



**INSTITUTE OF  
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

**web:** [www.issi.org.pk](http://www.issi.org.pk)  
**phone:** +92-920-4423, 24  
**fax:** +92-920-4658

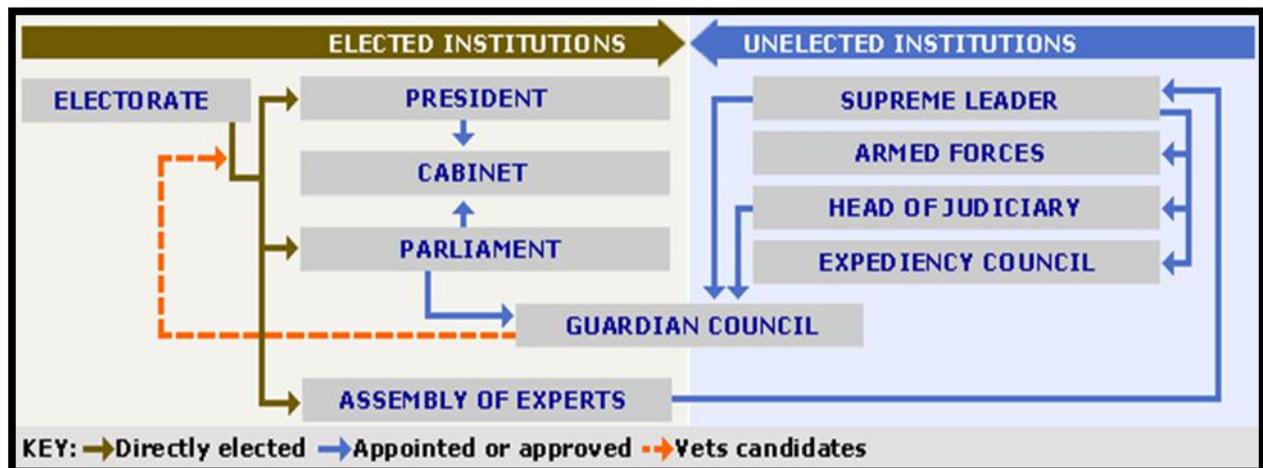
## Issue Brief

# Iranian Presidential Elections 2017: Understanding the Power Trail

**Fatima Raza**, Research Assistant, ISSI

April 10, 2017

All around the globe, elections season seems to be in full swing. Among almost 8 major elections that are in the offing, a significant one is expected in less than two months in our very neighborhood - the Iranian presidential elections (Wednesday, May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2017).<sup>1</sup> This electoral event shall determine not only the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), but also Tehran's external policy towards major powers of the world. Analysts sit poised to witness whether the conservative tide would take over the reformist wave that took the nation by storm back in 2013. This tug of war between the two sides keeps the contest rather engaging, but it can also be rather difficult to comprehend owing to the complex political system of the country. This brief attempts to present an overview and analysis of the upcoming elections with reference to the political institutions that influence the electoral process.



The above flowchart explains how different institutions in the Iranian political establishment are linked to one another. As seen in the chart, the Guardian Council stands to vet all candidates that wish to run for either of the elected institutions. Current President Hassan Rouhani has, amid rumors of disqualification and hesitancy, formulated his campaign headquarters under the aegis of the Reformist and Moderate party. However, the Guardian Council reserves the legal right to dismiss his candidacy if it deems wise, based on tangible evidence of his inadequacy. Rouhani has been under grave criticism by the Conservatives in the Iranian political stream due to his role in JCPOA and his promise to deliver economic ease at home by creating more jobs and investment opportunities. Some also floated the

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/12/ten-elections-to-watch-in-2017/510338/>

news that the Supreme Leader expressed his disdain regarding the failure in the deliverance of the economic relief promises that Rouhani's campaign had made. But no news of the Supreme Leader refuting Rouhani's bid to run for a second term has come to light as of yet.

While the conservatives backed by the religious leaders are wary of Rouhani's moderate ways, they have also not been able to bring forth a more charismatic opponent to Rouhani. Iranian political parties are basically polarized as the Principlists and the Reformists. Up till now the following candidates are expected to run this year as announced by both sides but the official registration process is still awaited:



Hamid Bahai has shown inclination to run independently while he is also being endorsed by the former president Mahmoud Ahmedi-nijad. The Principlists or the conservatives have been exceedingly critical of the moderate approach used by President Rouhani and his government during his first tenure. They nurse several grievances against the reformist president, but the two major ones are the signing of the Iranian nuclear deal and the lack of economic reforms which were promised in the aftermath of the lifting of sanctions against Iran. In a bid to unseat Rouhani, the conservatives have chosen the above mentioned candidates tentatively until the Supreme Leader approves of their candidacy. On the other hand, the reformist camp seems to be huddled staunchly for Rouhani; the tried and tested contender. Many are of the view that the reformist strategy of keeping a singular candidate might put their only chance in jeopardy, but there is also no guarantee that multiplicity of candidates can secure a win for the conservatives either. The conservatives have so far decided to wait for approval from the Supreme Leader regarding the credentials of their nominees after which they might choose just one candidate

out of the above mentioned choices. The catch is to hold off all candidates in favor of a singular more popular choice that could match Rouhani's fame and reduce the risk of vote polarization within the conservative ranks. Following are the individual details of the three popular conservative candidates in sequence of their seniority and credentials:



### Ibrahim Raisi

- Custodian of the Holy Shrine in Mashad
- Custodian of key religious sites (Astan-e-Qods Razavi)
- Favorite for the post of the supreme leader



### Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf

- Mayor of Tehran
- Former Chief of Iran's Police
- Lost to Rouhani in 2013 presidential elections



### Alireza Zakani

- Former MP
- Candidacy canceled by Guardian Council in 2013
- Vocal critic of the Iranian nuclear deal

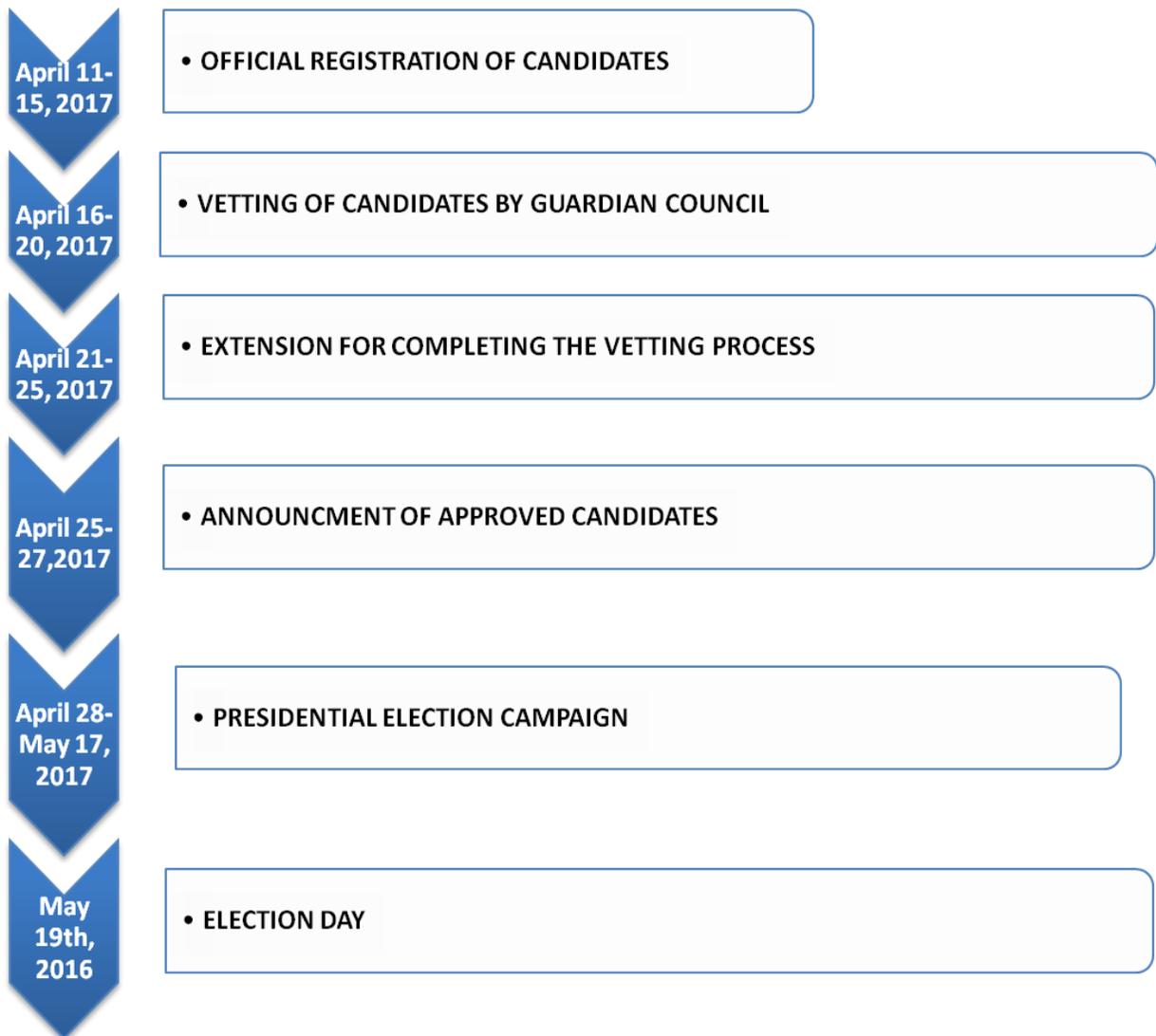


### Mostafa Mirsalim

- Former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance
- Former Advisor to President

On the opposite end, stands Rouhani, the current president of Iran and the only candidate of the reformist party. Rouhani's supporters earlier on floated the idea of announcing shadow candidates to help garner support for Rouhani. However, the idea has been dismissed but now the selection of merely one major candidate has also put him on the spot for the Guardian Council to cancel his run. Chances of this happening are rather slim, but the possibility exists nonetheless.

Speculations and observations however shall be put to rest in a few days' time when the official timeline of Presidential election events will commence. For sake of ease, the timeline of events is given down below:



As is evident from the timeline above, the announcement of the final names for Presidential elections shall mark the beginning of polarization of voters to either the conservative or the reformist camp. But as of now, the public opinion remains more tilted in favor of the sitting president despite the loudly voiced concerns against his political acumen and economic reforms.

Convention also favors his second term as almost all Presidents in Iran have enjoyed two successive terms in the office except for the impeached first President Abolhassan Banisadr. The candidates opposite Rouhani are also popular names with serious official positions but their public rapport does not match that of Rouhani. Rouhani will have to focus on certain problems areas in his presidency, the most prominent of which has been the economic dissatisfaction that the Iranian public has faced since the imposition of US sanctions. His diplomatic prowess in carving out the nuclear deal was welcomed by the

Iranian public with an overwhelming response, but his rival politicians have severely criticized the terms of the deal in question. With President Trump's erratic advent into the office, the deal has been put in question which provided Rouhani's opponents with an easy chance to direct their polemic opinion at his decision. In spite of the uncertainty shrouding these elections, the hope of the establishment remains focused on the task of ensuring fair elections with maximum voter turnout. Meanwhile eager eyes await May 19, 2017 which would reveal the name of the 12<sup>th</sup> President of the Islamic Republic of Iran.