

# USADIran Dispatch

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## USADI Commentary

### Political Turmoil in Iran: Theocracy vs. Theocracy lite

Iran's upcoming parliamentary election was further de-legitimized over the weekend when the watchdog Guardian Council disqualified thousands of applicants. The 12-member Council, tasked with vetting candidates for their "heart-felt" and "written" allegiance to the "Supreme Leader", rejected 80 incumbent parliament deputies including two deputy speakers.

The action plunged the ruling establishment into a major political crisis which, regardless of its final outcome, will further undermine an already fragile theocracy.

While some were quick to frame this latest political turmoil as a "reformers vs. hard-liners" tug-of-war, it is more like "theocracy vs. theocracy lite." The latter replicates the former, adding just a dose of smile to the mix. To be sure, there are factions within the political system, but the conflict is more a power grab rather than locking horns over fundamental issues facing society such as secular democracy. As noted by *Reuters* news agency, the so-called reformists "say they do not want to dismantle clerical rule -- only to place more emphasis on the law and citizens' rights." This explains why the search -- lasting some 25 years -- for a moderate trend within the clerical oligarchy has been an exercise in futility.

The cunning mullahs have perverted the pillars of Western democracies such as elections, the parliamentary system, etc., by making sure that those institutions would not pose a threat to their grip on power. This hybrid of theocratic soul and democratic gloss has created a make-believe democracy in Iran, giving ammunition to Tehran's advocates in Washington and Europe to justify "engagement" and "dialogue" with the clerics.

The Iranian government is already besieged by domestic social and political crises, and international pressure. Iran leaders cannot escape the reality of what has happened in the neighboring countries to the east and the west. Apparently, to better face these challenges a house clean-up was conducted by the Guardian Council. Khatami's faction, it seems, has outlived its usefulness. For his part, Khatami has shown his true colors by again opting for "legal" means and behind-the-scene negotiations to resolve the current stand-off, infuriating even his own brother.

The Council's move has made one thing clear once and for all: Under the current political structure founded on the doctrine of clerical rule, this regime is incapable of reform and moderation. A metamorphosis of the "Islamic Republic" from within by likes of Khatami is an impossible task and a reformed theocracy is a contradiction in terms.

Change will come from inside the country but outside this regime. Millions of Iranians are demanding fundamental change. We should not be shy about advocating a regime change in Iran. The reality on the ground dictates such a policy. We must help the Iranian people and opposition forces so that they can tear down the clerics' house of cards. Change in Iran is long overdue.

### Iran slams U.S. for "meddling"

PARIS - Iran's security chief accused Washington on Thursday of meddling in Tehran's domestic affairs with comments about a ban on candidates for a parliamentary election.

The head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rohani, criticized Washington, which said on Monday the Iranian government should disavow attempts by the Guardian Council to shape the election outcome.

"The United States never speaks uniquely out of their concern for the future of the Iranian people. They pursue their own interest and try to show hostility towards the Iranian people," Rohani told a news conference.

"The system and the legal structures of Iran are sufficiently strong and structured to solve any eventual difficulties," he added.

*Reuters, January 15, 2004*

### US will continue to speak on Iran

CAIRO - The United States said Tuesday it would continue to speak out on Iranian domestic politics and predicted its relationship with Tehran would remain complicated because of longstanding disagreements.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State William Burns, said Washington would openly advocate free and fair elections in Iran, just as in many other countries.

"We're going to continue to speak out in areas where we believe that it's clear that we need to see progress, whether it's in the behavior of the Iranian regime. ... or the importance of the Iranian people having an opportunity to express themselves through those kind of elections," he said.

*Reuters, January 13, 2004*

The US Alliance for Democratic Iran (USADI), is an independent, non-profit organization, which aims to advance a US policy on Iran that will benefit America's interests, through supporting Iranian people's aspirations for a democratic, secular, and peaceful government, free of tyranny, fundamentalism, weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism. The USADI is not affiliated with any government agencies, political groups or parties.

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## National Post (Editorial)

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### Iran's pretend democracy

Like many observers, we hoped that Iran's somewhat appreciative reaction to the outpouring of humanitarian assistance from the world community following last month's deadly earthquake might signal a move toward more moderate policies in Tehran. But that seems to have been naive. Even as the bodies of earthquake victims are still being recovered in the Iranian city of Bam, the country's theocrats are shredding the thin veneer of democracy behind which they operate.

As in a true democracy, Iran's parliament is elected by voters. But the choice at the polls is constrained: A conservative body called the Guardian Council has the power to vet all electoral candidates, a power it has traditionally used to pack the legislature with hard-line Islamists and stifle reform... The difference between Iran's "reformers" and "hardliners" is slight: Both generally support a theocratic vision for Iran. Secondly, given the failure of President Khatami to deliver any real change in the last seven years, most voters are cynical about this week's developments. Starved as they are for political freedom, there so far seems to be relatively little public support for the sit-in...

It once seemed possible that Tehran's theocrats would come to understand that Iranians -- students in particular -- no longer support the radical Islamist agenda that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power in 1979, and would grudgingly accede to democratic rule. But it now seems more probable that if Iran is to emerge as a free society, it will first have to undergo a true revolution, peaceful or otherwise.

## The Wall Street Journal Asia (Editorial)

January 15, 2004

### Iran's Real Reformers

Iran's supreme leader yesterday reportedly urged hardliners to reconsider their disqualification of more than 2,000 electoral candidates. That may defuse the political crisis mounting between two factions within Iran's political elite. But it doesn't mean the light of political liberalization is about to be let in.

Angered that 80 of their members have been disqualified from standing for re-election, the "reformists" were in their fourth day of a sit-in yesterday. Amid much international fanfare, this faction had gained control of the parliament in 1999, promising a degree of political liberalization. The promised liberalization never materialized and many of the disqualified candidates would likely have lost their seats in an election anyhow.

The fact that there have been no street protests in support of the "reformers" suggests much of the public has already lost faith in their ability to be agents of change. Ordinary Iranians won't risk the wrath of religious police just to ensure power for another faction. This loss of public support didn't deter the Iranian Guardian Council -- appointed by, and accountable only to, the Iranian Supreme theocrat, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei -- from seeking to curtail the parliamentarians' meager influence.

Beyond this scrum between competing factions, it's worth noting that the ground under the feet of Iran's ruling mullahs appears increasingly unstable. In June they faced student demonstrations demanding reforms to separate mosque and state, and in November the world discovered the mullahs had been lying about their nuclear program for 18 years. Last month the Bam earthquake took thousands of lives, and left the country's backwardness and the slowness of relief exposed for all to see.

Iran's under-30-year-olds -- who comprise a majority of the population -- have been leading the calls for a more liberal Muslim society. These are Iran's real reformers. But there is as yet no sign that their voices are being heard.

## Reuters

January 15, 2004

### Hardliners still hold strongest cards in Iran

TEHRAN - ... While the Guardian Council may have overplayed its hand by eliminating nearly half of the 8,200 aspiring candidates this time around, it gave itself more room to maneuver in the inevitable appeals and negotiations process that has followed. "The hardliners don't really need to compromise, but this will be their tactic," said analyst Saeed Leylaz. "Reformists will have to give in because they don't have public support." Many ordinary Iranians have lost faith in Khatami's ability to overcome conservative resistance. The public have shown no sign of rallying to the reformists' cause during this week's political standoff and are likely to be further disillusioned by the compromise that seems to have followed.

"This political infighting just turns people off. And when Khatami and the reformists announce they have accepted the Guardian Council's revised lists, even with misgivings, it will look to most people like a stitch-up," the first analyst said.