

Iran's Upcoming Elections: Much Ado About Nothing?

Iran's presidential elections are scheduled to take place on May 19. Although the candidates may be billed as either "reformist" or "conservative," such distinctions have little meaning. If history serves as a guide, the winner will not diminish Iran's malign behavior nor curb its regional ambitions.

Unfortunately, Iran is not a true democracy. Although the Islamic Republic of Iran has a presidency and parliament, the supreme leader serves as the country's ultimate source of authority. And while presidential and parliamentary elections are technically "free"—without apparent vote rigging—they are hardly fair. A body known as the Guardian Council, which is unelected and loyal to the supreme leader, vets candidates and disqualifies those who fail to exhibit ideological suitability and loyalty.

Therefore, to describe an Iranian presidential election as pitting "reformists" against "conservatives" is misguided. Rather, Iranian elections should be viewed as a competition between hardliners and more pragmatic conservatives who wish to see more political and economic freedoms within Iranian society, but are ultimately still proponents of the Islamic Revolution and supreme leader.

In the 2016 parliamentary elections, the Guardian Council disqualified well over 90 percent of reformist candidates for parliament, including 50 sitting members. The massive disqualification of candidates left the reformist parties with few options, forcing them to look for the most pragmatic of available hardline candidates (many of whom oddly appeared on both the lists of moderate and hardline parties). The results, however, were still often framed as an electoral success for the "moderates;" the same was true of President Hassan Rouhani's election in 2013.

But throughout Rouhani's presidency, including after the 2016 parliamentary elections, Iran's destabilizing behavior has only worsened. Tehran still supports terrorist groups that threaten Israel, such as Hezbollah and Hamas. In addition, Iran continues to test-launch ballistic missiles in violation of its international commitments. The latest missile test in early March 2017 successfully struck a floating barge 155 miles away from the launch site, sending a clear and menacing signal to the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf.

During Rouhani's tenure, Iran has suffered a spike in executions and increased repression of women, minorities, journalists and political dissidents. On Dec. 15, 2016, Iranian police arrested 120 people for attending a mixed-sex party in Tehran and violating conservative dress. On Aug. 2, Iran executed 20 Kurds for allegedly mounting a string of terrorist attacks between 2009 and 2011, an incident the United Nations' top human rights official denounced as a "grave injustice" lacking in due process. Iran's "reformist" leadership is either powerless to stop, or complicit with, escalating human rights abuses.

Unfortunately, Iran's upcoming election is unlikely engender positive change. Accordingly, the United States must continue to confront Iran's malign activities and take firm action to support Israel and its other regional allies, as well as to protect regional U.S. military bases in striking distance of Iran.