

Appendix: Iran's government and current political divisions

The structure of the Iranian government

Unelected bodies

The supreme leader, or *Rahbare Mo'azzame Enghelab* (leader of the revolution), stands at the top of the Islamic Republic of Iran, having the final say on all political and religious matters. He is also the commander in chief of Iran's armed forces. The current supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is the second since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The first was Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, one of the leaders of the revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic.

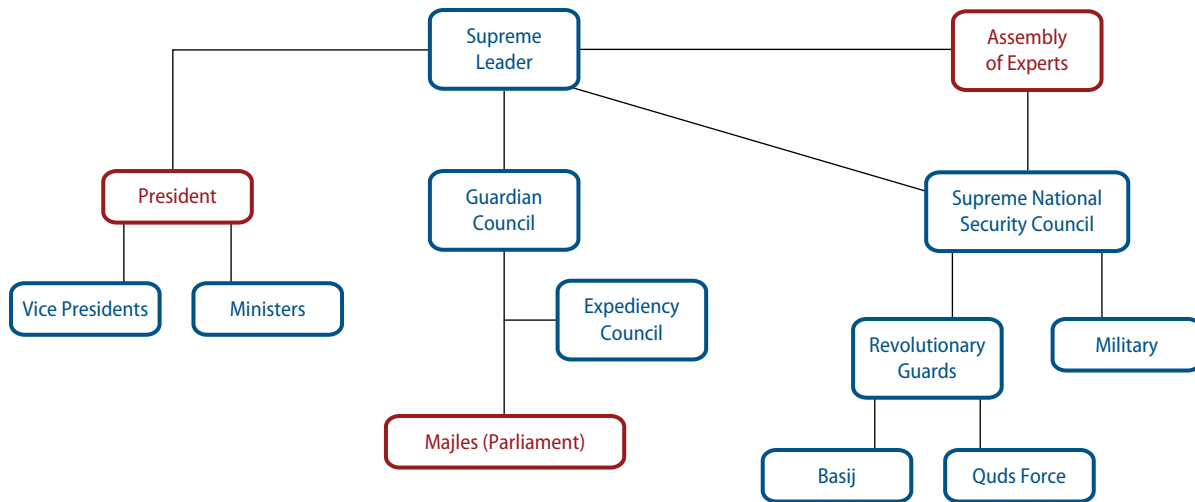
Unlike his predecessor, Khamenei is not known for his religious scholarship.¹ He was selected as successor shortly before Khomeini's death, when the long-intended successor, Ayatollah Montazeri, had a falling out with Khomeini over Montazeri's criticisms of the authoritarian excesses of the regime. Because Khamenei was not a senior cleric at the time of his selection, his ascent required a change to the constitution enabling a lesser cleric to serve as supreme leader. His lack of religious credentials has been a continuing source of political vulnerability and personal insecurity.

The most learned cleric, or *faqih*, acts as the earthly representative of the 12th imam, whose eventual return will inaugurate an era of peace and justice, according to Shia eschatology. The *faqih* has the final say on matters of state based on the guardianship of the most learned jurist, or *Velayat-e faqih*, the political-religious doctrine on which the Islamic Republic is based. Ayatollah Khomeini developed and promulgated this doctrine in a series of lectures while in exile in Najaf in neighboring Iraq in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

As with other trends in Shia scholarship at the time such as that of Iraqi Ayatollah Muhammad Baqr al-Sadr, founder of Iraq's Da'wa Party, Khomeini's ideas broke with

FIGURE 4
The Iranian system of government

■ Unelected
■ Elected



Shia tradition (in which clerics avoided overt involvement in politics) by advocating a much more prominent leadership role for clerics in political matters. As supreme leader, however, Ayatollah Khomeini had formal powers comparable to a constitutional monarch. But after a series of constitutional amendments hastily adopted shortly before Khomeini's death, the position became more powerful and effectively independent of any formal checks and balances under Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

The Council of Guardians is made up of 12 persons, six clerics appointed by the supreme leader and six legal scholars selected by the head of the judiciary (who is himself appointed by the supreme leader) and approved by the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament), to serve for six-year terms. The council has veto power over all legislation and strictly vets candidates for political office, effectively acting as a check on Iran's democratic institutions.

The Expediency Discernment Council was created by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1988 to manage disputes between the Majlis and the Guardian Council. Shortly before his death in 1989, Khomeini ordered a constitutional revision process that would officially establish the council.² It currently consists of 28 members, all of whom are appointed by the supreme leader to serve five-year terms. Since 2002, the

council has been headed by Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. On March 14, 2012, Supreme Leader Khamenei announced Rafsanjani's reappointment.³

The head of the judiciary is tasked with ensuring that Islamic law is enforced throughout the judiciary system. He is appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term and in turn appoints the chief justice of the Supreme Court and the chief prosecutor. The current head is Sadeq Larijani, the younger brother of Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani.

Elected bodies

The president is elected for a four-year term and is limited to two terms. Though the office has a high public profile, its power is severely constrained by the constitution, and the president's authority extends mainly to domestic and economic affairs. The current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was able to inject himself into foreign policy only when he had the backing of the supreme leader. Now that Khamenei has withdrawn his support, Ahmadinejad has found himself increasingly isolated. In October 2011 Khamenei proposed possibly abolishing the office of the president, but it's unclear whether he will pursue this.⁴

The Cabinet of Ministers is made up of 24 ministers, chosen by the president and confirmed by Iran's Parliament, the Majlis. The supreme leader has the ability to choose or dismiss cabinet ministers as he sees fit.⁵

Vice presidents oversee various aspects of the president's agenda. The constitution empowers the president of Iran to appoint as many or as few vice presidents as he requires. Currently there are 12 vice presidents serving under Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Parliament, or the *Majlis*, was first created as a result of Iran's constitutional revolution in 1906, with both an upper and lower house. After the 1979 Iranian revolution, the lower house was abolished. The parliament is currently made up of 290 representatives, elected every four years. Both Majlis candidates and the legislation the Majlis produces are subject to the approval of the Guardian Council. The current Majlis speaker is Ali Larijani. For the 2012 Majlis elections, the council rejected the candidacy of 45 percent of some 5,200 applicants. Reasons for rejection included allegations of "not believing in Islam," "not being a practitioner of Islam," "not being loyal to the Constitution," and "not being loyal to the *Velayat-e Faqih*."⁶

The Assembly of Experts is made up of 86 clerics tasked with electing and overseeing the actions of the supreme leader, though they have never been known to publicly challenge any of the decisions of the supreme leader. They are elected by the public for eight-year terms after being vetted by the Guardian Council.

Other key institutions

The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps was created after the 1979 revolution to safeguard the Iranian revolution against possible coup attempts and to enforce Ayatollah Khomeini's vision of the Islamic Republic. It currently consists of around 125,000 members, with ground, air (which oversees Iran's ballistic missile force),⁷ and naval divisions, the latter of which is primarily responsible for the Persian Gulf. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps has become deeply involved in politics and grown into a potent economic and political force as its veterans have moved into positions of power. Independent of the Iranian armed forces, the guards corps is believed to control monopolies in a number of key industries, including construction and telecommunications, in addition to a \$20 billion import empire. Politically the guards corps is not monolithic and contains supporters of the various political trends in Iran, including the reformists.

The Quds Force is a special unit within the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps tasked with exporting the Islamic revolution. The Quds Force manages Iran's relationships with various militant and terrorist groups in the region and around the world. It reports directly to the supreme leader. Its current commander is Major General Qassem Soleimani. The Quds Force is also implicated in the alleged plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador. The plan was revealed in October 2011, with "Gholam Shakuri, an Iran-based member of Iran's Qods Force," named as a defendant.⁸

The Basij is a volunteer militia tasked with internal security and suppression of dissidents. Created in 1980 by Ayatollah Khomeini to assist the guards corps, the basij is believed to be responsible for much of the street violence during the June 2009 demonstrations under the direction of the supreme leader's son—and likely the intended heir—Mojtaba Khamenei. President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was himself a member of this organization during the Iran-Iraq war.

The Judiciary was, similar to the Majlis, first created after the constitutional revolution in 1906, although it did not begin fully functioning until Reza Shah

came to power in 1925. After the Islamic revolution of 1978, the judiciary was reoriented around the principles of the revolution, with secular jurists being replaced by clerics and elements of Sharia law incorporated into the civil code. The Iranian court structure includes revolutionary courts, which deal with offenses that undermine the Islamic Republic of Iran, and public courts, which deal with basic criminal infractions.

The Supreme National Security Council was formed as a result of the 1989 constitutional revision. Presided over by the president, it includes the speaker of the *Majlis*, the chief of the judiciary, the heads of the armed forces, the ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, and Information departments, heads of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, and two representatives chosen by the supreme leader. Its current secretary is Saeed Jalili, who in this capacity also serves as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator.

The Armed Forces currently has around 220,000 regular army personnel, 18,000 navy personnel, and around 52,000 air force soldiers. The regular army, navy, and air force are overseen by Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps counterparts and supported by basij battalions.⁹

The Ministry of Intelligence and Security is the secret police/intelligence apparatus of the Islamic Republic of Iran, working both inside and outside the country. It is believed to be one of the most powerful ministries in the government. It operates with a secret budget and answers directly to the supreme leader. From the late 1980s through late 1990s, ministry agents were behind the brutal killings of a number of dissidents and activists in Iran, known as the “chain murders” or “serial murders.” This was eventually admitted by the ministry after years of public outcry, though it blamed the murders on “rogue elements.”¹⁰

Main current political divisions in Iran

Since the mid-1990s during the presidency of popular reformer Mohammed Khatami, Ayatollah Khamenei has worked diligently to marginalize the power of the reformist bloc in Iran's political system. The carefully stage-managed 2005 election of Khamenei's then-favorite Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the conservative populist former mayor of Tehran—was a major step in this campaign. But even as he worked behind the scenes to marginalize the forces of reform (and sometimes even more openly, as in the rejection of large numbers of reformist candidates

by his representatives on the Guardian Council), he was careful to maintain the pretense of the office of supreme leader as above the usual political fray.

With President Ahmadinejad's 2009 re-election, however, Khamenei's intervention on behalf of his protégé was so blatant, congratulating Ahmadinejad on his re-election even before all the votes had been tallied. Millions of enraged proreform voters took to the streets for days of protest, in what became known as the "Green Wave." With this intervention Khamenei showed that he considered his goal of marginalizing the forces of reform to be more important than the even the most minimal pretense of democracy.

Ahmadinejad vs. Khamenei

And yet, since the beginning of his second administration, Ahmadinejad undertook a number of initiatives that were seen as a direct challenge both to the supreme leader and to the larger clerical establishment. In the former case, Ahmadinejad fired Intelligence Minister Heidar Moslehi in April 2011 against the wishes of the supreme leader. Khamenei's insistence that Moslehi be reinstated, yet another very public intervention in political affairs, resulted in Ahmadinejad removing himself from the public eye for 11 days—even skipping meetings of the cabinet—in what was regarded as a shocking protest cum temper tantrum. Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, who had previously been considered a close spiritual adviser to Ahmadinejad, publicly warned him that disobeying the supreme leader is equivalent to "apostasy from God."¹¹

In regard to the clerical establishment, Ahmadinejad and several of his key aides, most prominently Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaei, Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, who many viewed as Ahmadinejad's chosen successor, began to speak more openly about their vision of a populist, Iranian-nationalist-tinged Islam, in which pride in Persian history and civilization mingled with conservative Shiism. Ahmadinejad and his circle promoted a heavily messianic form of Shiism in which he claimed to be able to commune with the Hidden Imam (whose return many Shiites believe will inaugurate an era of peace and justice under Islam) and suggested other lay worshippers could too.

This embrace of messianic populism by the president was seen as a direct threat to the political power of the clerics, who perceived it as an effort to sideline their authority to interpret scriptures. They responded with a series of political attacks on Ahmadinejad

and his aides, including accusing Mashaei of “sorcery.”¹² Mashaei was forced to step down as one of Ahmadinejad’s vice presidents, though he remains chief of staff.

All of this added up to a severely weakened and politically neutered Ahmadinejad. The president’s allies were trounced in the March 2, 2012, parliamentary elections by candidates much closer to the supreme leader. Khamenei’s supporters captured more than 75 percent of the seats in what was essentially a competition between conservative and ultraconservative factions jockeying for position under the supreme leader.¹³

Facing considerable internal tension and growing popular discontent resulting from increasing international economic and financial sanctions because of Iran’s continued nuclear program, Iran’s supreme leader was clearly desperate to present the elections as an affirmation of the regime’s flagging legitimacy and a rebuttal to international criticism and pressure over its controversial nuclear program. Iranian state television quoted Khamenei as declaring a religious obligation to vote, saying that a high voter turnout would “safeguard” Iran’s reputation.¹⁴ Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi similarly stated that a large turnout would “deal a heavy blow to the mouth” of Iran’s foes.¹⁵

The March 2012 Majlis elections were carefully managed, both at the front end by the vetting of candidates and at the back end with the actual voting. This year the Guardian Council barred 35 sitting members of the Majlis from seeking re-election and blocked nearly 2,000 others from running out of a total of nearly 4,500 applicants. Reports from foreign journalists indicate that the conduct and coverage of the election were even more tightly controlled than in previous elections. “I have never been corralled like this,” one Western reporter told PBS’s Tehran bureau. “Apart from the fact that people are very much afraid to talk in public, we have been constantly monitored and harassed.” Among the foreign media, he said, “We all agree this is the most tightly controlled we’ve ever seen it.”¹⁶

Reformists marginalized

Meanwhile the reformists announced their decision to boycott the election weeks before they took place, both as a gesture of protest and in anticipation of being prohibited from running by the Guardian Council—one of two official bodies responsible for vetting candidates along with the Interior Ministry. Leading green movement figures Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, both reformist candidates in 2009, have been under house arrest for more than a year.¹⁷

Former reformist president Mohamed Khatami came under intense criticism for his decision to cast a vote rather than boycott, but his move was seen as an effort to “stay in the game” by signaling continuing support for the system, as well as a tacit admission that the green movement is not an important player in Iranian politics at the moment.

Conservatives, ultraconservatives dominate

Though 13 different conservative coalitions fielded candidates for election in Tehran alone, the two largest coalitions—the United Principlist Front and the Stability, or Steadfastness, Front—together secured about three-quarters of the seats. The Principlists originally rose in response to Mohamed Khatami’s reformist presidency but splintered into a number of factions, including Ahmadinejad’s. The United Principlist Front was established in response to Khamenei’s call for unity among his supporters in the wake of the 2009 protests.¹⁸ It includes moderates, conservatives, and hardliners, including many former Ahmadinejad supporters, and is led by conservative Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, secretary general of the Militant Clergy Association.

The Stability/Steadfastness Front is made up largely of hardliners and is led by ultraconservative cleric Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, Ahmadinejad’s former spiritual adviser who has now withdrawn his support for the president. Yazdi has strong ties to the intelligence community and the Revolutionary Guards and is known to be a strong believer in the imminence of the return of the Hidden Imam (the Shia messiah, or *Mahdi*), a view he shared with his erstwhile disciple Ahmadinejad. There are also rumors that Yazdi belongs to the extremist *Hojattieh* society, a conspiratorial sect considered so extreme that it was banned by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1983.¹⁹ Similar to rumors about the Freemasons in Europe or the Gulenists in Turkey, the *Hojattieh* are believed by some Iranians to have infiltrated the various levels of Iranian government and exercise influence throughout the system.

Iranian officials declared a 64 percent turnout, a “victory”²⁰ for the Islamic Republic of Iran, though many observers doubted this number. At the very least it seems clear that the elections represent a victory for Ayatollah Khamenei’s efforts to reassert his power over Ahmadinejad’s upstart faction and re-establish himself as the unquestioned “decider” of the Islamic Republic. Khamenei’s confidence is apparently so great that on March 15 he reappointed Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as head of the Expediency Council, after having him removed after the June 2009 elections.²¹

Rafsanjani had been seen as sympathetic to Iran's reformers, and his own daughter was arrested for taking part in the post-election demonstrations. Rafsanjani's reappointment is a fairly clear sign that Khamenei no longer sees him as a threat.

Finally, the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in Iran's politics and economy has tracked with the supreme leader's efforts to marginalize the reformers in Iran's system. The Revolutionary Guards benefited from their close relationship to Khamenei, which has enabled them to place their alumni in key positions of influence. This in turn has delivered considerable benefits to the guard corps's networks in terms of government contracts and virtual monopolies in major industries such as telecommunications and construction, which has seriously diminished the influence of Iran's traditionally powerful *bazaari*, or merchant class, as well as control of Iran's considerable black market in smuggled goods. The Revolutionary Guard's influence in Iranian affairs has become so great that in 2009 Iran scholar Rasool Nafisi suggested that Iran "is not a theocracy anymore," but "a regular military security government with a facade of a Shiite clerical system."²²

A silver lining in Khamenei's reassertion of authority

It's unclear what the recent election results will mean for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. Khamenei himself has long been known to be one of the biggest skeptics of the possibility of a deal with Western powers. He believes the West is out to destroy the Islamic Republic. But if Khamenei has now once again established himself as the unquestioned arbiter of Iran's politics, he may feel more confident in allowing his representatives to engage with the so-called P5+1 countries—the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany, which are negotiating with Iran on the nuclear issue—in a way that Iran has thus far been unwilling to do.

While it's important to be wary of over-interpreting signals out of Tehran, there have been a few recent indications that Khamenei could be willing to move on a nuclear deal. Last month, in what could be seen as an attempt to allay international concerns over Iran's possible weaponization, Khamenei said that having nuclear weapons "is a sin as well as useless, harmful and dangerous."²³ On March 8, 2012, Khamenei praised President Barack Obama's remarks downplaying the talk of war, declaring a "window of opportunity" for diplomacy with Iran.²⁴ And in a recent interview with CNN, published on March 16, 2012, Ali Larijani, a close adviser to Khamenei, disavowed Ahmadinejad's infamous remark that Israel must be "wiped

off the map,” saying that the remark was “definitely not” meant in a military sense, and that such a move was not “a policy of Iran.”²⁵

These are all mild statements to the extent that they represent Iranian leaders addressing two key issues of stated international—particularly U.S. and Israeli—concern. But Iran’s record of prolonged negotiating punctuated by deliberate breakdowns cannot be forgotten. Still, these remarks by Khamenei and Larijani should be considered seriously. Iran’s first supreme leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, was able to reverse himself and “drink the cup of poison” by accepting a 1988 ceasefire with Iraq in part because he enjoyed unquestioned authority.²⁶ Now that Khamenei has demonstrated his own supremacy, he could have enough political space to make a similar, previously unacceptable compromise.

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