

Iran's complex and unusual political system is often perceived as opaque and even arcane by Western

E pluribus unum: Decision-makers and decision-making in Iran

observers. This policy brief provides an overview of the power structure of the Islamic Republic and offers an insight into the intricacies of the Iranian system's decision-making process.

Ideological limitations

The political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is said to be among the most complicated in the Middle East. Western observers bemoan the opaque nature of its decision-making process, the confusing multiplicity of its power centres and the intricacies of the regime's Islamist ideology. Even the fact that there are free elections (to a certain degree) contributes to the reigning confusion. Apologists for the regime, however, take the existence of the elections as their starting point and point out the fact that in Iran there is a – relatively – free press, thus highlighting Iran's difference from other autocratic regimes in the region.

The truth, as always, is somewhere in the middle. To begin with, freedom of expression and the right to engage in political activities apply only to those who ideologically belong to the sphere of political Islam according to Khomeini's interpretation ('Khomeinism'). Khomeinism involves a relatively wide and open interpretation ranging from very left-wing to right-wing positions in economic and social policy. The regime also has the monopoly over Iranian nationalism (which is fundamentally secular) as well as over Third World anti-imperialism (actually an ideology of the left) – both

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have become part of the regime's political discourse, albeit only in their 'Islamised' versions. Those members of Iranian society who are not Islamists will find it hard to voice their views or to hold high office. There is a fair amount of covert freedom on the cultural and intellectual scene though, but its impact on the Iranian body politic is almost negligible.

Role of the clergy

Iran's political system is theocratic in the sense that the ultimate power-holders are clerics. But this does not amount to a fully-fledged theocracy because only a limited number of clerics are employed within the ruling bureaucracy, among them hardly anyone from the highest echelons, the *mardjas*. The latter are allowed to lead an autonomous existence, although their activities are subject to severe limitations. Apart from clerics, sons and other relatives of clerics and Islamist laypersons are actively engaged in the regime. They can trace back their affiliations to the various Islamist networks, many of them predating the Islamic revolution. Family relations, regional background and the like play an important role in this regard too.

The Supreme Leader

Unflinching loyalty to the 'Ruling Jurisprudent' and 'Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution' Sayyid Ali Khamenei remains the basis for political activity in Iran. The position of the Supreme Leader has changed



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei casts his ballot in Iran's Parliamentary election in Tehran, 14 March 2008.

for two reasons: first, its theological dimension was downgraded when the regime terminated the connection between the post of Ruling Jurisprudent and the function of *mardja*. And secondly, as a consequence, other factors like the French-inspired constitution had an impact on the Iranian power structure, including on the role of the Supreme Leader. This led to a situation whereby as a result of the streamlining of the polycentric political system Khamenei's position today in terms of the power structure could be compared to that of the French president – with the difference that in Iran the Supreme Leader picks the members of the body that elects him.

Development of political currents

The Western media tends to present Iran's political system as basically split into a pro-Western reformist or moderate and an anti-Western conservative camp.

This is a gross oversimplification, because the moderates in the regime agree merely on 'talking to the West', which does not mean that they acquiesce in Western hegemony. In the last two decades,



Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad speaks at a ceremony in Iran's nuclear enrichment facility in Natanz, 300 kms south of Tehran, 9 April 2007.

the fluid revolutionary ideology (or range of ideologies) has crystallised into four main currents: Islamic left, moderate right, traditional conservatives and neo-conservatives, who nowadays call themselves 'principalists' or 'fundamentalists' (*osul-garâ*). The Islamic left were those revolutionary firebrands that Khamenei and Rafsanjani managed to successfully sideline in the early 1980s. They spent a decade in the political wilderness until they made a triumphant return under Khatami in 1997, after having given up on their ideological dreams of a state-run economy and permanent revolution and come to terms with the idea of reconciling political Islam with democracy. Those who could not give up dreaming of the revolution had to remain in the wilderness for almost a decade longer, until they came to power under Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad in 2005. His group was by all accounts the weakest and needed substantial support from others, including the *basij* paramilitary militia, which provided the manpower, and the group around the eccentric Qom-based Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, which provided some of the intellectual input. They also forged an alliance with the traditional conservatives. This group is rooted in the lower-class milieu of the bazaars and the petty bourgeoisie, although many of them became very wealthy during the war. Socially extremely conservative, and like most business people abhorring intellectualism, for these people support for Ahmadinezhad was a logical choice. However, they unexpectedly turned out to be the sharpest critics of the new government's policies, which is partly

Table 1: 8th *Majles* Elections 2008

LISTS AND MINORITY SEATS	SEATS 1 ST ROUND	SEATS 2 ND ROUND	TOTAL
<i>Unified Fundamentalists (radical)</i>	90	27	117
<i>Broad Fundamentalist Coalition (moderate)</i>	42	11	53
<i>Reformists</i>	31	15	46
<i>Independents</i>	40	29	69
MINORITIES			
<i>Armenians</i>	2		2
<i>Chaldean and Assyrian Catholic</i>	1		1
<i>Jews</i>	1		1
<i>Zoroastrian</i>	1		1
Voter turnout 60%			

Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iranian_legislative_election%2C_2008 (based on IPU figures).

due to the fact that Ahmadinezhad somehow forgot to provide them with important positions in his government. Finally, the most famous of all these socio-political groups calls itself the 'modern right', a category of people that encompasses pragmatists, technocrats and the like. Their paragon is Rafsanjani and their political support was necessary for Khatami and the Islamic left, but they always enjoyed good relations with the traditional conservatives too. All of these groups are connected with certain newspapers which serve as their mouthpieces. But there are also many personal and family ties between the different political currents. And of course all are loyal towards the Supreme Leader. Proponents of these various political-ideological fields compete for political positions. In this competition, parliamentary and presidential elections are the final litmus test for the regime to see which group of its members is most popular. In the last elections in March and April 2008, the radical fundamentalists won by a clear margin and became the dominant party on the right to the detriment of the moderate right which either joined the reformists or the moderate fundamentalists. (See table opposite). At the same time, any big election

is also a referendum by default on the popularity of the regime and of its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Therefore it is less important, as seen from the vantage point of the regime, to rig the outcome of the elections than to manipulate voter turnout.

Decision-making

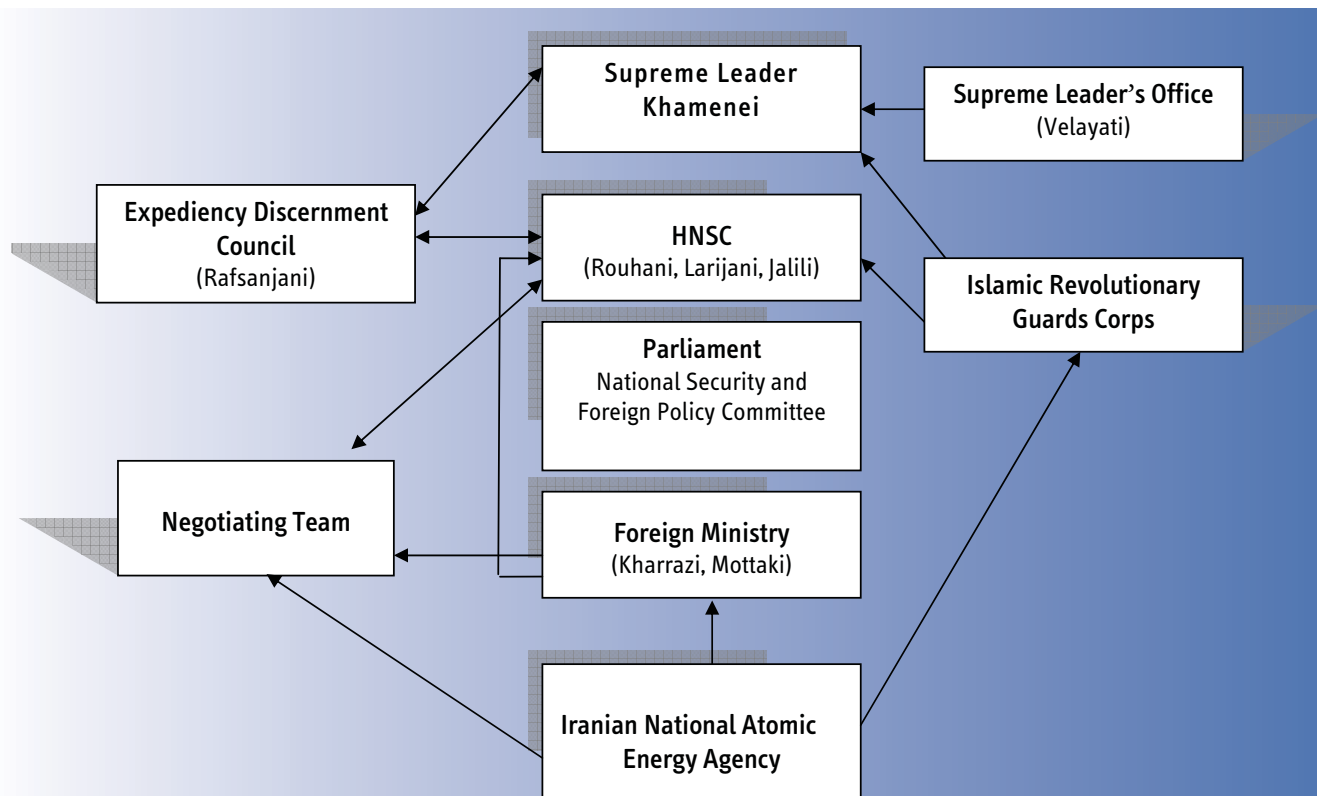
The Iranian system also 'takes care of' experienced politicians who have lost their seats in elections by appointing them to higher positions, as was the case with Rafsanjani, Velayati and Larijani. Foreign and security policy decisions are dealt with in the Higher National Security Council (HNSC) that comprises all elected and appointed bodies. But the HNSC only prepares decisions and coordinates the state machinery; the Supreme Leader takes the final decision, after consulting with his closest advisors and having heard the views of the Expediency Discernment Council. He has reportedly never taken a decision that runs counter to the consensual will of the Iranian elites. In the early years of the Republic, when the system had not been streamlined in favour of the



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Table 2: The nuclear issue: outline of decision-making flow



Source: derived (modified) from Shahram Chubin, *Iran's Nuclear Ambitions*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington DC 2006, p. 38.



Bilateral talks between EUHR Javier Solana, left, and Iranian top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani during the second day of the 43rd Conference on Security Policy in Munich, 11 February 2007.

Supreme Leader, rogue operations by extremists aiming to derail moderate policies occurred. But today, in order to achieve maximum consensus, highly formalised tri- or bi-monthly meetings between the Supreme Leader and the Iranian elites are held. All influential figures of the Islamic Republic attend and it is at this occasion that the Iranian multipolar system finds its balance. Attendees at these meetings may influence foreign policy by approaching HNSC members and trying to persuade them of the validity of their positions. Strategic decisions like how to proceed on the nuclear issue in 2004 were taken in the same spirit: technical and political expertise was discussed in the HNSC, which in parallel to Ayatollah Rafsandjani, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Supreme Leader's office communicated their views to the Supreme Leader before a final decision was taken. The Foreign Ministry was therefore twice represented, on the ministerial level with the Foreign Minister and on the technical level within the negotiations team. Yet, after 2005, the Foreign Minister was sidelined and his role was obscured by the nuclear negotiator – until 2008 (see below).

The various institutions are controlled by figureheads who belong to different political factions (Rafsanjani to the modernist right, the IRGC to the fundamentalists etc). After elections these alignments can change, as happened when Mottaki from the traditionalist right replaced the reformist Kharrazi in the Foreign Ministry. In this context the role of Iran's first nuclear negotiator, Hojjatoleslam Dr. Hassan Rouhani, is worth remembering because he was (and still is) considered to be a revolutionary conservative with good connections to the reformist camp. Therefore his role was crucial for the then reformist government to muster the support of the political right. Iran's nuclear negotiators' room for manoeuvre was rather limited but there was enough flexibility to prepare the ground for serious decisions

like the 2004 Paris Agreement, when Iran suspended enrichment activities in order to reach a negotiated solution to the nuclear crisis with the EU.

Nuclear negotiations

Factional tensions led to the sacking in 2007 of Ali Larijani, who two years earlier had replaced Rouhani. Dr. Saeed Jalili, a member of the most right-wing circle within the fundamentalists, was appointed head of the HNSC and he therefore became Iran's nuclear negotiator. His style and methods quickly irritated the Europeans. But he too was constrained by the limits of his mandate: he had to continue talking to the EU (now in the P5+1 format) and was not allowed to risk a breakdown of talks with the international community, whilst at the same time insisting on Iran's right to nuclear enrichment. The Foreign Ministry came back to the diplomatic front in 2008 when the now famous letter which contained the new nuclear offer, which was signed by all P5+1 Foreign Ministers, was handed in to Foreign Minister Mottaki. The changed tone in Tehran should not obscure the fact that the same limitations continue to apply: talking to the international community does not mean giving up on Iran's 'right' of enrichment. Unless of course the Supreme Leader is convinced Iran could strike a favourable bargain with the international community.

In the end, Iran operates under an extremely finely-balanced political system – for better or for worse. The balance of the system is guaranteed by the Supreme Leader, who, as has already been pointed out, takes decisions on all important matters alone; where no decision on a given issue is forthcoming from the Supreme Leader, this should be interpreted as indicating an absence of consensus. No wonder outsiders find the Iranian system to be complicated.