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ALI KHAMENEI'S SHAM ELECTIONS

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The Islamic Republic of Iran is set to hold two elections on 1 March 2024. One is for the 290-seat Majlis, or parliament, ostensibly the country's main legislative chamber. The other is for the 88-seat Assembly of Experts, the chamber made up of senior clerics whose most important function is to oversee the performance of the supreme leader and choose his successor when the time comes. Both elections would be important if the voting process was meaningful in Iran. It is not.

Elections in Iran are highly restricted and engineered to produce the veneer of political representation. Still, the elections on 1 March are set to break earlier records for pointlessness, as voter turnout is anticipated to be at an all-time low.¹ And yet, there is significant symbolism around heightened absurdities of holding elections in Iran that the vast opposition to the Islamist rule could have used if it had any game plan. So far, however, the broader opposition—both inside Iran and in the large diaspora community—has failed to construct a plan to spin the upcoming mock elections into a moment to revitalize the clumsy yet immense opposition to the Islamist rule.

Khamenei's Game Plan

The supreme leader of Iran, Ali Khamenei, who essentially decides who can run in Iran's inconsequential elections, does not even bother with pretending to care about the public's wishes. He has said that it is every citizen's duty to cast a ballot, expecting a historically low turnout that would be embarrassing for him.² However, instead of loosening his grip on the tight vetting of candidates, he is already pointing fingers at external enemies, such as the likes of Western intelligence services, as the purported culprits behind low voter enthusiasm in Iran.³

Even loyalists of the regime remind Khamenei daily, via interviews and commentary published in the state-run media, that an election without any real political competition is a waste of money and an insult to the intelligence of the Iranian people.⁴ Since 1979, mass disqualifications have been the norm when candidates seek to run for elected office in the Islamic Republic. However, this time even many senior veterans of the Islamist rule have been barred. Among the notable disqualified candidates is former president Hassan Rouhani, who wants to know why he is suddenly no longer fit to serve in a regime for which he has toiled since its inception 45 years ago.⁵

Rouhani's presidential predecessors, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mohammad Khatami, who together occupied the presidential palace from 1997 to 2013, have not even attempted to register for the 1 March elections, knowing that the door would be shut in their faces. In short, none of these men, as well as many other former senior regime figures, are trusted by the 84-year Khamenei, who is paving the way for his succession process.⁶

Trends during recent months point to the fact that any figure with a hypothetical ability to set up a political operation outside of Khamenei's authorization is being marginalized. The Persian term used inside of Iran is *Khaales-Saazi*, which is best translated to mean "purge."⁷

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A Fast-Shrinking Regime Tent

Khamenei is an obstinate and embittered man, but also one with a long historic memory and a plan for the future of the Islamic Republic. Rather than engaging in introspection and accepting responsibility for the dire state of affairs in Iran and widespread public disillusionment, he doubles down and shifts blame to others, ranging from perceived internal rivals to foreign opponents of his regime. However, for Khamenei, the likely twilight years of his nearly four-decade-long rule represent the worst possible time to waver from his longstanding uncompromising methods that have enabled him to maintain power for so long.

Khamenei, who became supreme leader in 1989, was among those Islamist revolutionary leaders who toppled Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah of Iran, in 1979. The lesson that Khamenei and his fellow Islamist revolutionary leaders learned from that event is that the Shah showed indecision in the face of internal opposition, and that became his undoing.⁸ Khamenei is evidently hell-bent on avoiding the same mistake by exhibiting a willingness to compromise with his opponents. It is a gamble that Khamenei has presumably reached after considerable due diligence.

The case of barring Rouhani from the elections to the clerical Assembly of Experts offers a good example. What prize could Khamenei hope to secure, and what risk is he taking by excluding his former friend? Through his control over the Guardian Council, which approves all electoral candidates and all-important legislation passed by the Majlis, Khamenei has long sought to turn supposed elected assemblies into a symbolic rubber stamp.

At this juncture, Khamenei's succession plans become most relevant. For years, there has been speculation that he wants his son, Mojtaba, to succeed him. If so, given that such a hereditary succession will be highly controversial, Khamenei has all the reason in the world to ensure that the 88 members of the Assembly of Experts do not stray from his plan. Seen from this perspective, his choice of keeping Rouhani out of the assembly demonstrates a great deal of logic, and the likely risks associated with such a decision are limited. After all, Rouhani has a very small popular support base. He was elected president in 2013 and again in 2017 because he assumed a moderate mantle but failed miserably to bring about any political reform during his eight years in office. Moreover, the Iranian public remembers Rouhani not as a reformist, but as a man who served as Khamenei's special advisor for 16 years before he became president.⁹ Now, Khamenei sees Rouhani more as a liability than an asset and is therefore casting him aside. The Iranian public is hardly bothered by this, as it is seen at most as a fight inside the regime.

There is no evidence that voting in the Khamenei-controlled elections process can ever yield any meaningful reform. Pressure for political change in Iran is far more likely to come from the streets than from the ballot box. As Iran prepares to hold what are guaranteed to be sham elections—with no real choice, as the vetted candidates will stand for nothing but subservience to Khamenei and everything that he has inflicted on Iran since he came to power in 1989—a significant drop in the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic is beyond doubt. This has become such a basic fact that it is repeated daily on Iranian regime television. The trouble is that regime pundits have no one to blame these days without daring to openly criticize Khamenei. In reality, Khamenei and his foot soldiers control every lever of power in Iran and continue to enact domestic and foreign policies detached from the wishes of the Iranian people. It is little wonder that the Iranian people are no longer prepared to participate.

ENDNOTES

1. Statista reports voter turnout for the last 40 years in Iran, which ranged from 67.42 percent in 1980 to a historic low of 48.8 percent in 2021. "Rate of Voter Turnout for Presidential Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran from 1980 to 2021," Statista, June 2021.
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4. "Member of the Economic Commission of the Majlis: Every Vote of the People Turns the Hope of the Enemies into Despair," Islamic Republic News Agency, accessed 28 February 2024.
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7. "Media 'Cleansing' at the Press Conference of the Reform Front—Vahdat's Electoral Message to the Revolutionaries," Islamic Republic News Agency, accessed 28 February 2024.
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9. Uskowi, *Temperature Rising*.



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