists but also moderate conservatives, such as Ali Motahhari, who is conservative on gender issues but relatively liberal overall and is honest.<sup>6</sup> He has repeatedly called on the regime to investigate allegations of torture of political prisoners, and he has urged the release of the leaders of the Green opposition movement.

The Guardian Council also disqualified 207 candidates and approved only 166 out of 800 candidates from among those who applied to the Assembly of Experts. Among those barred is even Ayatollah Khomeini’s grandson, Hassan Khomeini, who has a reputation of being close to the reformists. The formal reason was his “insufficient knowledge of the Shari’a,” after he and other candidates did not attend a special exam to test their knowledge in Islamic legislation. Interestingly, the most extremist hardliners were not approved either, including Mehdi Tayyeb (who heads the radical think tank Ammar,) and Kazem Seddiqi (a Friday preacher in Tehran). In addition, the rabble-rousing extremist ideologue Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi ran but was not elected. The regime’s goal is likely not only to block the path to the reformists or reformist-minded but also to the extremists to the right of the supreme leader. Such a balance would enable the Iranian system to maintain its “centrist” orientation and would guarantee its continuity in the event of Khamene’i’s death and the appointment of a successor (or a triumvirate of several potential leaders).

The disqualification of Ali Motahhari and Hassan Khomeini is quite telling. Both are linked to important Iranian figures: Hassan is the grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic and Ali Motahhari is the son of Ayatollah Murteza Motahhari (d. 1979), who was a leading religious intellectual, referred to as the spiritual father of the Islamic Revolution. Historically speaking, one is witnessing the implementation of the paradigm of “the Revolution that devours its children.” The claim that Khomeini and

Motahhari don't meet the criteria of Islam is humiliating and scoffing. Yet the Guardian Council also benefits from their disqualification, showing that it the candidate selection process was as a measure of "good management," independent of their pedigree.

### REFORMISTS AND MODERATES SYNONYMOUS?

On a broader scale, the elections are yet another stage in the fight between President Hassan Rouhani and the Khamene'i. Again, the supreme leader had and will continue to have the upper hand. The Iranian president is the head of executive power and his policies by definition are subject to the supreme leader, both formally and informally. Everything is thus carried out in accordance with the Khamene'i's orders. Nonetheless, the supreme leader is never held accountable in the event of a failure; instead, the president has always taken the blame. Even regime successes, such as the nuclear deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), can work against the president, as the president could become too popular at the expense of Khamene'i.

Rouhani successfully rallied supporters, and together, they have achieved a significant electoral victory. However, it would be wrong to consider Rouhani's backers "reformist"; among them are a number of politicians with different approaches to the various issues, but none are reformists in the sense that some Western media tacitly attribute to this term. Initially, the term "reformists" referred to an intellectual current in Iran that united religious lay intellectuals and modernist clerics, such as Mohsen Kadivar. They developed a particular recognizable discourse that revolved around several tenets.

These principles include:

- 1) Rationalization of Muslim law: While the Koran is sacred, its interpretation is not and can be subject to human understanding in accordance with the preferences of modernity.
- 2) An emphasis on Islam's noncoercive character: Reformist Shi'as argue that any religious belief or disbelief is an individual

choice since according to the Koran, "There is no coercion in religion."

- 3) An emphasis on the rule of the people, by the people: Many leading reformists used to argue that Islam was fully compatible with the values of democracy and popular representation.

- 4) Islam is relevant to the challenges of modernity, and granting more rights to women is a way to adapt the religion to the needs of modernity.<sup>7</sup>

In combination, these tenets challenge the basic principles of the Islamist regime, namely the central role of the traditional Shari'a in legislation, and--even more dangerous--Khamene'i's absolute power as *vali-e faqih* (the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist)--which sets Iran apart from other Islamic regimes.

The reformists' aspirations culminated in the election of Mohammad Khatami in 1996. In comparison to the winners of the 1996 elections, Rouhani and his current circle do not necessarily share the above tenets of reformism. Moreover, whereas the "historical reformists" hailed from left-oriented Islamists, today, the president's fraction also includes moderately conservative right-wingers. Rouhani's supporters indeed want more openness toward the West in order to achieve economic relief and less oppression at home, but this does not necessarily mean "reformism" or "democracy." In addition, none of them have challenge Khamene'i and the IRGC's grip on power. It is possible Rouhani's moderates may have hoped to see more drastic changes within the existing system. It should be emphasized, however, that there is currently no direct link between the historical Reformists and those in the Majlis and Assembly of Experts who are referred to as "reformists." Their approval and election alone mean the candidates are *within* the system (*khodi*, an Iranian political term meaning "insider" or "someone from within"). Consequently, their "reformism" is confined to a somewhat more moderate stance on several tributary issues--both domestic and foreign--but they do not question the legitimacy of the Islamic regime, and thus are "permitted opposition." Moreover, regional

foreign policy and other strategic issues are not under the control of the government and the president, but a monopoly of Khamene'i, the IRGC, and other dubious bodies of power, such as privately funded *bonyads* (funds), which are accountable only to the supreme leader.

## REVOLUTIONARIES VERSUS CONSERVATIVES

In place of “reformists,” a more precise definition would be “moderates” versus “revolutionaries.” For methodological accuracy, it is necessary first to make some preliminary assumptions. Any reference to Iranian politics always requires that one bear in mind the complexity and relativity of the respective terms in question, as is the case with regard to other countries. Thus the notions of “moderation,” “extremism,” and “liberalism” must be analyzed in their local context, and one should not attempt to apply the Western sense of these terms to the Iranian reality.

The above assertion can be demonstrated through a comparison of different cultures and countries. For example, Israeli politics of both the left and right focuses almost exclusively on security and defense issues. This does not, however, mean that the Israeli Labor party has no ideological or historical kinship to other social-democratic parties in Europe or that Israeli political discourse is militaristic. It only highlights the fact that the real difference between left and right in Israel is reflected in their respective stances on security issues (such as the future of the “occupied territories”) as opposed to social and economic issues.

In the case of France, while differences certainly exist between François Hollande’s ruling French Socialist Party (PS) and Nicholas Sarkozy’s right-wing Union for a Popular Movement (UMP), they are based more on traditional and historical discord rather than on real contradicting approaches to economic issues. Roughly speaking, any French politician from the parliamentary Gaulliste right party would still be far to the

left on socioeconomic issues if compared with American Democratic politicians. In addition, while the French right and left traditionally differ on domestic issues, their respective foreign policies are immutable and bipartisan.

The above examples imply that even the distinction between “left” and “right” in democratic countries is less simplistic than it may initially seem. The terms “moderation” and “extremism” are even more fluid. The same problem exists with regard to the Islamist movements across the Middle East: Is the Muslim Brotherhood democratic or moderate? Carrie Wickham sheds much light on this issue, arguing that:

Yet the concept of “moderation” suffers from a high degree of imprecision. First and most obvious, it can refer to both an end state and a process. Second, as a relative rather than an absolute concept, it begs the question, “Moderate in comparison to what?” Third, it may refer to changes in behavior, such as a renunciation of violence, and/or to changes in broader worldviews, goals, and values, such as a growing commitment to freedom of expression or women’s rights. Fourth, the term can be applied to changes both at the level of individual actors and at the level of the complex organizations of which they are a part. Yet when used as a descriptor of an Islamist organization as a whole (the Muslim Brotherhood is or is not “moderate”) or to capture change over time in an organization’s rhetoric and behavior (the Muslim Brotherhood is or is not “moderating”), it may gloss over some important vectors of internal differentiation. First, the term implies an overarching, internally consistent, and linear process of behavioral or ideological change when in fact an Islamist group may “moderate” its official rhetoric and practice in some areas while retaining, or even radicalizing, them in others.

Second, treating Islamist organizations as unitary actors entails the risk of exaggerating the extent of the ideological and behavior uniformity within them—that is, of failing to discern instances in which the beliefs and practices of some individuals or factions of a group have changed while those of others have not.<sup>8</sup>

These nuances are fully valid for Iran, and the same questions can and should be raised. Is Rouhani a reformist? The answer is no, because the president is the ultimate insider who knows very well how the system functions. Had he been a reformist, Khamene'i would have never consented to his election. Is he moderate? He is moderate, but in comparison to whom? Rouhani is certainly moderate in comparison to Khamene'i or to Khamene'i's mouthpiece, the *Keyhan* newspaper's Editor-in-Chief Hussein Shariatmadari. However, he is far from liberal or moderate in Western terms. Thus, Rouhani's supporters in the parliament and the government are indeed moderate by Iranian parameters, but they are not reformist, at least not in the original sense of the term.

An additional distinction can be made between "revolutionaries" and "conservatives." Iran is not only "Islamic"; it is also "revolutionary." Khamene'i's official title is *rahbar-e mo'azzam-e enghelab-e eslami* (the great leader of the Islamic Revolution). There has always been an emphasis on the revolutionary aspect of Islam in Iran. Not only is it an inseparable part of the country's recent history, but it also implies crucial differences between Iranian Islamism and other Islamist movements—in addition to the "natural" differences between Sunni and Shi'a. The revolutionary dimension of official Islamist rhetoric in Iran is in some ways similar to the Marxist rhetoric of the revolutions in the Third World.

Overall, Khamene'i is determined to block the path to what he calls *nufuz* (foreign influence), which would damage Iran's revolutionary zeal. It is noteworthy that Khamene'i's view is perfectly logical and rational. A revolution cannot exist without a counter-revolution and without both foreign and internal foes. Should Iran become a more open society, one involved in the global economy that lives in peaceful coexistence, the Islamic regime would likely lose its *raison d'être*. In addition, more open and peaceful relations with the West as well as domestic leniency would make Islam in Iran "Andalusian"—similar to the Islam in medieval Muslim Spain (al-Andalus), where the Muslims were conquered due to—as Iranian hardliners argue—their friendly contacts with Christians, cultural exchange, and intermarriage with Christian women.<sup>9</sup>

Iranian hardliners are thus skeptical and anxious about the new economic opportunities for Iran following the JCPOA, as they pose a threat to the Iranian revolutionary mode and could weaken Islam. Laleh Eftekhari, a member of the Majlis Commission for Education, noted, "In the wake of the implementation of the JCPOA, our revolutionary culture in Iran will be compromised. Should the 'nufuz' find a way into the country, God save [us], we will face Andalusization."<sup>10</sup> Khamene'i may rationally assume that should the enmity toward the United States disappear—and McDonald's open in Tehran—Iran's revolutionary stance against "world arrogance" (*estekbar-e jahani*) would soon become unsustainable hypocrisy or unbearable cognitive dissonance. Hence, it is logical to nip this danger in the bud.

There is, however, another nuance that is often ignored. While the Iranian leadership is surely not Russia's best friend, Iran is among one of the few foreign countries to have an intimate understanding of how Russia functions and how the Soviet Union collapsed. Khamene'i is highly aware of the frequent comparison of the IRI with the USSR of Gorbachev's Perestroika era. On December 26, 2015, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Soviet Union's collapse, Khamene'i published

an article on his personal website in which he explicitly compared Iran to the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> He argued that Iran does not have the problems the USSR had and proposed several reasons that the Soviet Union collapsed. First was that Gorbachev trusted the Americans and the West; he let in McDonald's and other American symbols. This ultimately led to internal corrosion of the state. He added that domestic forces within the Soviet Union were also exploited by the West to accelerate the collapse of the Soviet superpower. This type of situation and threat to the regime's existence appears to be precisely what Khamene'i fears.

At a meeting with students of the religious seminaries in Qom, Khamene'i stressed that the seminaries must resist the efforts of those attempting to depoliticize the seminaries and detach them from the revolution. He added that the seminaries must remain the bastion of revolutionary spirit.<sup>12</sup> It is possible that Khamene'i is wary of the ongoing developments in the country, which could threaten the tenets of the regime, even in the religious seminaries.

When comparing Iran to the USSR, it is important to note that while it is a widely accepted fact that Gorbachev wanted to reform the system, he had no intentions of dismantling it. Although Gorbachev fully realized the flaws of the Soviet economy and society, he did not realize that they were unreformable. By the same token, Khamene'i suspects that reformist-minded politicians could *unwillingly*, just as Gorbachev did, help hostile influences penetrate the Islamic republic.

To counter these dangers, Khamene'i has nominated his hardliner trustees to the most sensitive positions of power, so that even a truly reformist parliament will remain emasculated. One such nomination was the appointment of Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi to head Astan-e Qods Razavi, the country's wealthiest and arguably most important entity, which runs the Mashhad shrine as well as a vast business empire. Ra'isi is a hardline cleric with records in the judiciary and fully shares Khamene'i's worldview.<sup>13</sup>

As a result, should Rouhani and his team try to challenge Khamene'i on various issues, including economic ones, they are likely to be blocked. It is noteworthy that their maneuvering room remains limited not only because they wield little real power but also because they remain supporters of the system, albeit moderates. What is this moderation?

President Rouhani considers himself a follower of Ayatollah Mohammad Husseyni Beheshti, who was the second most powerful politician in Iran after Khomeini, shortly after the 1979 revolution. Beheshti drafted Iran's first Islamic constitution in 1979 and systemized Khomeini's Islamic slogans into a coherent ideology. Beheshti was Khomeini's right hand until his 1981 assassination. Beheshti, however, was more than a politician. He was a religious thinker, cleric, intellectual, and teacher. He was the first Shi'i cleric who learned foreign languages, and he managed the Islamic Center in Hamburg (1965-1970)--which former president Mohammad Khatami later became director of after Beheshti's return to Iran.<sup>14</sup> Beheshti remained the closest person to Khomeini, and he was also responsible for the establishment of the theocratic despotism, as Iranian journalist and activist Ali Afshari argues.<sup>15</sup> However, his personality and thought were much more complicated and multidimensional than that of his teacher Khomeini.

President Rouhani commemorated Beheshti, calling him the "supreme example of brotherhood, moderation, and rationalism."<sup>16</sup> Beheshti's teachings can demonstrate what kind of moderation and rationalism Rouhani envisions. Beheshti was neither liberal nor democrat, and he remained a bona fide Khomeinist. Unlike Khomeini, however, he accepted the existence of different opinions within the regime--to a certain extent--and openly discussed these differences with his rivals. Rouhani and his followers support an Islamic regime but one that is more open to the outside world and with less repression--albeit not democratic.

The bottom line is that Khamene'i considers even these cosmetic differences dangerous and acts accordingly. Nonetheless,

the elections are important, as they highlight the aspirations of the Iranian people. It is also noteworthy that the appeal of some Iranians in the diaspora to boycott the elections was not heard; voter turnout was about 61 percent.<sup>17</sup> While Iranians do not necessarily believe that the elections will bring about change, voting is the only means of influence. Prominent moderate intellectual Sadeq Zibakalam stated that the choice was between “bad and worse.”<sup>18</sup> The people have thus aligned with President Rouhani hoping that this will lead to economic improvement as a result of the nuclear agreement. With the people leery of violence and instability, the unwritten consensus is that active opposition to the regime, a new revolution, or war are not viable options. Last, it is important to remember voting differences between Tehran and the provinces. Residents of the various Iranian provinces who voted for the conservatives were generally not motivated by ideology but by the candidates’ abilities to address their community’s needs, thus tribal and regional voting patterns also play an important role.<sup>19</sup>

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> ISNA (Iranian Students News Agency), “The Parliamentary Elections Results,” February 29, 2016, <http://goo.gl/7FesGe>.

<sup>2</sup> “Iran Runoff Election Scheduled for April 29,” *Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty*

(*RFERL*), March 14, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-runoff-election-schedule-april-29/27609560.html>.

<sup>3</sup> “Hashemi’s Analysis of the Election: Disqualifying Candidates Is Not Good for the Regime,” *Aftab*, March 8, 2016, <http://goo.gl/WyJYrJ>.

<sup>4</sup> Arash Karami, “Khamenei: Even Those Who Don’t Believe in Islamic System Should Vote,” *al-Monitor*, June 12, 2013, <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/06/2196/khamenei-even-those-who-dont-believe-in-islamic-system-should-vote/>.

<sup>5</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “What Does It Mean To Be a Reformist in Iran?” *Policy Watch* 2583, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 10, 2016,

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-reformist-in-iran>.

<sup>6</sup> Ali Motahari was finally approved by the Guardian Council and was reelected. Golnaz Esfandiari, “Nine Takeaways from Iran’s Elections,” *RFERL*, March 4, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/nine-takeaways-iran-elections/27589506.html>.

<sup>7</sup> The following article mentions—albeit not explicitly—the tenets of the Reformist discourse as they are rendered: Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran Divided: the Historical Roots of Iranian Debates on Identity, Culture, and Governance in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), pp. 156-59.

<sup>8</sup> Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, *The Muslim Brotherhood: Evolution of an Islamist Movement*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton, 2013), pp. 5-6.

<sup>9</sup> “The Concept of Andalusiation,” *Kayhan*, No. 19226, November 9, 2008, <http://www.magiran.com/npview.asp?ID=1739718>; Afshin Shahi and Alam Saleh, “Andalusiation: Is Iran on the Trajectory of De-Islamisation?” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (2015), pp. 500-19.

<sup>10</sup> “Eftekhari: The Danger of Andalusization Is Looming As a Result of JCPOA/Majlis

Resolution to Prevent the Foreign Influence,” *Parsnews*, December 5, 2015, <http://goo.gl/8t8nVk>.

<sup>11</sup> “Gorbachev Trusted the West and the Americans,” Ali Khamene’i’s Personal Website, February 26, 2015, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/memory-content?id=31730>.

<sup>12</sup> “The Meeting of Students’ Representatives of the Religious Seminary in Qom with the Leader of the Revolution,” *Press TV*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/Fa/2016/03/15/455836/Iran-Leader-Qom-Hawza>.

<sup>13</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, “Mashhad Appointments Show Tightened Hardliner Grip,” *Policy Watch* 2586, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, March 14, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/mashhad-appointments-shows-tightened-hardliner-grip>.

<sup>14</sup> Information on the life, activities, and works of Mohammad Hosseyni Beheshti can be found on the website of his followers, <http://www.beheshti.org>.

<sup>15</sup> Ali Afshari, “Ayatollah Beheshti and the Consolidation of Religious Despotism,” July 24, 2012, <http://aliafshari.com/1391/04/06/466>.

<sup>16</sup> “‘Rouhani’ Shahid Beheshti Was the Best Example of Moderation,” *Eghtesad-e Iran Online*, June 28, 2013, <http://eghtesadeiranonline.com/vdch-znzk23n6vd.tft2.html>.

<sup>17</sup> “Latest Results Show Definitive Reformist Victory,” *Radio Farda*, March 20, 2016, <http://www.radiofarda.com/content/f12-last-result-shows-definite-reformist-victory-tehran/27580755.html>.

<sup>18</sup> “Zibakalam on Iranian Elections: ‘We Had to Choose Between Bad and Worse,’” *The Guardian*, February 26, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/feb/26/iran-zibakalam-grand-reformists-coalition-includes-intelligence-ministers>.

<sup>19</sup> Sadeq Zibakalam, “The Reformists Are More Surprised than the Conservatives,”

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