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Analytical Article

Iran's Political Demography and Presidential Elections: Can Reformists Rise to the Helm?

The first round of the Iranian presidential elections was a challenging test for the political system, achieving half the goal. The Iranian regime demonstrated its ability to maintain cohesion and continue functioning according to the constitution despite the crisis of former President Ebrahim Raisi's death, which was overshadowed by massive protests months earlier, rising inflation, and a "semi-regulated" confrontation with Israel. However,

the other half of the goal was not achieved as the participation rate in the first round of elections did not exceed 40%, despite the participation of a reformist candidate. This indicated that the majority of Iranians are less willing to engage with the governing institutions and have lost trust in the political elites of both the main conservative and reformist factions.

There is no doubt that the ruling system in Iran has proven its ability to overcome difficult challenges and has shown remarkable cohesion since Raisi's death, which could serve as a "rehearsal" for the more difficult test concerning the disappearance of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in the coming years or perhaps months.

Iran is considered a classic model of a constrained democracy, where the political system allows voters to choose the president and parliament, while the unelected position of the Supreme Leader remains the most important and controls the army, security forces, and military organizations. The Guardian Council also has the authority to disqualify any candidate who does not align with the Leader's policies from running in presidential or parliamentary elections.

Despite the "semi-authoritarian" nature of the Iranian political system, Iranian voters still relatively trust the ballot box as a tool for change. However, this trust has been clearly declining since the beginning of the 21st century, as participation rates in presidential and parliamentary elections have decreased by about 20% on average since 2000 to 2024. The participation rate in the first round of the presidential elections was 40%, the lowest in the history of presidential elections since 1980. Conversely, there are no indications that the political system in Iran faces a direct threat or the possibility of being changed by force, despite the clear decline in Iranian satisfaction with the system and its institutions over the past decade. It is also evident that the capabilities of the opposition in Iran do not exceed the potential of mobilizing to get their representatives into parliament or entering a strong competition in presidential elections. Scenarios of change by force promoted by organizations like the "MEK" seem impossible and are not even considered for discussion.

The political system in Iran has shown, over 45 years, a clear ability to overcome major crises, waves of popular protest, and radical street opposition, benefiting from the

complexity of its structures and the multiplicity of parallel structures and religious, executive, and unofficial authorities. This system is like a “spider’s web” that preys on any attempts at radical change, while also allowing room for both reformist and fundamentalist opposition to continue within it. It is a system that ensures public participation in the political process but makes their choices subject to oversight through its institutions. The presence of an elected president prevents public anger over bureaucratic practices and internal policy failures from being directed at the Supreme Leader’s institution. This equation is not always successful, but regardless of occasional failures, it still functions successfully more often than it fails.

In this context came the 2024 presidential elections following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian, and several system leaders in a helicopter crash near Azerbaijan. This crisis of the presidential vacancy has been witnessed twice before in the political system; the first was with the parliament’s dismissal of Abolhassan Baniśadr (Iran’s first president) in June 1981, when a temporary presidential council was established. The second came months later

after the assassination of President Mohammad Ali Rajai in August 1981, and a temporary presidential council was formed until presidential elections brought Ali Khamenei, who remained in office until he took the position of Supreme Leader.

Following Ebrahim Raisi’s death, the political system sought to muster its forces to prevent any disturbances by quickly and accurately applying the constitutional article on the presidential vacancy (Article 131), which states: “In the event of the death, dismissal, resignation, absence, or illness of the president for more than two months, or in the case of the end of the presidential term without the new president assuming his duties due to some obstacles or other matters, the First Vice President shall assume the president’s powers and responsibilities with the consent of the Supreme Leader... A council consisting of the Speaker of the Parliament, the Head of the Judiciary, and the First Vice President shall be formed. This council must make the necessary arrangements for the election of a new president within a maximum period of 50 days.” Indeed, the first round of presidential elections was held on June 28, 2024, just 40 days after Ebrahim Raisi’s death on May 19, 2024, clearly emphasizing

the continuity of elections in playing their functional role in renewing the system's legitimacy.

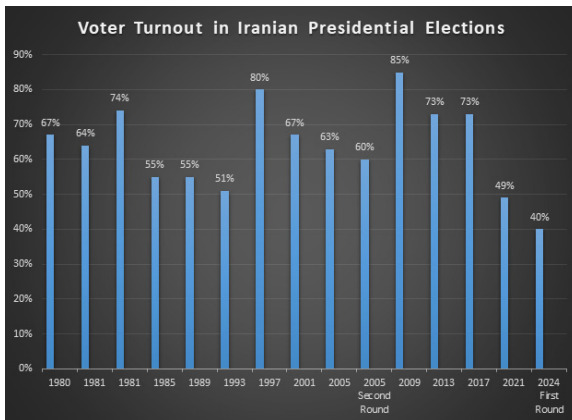
Participation in Elections: Reasons for Decline

The main question in the first round of the Iranian presidential elections was the participation rate, especially with the unprecedented abstention rate in the parliamentary elections held in March 2024, which led to conservatives regaining control of the parliament. However, this control was based on fragile popular legitimacy due to the low participation rate of only 41%.

Since Raisi's death, the Iranian regime has tried to overcome the dilemma of election participation through "restricted openness" by allowing the reformist candidate Massoud Pezeshkian to run. Despite this, the participation rate in the first round dropped to 40.1% compared to 48.8% in the 2021 presidential elections, which is even lower than the parliamentary elections in which most reformists did not participate and the lowest participation rate since the 1979 revolution.

Increasing election participation was the top priority for the regime, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei called on the Iranian people to participate in the elections, declaring it of utmost importance, followed by voting for the "most suitable candidate" who wholeheartedly believes in the principles of the revolution. Khamenei stated that elections are among "the tools that enable the Islamic Republic to triumph over the enemy," describing election day as a "day of great test," adding that a low participation rate makes "the enemy's tongue sharp," and calling for "silencing the tongues of the enemies" by intensifying participation. However, on the ground, the "internal enemy of the Wilayat al-Faqih had a sharp tongue" indeed.

Indicators pointed to a relatively high participation rate in the first round of the presidential elections, as the results of an opinion poll conducted by the "Mellat" institute affiliated with the Iranian Parliamentary Research Center, published just two days before the elections, showed that 45.7% decided to participate, while 31.6% were undecided and 22.6% confirmed they would not participate. However, the actual participation rate was disappointing despite the competition between the reformist candidate and conservative rivals.



The previous illustration shows that the first round of the 2024 presidential elections had the lowest participation rate in the history of presidential elections in Iran, even 9% lower than the 2021 elections in which the reformist faction did not participate, and less than half compared to the 2009 elections (85%), which witnessed the peak of the conflict between the reformist and conservative factions represented by the conflict between Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Mir Hossein Mousavi. Those elections sparked what became known as the “Green Movement” protests, which ended with many reformist leaders being placed under house arrest since then, including Mousavi.

In the first round, 24.535 million voters out of a total of 62 million eligible voters participated. The low participation rate in the first round raised questions about the reasons for this decline, which the regime leaders justified by the voters’

unpreparedness for early elections following Raisi’s death, and that the presidential elections were usually held simultaneously with municipal council elections, which garnered significant attention in villages and small towns, a thing which did not happen in these elections.

Some considered the participation rate a defeat for the ruling authority, which failed to reconcile with Iranians who no longer trust it due to events following the electoral processes in some previous cycles. The low participation rate sparked criticism about allowing a reformist candidate to run and threatening the “revolution” to gain “ballot box legitimacy,” which was not achieved by Pezeshkian’s presence among the candidates. This candidacy was warned against by Hossein Shariatmadari, editor-in-chief of the hardline “Kayhan” newspaper and a close friend of Khamenei, accusing Pezeshkian of being supported by some “leaders of sedition,” referring to Mohammad Khatami and other senior reformists who supported the 2009 protests.

Allowing Pezeshkian to run aimed primarily at increasing the election participation rate, a goal that was not achieved. However, the reformists

succeeded in reaching their goal with their candidate leading the first round amidst the low participation, which was the most surprising outcome of this round.

Traditionally, a high participation rate increased the chances of the reformist candidate and vice versa. But the first round of the presidential elections was an exception, with declining participation and the reformist candidate advancing in a new equation between participation rate and reformist chances.

The surprise can be traced back to most observers' assumption that in the event of a low participation rate, the "silent majority" would prefer to seek calm by electing Parliament Speaker Ghalibaf. As traditionally, conservatives win electoral processes where the participation rate drops below 50%.

Reasons for the Advancement of Reformists Amid Declining Participation Rates

The primary reason for the advancement of reformists despite



the decline in participation rates is the demographic transformation that Iran has witnessed over the past 20 years. The urban population has risen to over 74% of the total population, with Tehran alone (10 million people) representing about 11% of the total population. Adding the cities of Mashhad, Tabriz, Isfahan, Karaj, and Shiraz, this figure exceeds 30% of the population. This urban shift has intersected with a rise in university education, with university students making up about 8% of the adult population (19 years and older) in Iran, 60% of whom are women.

This demographic situation partially answers the question of political participation. According to the equations of the school of political demography, urban residents with university education are less inclined to participate in elections in constrained democratic systems, a situation that largely applies to Iran.

The “progressive” demographic shift in Iran has, like water carving through rock, over three decades, drawn a new political map. Conservatives refuse to acknowledge this change because it signifies the nearing end and the incompatibility of “Wilayat al-Faqih” (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) with progress and education. Reformists, on the other hand, don’t see it entirely positively because it adds significant burdens in very tough battles, especially in areas like the hijab and women’s liberation. However, this transformation has occurred, and no one can revert it now.

The Iranian regime has reaped the results of its “real” success in accelerating urbanization in the country since the late 1980s and increasing university enrollment rates. This has created large, less-voting urban blocks compared to the rural conservative blocks that were the numerical majority and represented the majority of the population in the 1980s and 1990s.

This demographic explanation makes the possibility of increasing voter turnout contingent on a major political crisis or an unprecedented mobilization of educated urban residents. This is only possible if the election results lead to a “dramatic”

shift in the political system in favor of these demographic blocks, which was not available in the first round of the 2024 elections, despite the reformists running a candidate in this battle.

The same factor explains why the reformist candidate Masoud Pezeshkian received about 10.4 million votes, Saeed Jalili about 9.4 million votes, while Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf received only 3.3 million votes, and Mostafa Pourmohammadi received 158,000 votes.

These votes for Pezeshkian come from voters in major cities who have more years of education and are aged 30 and above. This “block” has been the traditional audience for the reformist movement since 1997. Therefore, any attempt by the reformist movement to win the presidential election in the second round will primarily rely on attracting votes from educated urban residents under 30, women, and minorities, to surpass the 13 million votes likely to be garnered by the conservative movement in the July 5 round.

Estimates also indicate that participation rates have declined in minority areas, particularly Kurdistan, where participation dropped from 37% in 2021 to just 23%,

and Balochistan, where participation fell from 62% to 40%. Participation also declined in Gilan, one of the centers of the 2022 women's protests, from 57% to 32%.

The success of the reformist movement in winning the second round depends on a discourse focused on supporting women's rights, rejecting security interventions, and limiting the powers of the morality police in dealing with women, alongside raising expectations among minorities, primarily Kurds and Balochs, from the new president. Concurrently, Pezeshkian will also rely on the significant support he receives from Azeris in East and West Azerbaijan provinces.

The struggle between the two movements remains over what is called the "gray votes," the undecided votes that -according to the researcher- do not exceed 10% of the votes. Attempting to raise their value in Iranian elections is akin to an "Iranian" translation of the idea of the "swing block" in American elections, which does not clearly apply to Iran. The researcher believes that electoral indecision pertains not to voting for any candidate but to whether to participate or not, as the social, educational, and geographical

dividing lines between the reformist and conservative audiences have become clearer under the impact of the crises the country has witnessed since 2009, through the intense protests in 2017, 2019, and 2022.

Understanding the presidential elections in their second round requires comprehending the political system, its main movements, ethnic divisions, and demographic transformations:

The Political System in Iran

Following the death of Supreme Leader Khomeini in 1989, Iran's political system sought to adopt more realistic policies in terms of foreign relations and internal economic



and social policies to overcome the crisis of the revolution leader's demise. These policies reached their peak with the rise of reformist Mohammad Khatami to power in 1997. However, the religious and military elite's refusal to hand over their powers and authorities prevented the continuation of this reformist trend and the adoption of more pragmatic policies. Instead, it led to extremely limited changes in both foreign and domestic spheres and the return of the conservative movement to the forefront and the leadership of the state.

The decision-making process in the Iranian political system is highly complex. In addition to official institutions such as the Supreme Leader, the President, the Parliament (Majles), the Guardian Council, the Expediency Discernment Council, and the Assembly of Experts, there are powerful unofficial networks. These unofficial networks sometimes have more authority than the official institutions.

The Supreme Leader represents the center of power in Iran and enjoys extensive powers, including determining the general policies of the political system, supervising the government's performance to

implement these policies, leading the Iranian army, declaring war, and signing peace treaties. The Supreme Leader also has the authority to appoint half of the Guardian Council members and the head of the judiciary. Since Khomeini's death, the Guardian Council's presence has increased due to the absence of the founding president, who had a special charisma and moral and popular influence in Iran.

The Guardian Council is one of the most important institutions in the system, as it has the authority to determine candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections to prevent any candidate opposing the system of Wilayat al-Faqih from reaching political power. The council consists of 12 members, half of whom are jurists in the Ja'fari school appointed by the Supreme Leader, and six jurists nominated by the head of the judiciary and approved by the parliament.

The Assembly of Experts comprises 86 clerics responsible for selecting the Supreme Leader. This council has the "unused" authority to impeach the Supreme Leader and plays a crucial role in choosing his successor. With Ali Khamenei reaching 85 years of age, attention in Tehran is currently focused on this council, especially

after the death of Ebrahim Raisi, the primary candidate to come after Khamenei.

The Expediency Discernment Council is a council whose members are all appointed by the Supreme Leader. It is responsible for advising the Supreme Leader and proposing the state's political guidelines. Khomeini established this body in 1988 to reduce the power of the Guardian Council. Khamenei strengthened the Expediency Discernment Council's powers in 2005, granting it supervisory authority over all branches of government, in an attempt to limit the powers of then-President Ahmadinejad.

Amid these institutions under the Supreme Leader, the role of the President is an executive one with popular importance to maintain the semi-democratic nature of Iran's political system. The 1979 Constitution created the positions of President and Prime Minister, placing most decision-making powers in the hands of the Prime Minister. In 1989, Khomeini changed this system, abolishing the Prime Minister's position and transferring its powers to the President, who was then Ali Khamenei. The Iranian President has the authority to supervise planning,

the budget, and the National Security Council. The President is elected through popular vote, but the Supreme Leader must approve his assumption of office. The President does not have authority over the military or security forces, as the Supreme Leader holds ultimate authority in political, religious, and military matters.

Members of the Parliament (Majles) are elected, as is the President. Parliamentary candidates, like presidential candidates, are subject to vetting by the Guardian Council. Since the 2004 parliamentary elections, the Guardian Council has taken a stricter stance on allowing reformists to run for parliament, contributing to the conservative and fundamentalist dominance in the Majles.

Militarily, the Revolutionary Guard is the most significant military force alongside the army. The role of the Revolutionary Guard has doubled since the Iran-Iraq war, with over 150,000 members and substantial air, land, and sea capabilities. The most prominent aspect is the political power of this military organization, which dominates authority through its members holding most executive positions and managing the most important public economic institutions.

The Supreme National Security Council, led by the elected President and including representatives from the Revolutionary Guard, the army, and security agencies, is the most important institution. It is responsible for setting defense and national security policies and is the most prominent institution in setting Iran's foreign policies.

Alongside these official institutions, the “charitable-Islamic” or “Bonyad” institutions represent a parallel authority in Iran through their ability to redistribute income and create a ‘clientelist’ relationship with a significant section of society. Estimates indicate that these “charitable” institutions control up to 40% of Iran's non-oil resources. The largest of these institutions is the “Foundation of the Oppressed,” which is estimated to have amassed assets worth \$12 billion and employs 400,000 people. According to an official statement, the “Foundation of the Oppressed” had revenues exceeding \$2.5 billion in 2020.

The “Bonyad” institutions, which are the second-largest economic entity in Iran after the National Iranian Oil Company, own 200 factories and dozens of financial companies, including a bank, as well as numerous

real estate properties.

Although these charitable Islamic institutions existed before 1979, they managed confiscated assets from the Shah and his supporters after the Shah's fall, transforming them into a significant economic force, especially with the Supreme Leader supervising their activities.

In addition to the “Foundation of the Oppressed,” there is also the “Astan” Foundation, which oversees the shrine of Ali al-Ridha in Mashhad, and “Setad”, which supervises real estate and housing, along with a group of other entities under Khamenei's direct supervision. For example, the “Astan” Foundation controls 90% of the arable land in the Mashhad area and owns other assets, including universities and the Coca-Cola bottling company.

These institutions operate outside the government's scope and were exempted from paying taxes under a decree by Khamenei in 1993. They are not subject to government audits and are not accountable to the Iranian parliament.

The strong economic and political role of the “Bonyad” in Iran strengthens the conservative movement politically and prevents any possibility for the

reformist movement to realistically compete with the conservative movement. These institutions also play a crucial role in the political decision-making process in Iran by strengthening the Supreme Leader's power against his opponents, alongside the intertwined relationships between their leaders and the regime's officials. Alongside the "Bonyad," Iran's security and military forces play a major role in the decision-making process through its foundational roles inside the government, as well as through its representation in the unofficial networks.

Main Political Currents and the 2024 Elections

Despite the Supreme Leader's control over political decisions in Iran, the political scene includes many parties and political orientations that the regime has maintained to infuse vitality into the decision-making process and provide popular and electoral legitimacy.

The political landscape in Iran comprises various currents and parties representing different segments of society and political and ideological

viewpoints. These can be divided into two main groups: traditional conservatives and reformists. Overall, the right to change the Wilayat al-Faqih system is unavailable, given the absence of the principle of power rotation, which has been reduced to competition between the two poles of the ruling elite: the "reformists" and the "conservatives." Both belong to the ruling class that supports the "Wilayat al-Faqih." The "conservatives" support the dominance of the Supreme Leader and seek to maintain religious ideology in the political arena, while the "reformists" call for more freedom and democracy within the legislative system within the boundaries of the "Wilayat al-Faqih."

The general principles of the reformists revolve around seeking to reduce the powers and authorities of the clergy, strengthening civil institutions, adopting more liberal stances towards ethnic and religious minorities, and building a more moderate foreign policy with a relative restriction on the powers of the "Revolutionary Guard." This current has historically been led by Mohammad Khatami, and in the last presidential elections, it was represented by Masoud Pezeshkian. Former reformist President Hassan

Rouhani supported Pezeshkian, declaring him as the hope to improve relations globally.

Pezeshkian, a parliamentary deputy from Azerbaijan, enjoys the support of the reformists. He calls for “constructive relations” with Washington and European capitals to “bring Iran out of isolation.” He has criticized the regime’s policy on enforcing the hijab. Pezeshkian, a doctor, served as the Minister of Health during the reformist President Mohammad Khatami’s term from 2001 to 2005. He has been a member of parliament since 2008. Pezeshkian has not hidden his criticism of the political system for its lack of transparency regarding the death of Iranian Kurdish woman Mahsa Amini in 2022. He was barred from running in the 2021 presidential elections by a decision from the Guardian Council.

The reformists sought in the 2024 elections to end the phase of “eclipse” that began in 2017 due to Rouhani’s failure to fulfill his election promises, both economically and socially. The reformists faced intense attacks from conservative and fundamentalist circles, along with the disappointment of the Iranian street, which took to the streets in large

protests multiple times against the deteriorating economic conditions and high costs of living. Rouhani’s poor management of the economic file even forced some reformists to distance themselves from him. The pressure on the reformists was intensified by former U.S. President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the nuclear deal, which the reformists had staunchly defended. The decisive blow to this current came from the Guardian Council by excluding most reformist candidates in elections since 2020, paving the way for conservative control of parliament and the presidency, pushing the reformist current to the margins of governing institutions.

Pezeshkian’s candidacy itself was a victory for the Iranian reformist front, which linked participation in the presidential elections to the Guardian Council’s approval of one reformist candidate out of three (Eshaq Jahangiri, Abbas Akhoundi, and Masoud Pezeshkian) they presented.

This is the first time since 2009 that the reformists have participated in Iranian presidential elections with a candidate of their own. The 2009 elections witnessed protests over the presidential election results

after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was declared the winner. Since then, the Guardian Council has rejected their top candidates, except in 2017 when Jahangiri was a shadow candidate for Rouhani, whom the reformists supported in 2013 and 2017, leading him to the presidency.

The traditional conservative current had two main candidates in the 2024 presidential elections: Ghalibaf and Jalili. Both have clear ties with the “Revolutionary Guard” and represent the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s current.

The traditional conservative current adopts a firm stance in defending the Wilayat al-Faqih institution and sees consolidating the revolution internally as its supreme goal. This current holds very conservative views on social and cultural issues and is the least democratic among Iranian factions. It has created an implicit social contract in its favor: “In a sense, the hardliners offer the population their own pact, whereby the public surrenders its right to opposition in exchange for spiritual salvation.”

Ghalibaf, the Speaker of Parliament, is a former commander in the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and an ally of Khamenei. He has run for president

twice before and failed, opting to withdraw from a third attempt in the 2017 elections to avoid splitting conservative votes, supporting the late President Ebrahim Raisi. Ghalibaf resigned from the Revolutionary Guard in 2005 to run in the presidential elections, and after his campaign failed, he was appointed Mayor of Tehran with the Supreme Leader’s support, holding the position for 12 years.

Saeed Jalili, a diplomat from the ultra-conservative camp, lost his right leg in the 1980s while fighting with the “Revolutionary Guard” during the Iran-Iraq war. Jalili has declared himself a staunch believer in the theory of “Wilayat al-Faqih” or the rule of the Supreme Leader. Starting in 2007, Jalili, appointed by Khamenei, served as the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council for five years, a position that made him the chief negotiator on the nuclear file. He also worked for four years in Khamenei’s office and participated in the 2013 presidential elections. After serving as Deputy Foreign Minister, Khamenei appointed him in 2013 as a member of the Expediency Discernment Council.

The conservative camp in Iran is far from homogeneous. The March 2024

parliamentary elections highlighted these internal divisions, with different conservative groups competing, leading to the loss of several seats from the main conservative list led by Ghalibaf to more hardline groups led by clerics and conservative activists. These divisions benefited the reformist candidate Pezeshkian in the presidential elections.

The main fundamentalist candidate in these elections was the cleric Mostafa Pourmohammadi, who served as Minister of the Interior during the first term of former President Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2008. He also served as Deputy Minister of Intelligence (internal security) from 1990 to 1999. Pourmohammadi's chances were slim from the beginning, ultimately receiving fewer than 160,000 votes, less than 1% of the votes.

Ethnic and Religious Divisions

Ethnic divisions in Iran do not represent a direct threat to the political system. However, the regime has thus far failed to resolve the crises among the various ethnicities within the country, especially given the lack of real representation for minorities

in the Islamic Consultative Assembly or the regional and local councils. The elected councils also suffer from weakness in the face of parallel institutions.

The most notable attempts to unify or create an Iranian nationalism came at the hands of the modernizing Shah regime, which expanded the central government's administrative control to the peripheries and promoted the Persian language and culture to forcibly integrate minorities. After the 1979 revolution, Khomeini took a different path but with similar inclinations, emphasizing the "Shiite" religious identity, which was by definition supra-national and supra-ethnic. However, like the Pahlavi campaign of "Persianization," it refused to acknowledge the diversity within Iran.

During the Iran-Iraq war, the "Wilayat al-Faqih" regime sought to reinforce a shared Iranian identity based on both nationalism and religious identity, a mission that continues to this day. Iran faces the challenge of being a state and empire with a long history dating back thousands of years while not being a unified nation like major countries in the region, such as Egypt. This legacy has forced successive regimes to deal with competing

identities and ethnicities that do not necessarily align with the geographic borders of the state.

Linguistically, Iran's population can be divided into eight linguistic groups: Persian, Azeri, Turkish, Balochi, Kurdish, Hyrcanian, Lari, and Lur. There are also three major groups: Persians, Mazandarani and Gilaki, and Azeris, along with relatively smaller groups like the Baloch.

Persians represent about half of Iran's population. This dominant ethnicity seeks to promote Iranian nationalism through its identity and the Twelver Shiite sect. Minority demands focus on the distribution of government jobs and the division of state revenues, which were politically manifested in their support for former reformist President Mohammad Khatami. Historically, Persians are a large population group that settled in the central Iranian plateau, with this majority group concentrated in central, eastern, and southern provinces.

The Azeris are the largest ethnicity after the Persians, making up about 25% of the population (the reformist candidate in the presidential election, Pezeshkian, belongs to this group). This ethnic group has shown clear

support for the political system and the Iranian state, explicitly backing the regime during the Iran-Iraq war. Thus, they are a minority united with the Persian majority in general orientations and represent a pillar of the regime rather than a threat to it. Azeris are concentrated in northwest and west Iran, in a broad area currently including the provinces of West Azerbaijan, East Azerbaijan, Ardabil, and Zanjan.

Along with Persians and Azerbaijanis (who together make up 75% of the population), there are other ethnicities, including Gilaki and Mazandarani (in the north), Kurds, Arabs, Baloch, and Turkmen. Iran's ethnic and linguistic diversity contrasts with its religious homogeneity, as Twelver Shiites make up about 89% of the total population, with the Sunni minority concentrated among the Kurds, Baloch, and Turkmen.

The intertwined identities within Iran have posed political challenges to successive regimes. Azeris and Kurds have often demanded greater cultural freedom and a higher degree of local autonomy in the face of Tehran. These two groups enjoy a critical mass unified geographically. Moreover, large communities of shared ethnicities live in neighboring

countries. Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi managed to thwart and tone down separatist tendencies among these two groups. Currently, only very small, limited-impact groups among these two ethnicities seek to separate from Iran. When Reza Khan took power in 1925, a large part of Iran was outside the central government's control, and political movements (such as the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909) called for greater decentralization of power. The Shah's attempts to consolidate the Iranian state faced a series of obstacles, including linguistic differences, weak central authority, and the predominance of rural over urban populations. Confronted with these challenges, the Shah adopted repressive policies targeting "top-down modernization" through the forced settlement of thousands of nomads, banning the wearing of the veil, suppressing non-Persian minorities, centralizing power in Tehran, and establishing a unified education system. The Shah's regime aimed at national unity by imposing the language and forcibly concealing ethnic diversities and local sects manifested through clothing or language.

One consequence of this policy was the concentration of development

in the central Persian region of Iran, neglecting areas where Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baloch, and Turkmen reside. Tehran, Isfahan, and Mazandaran became centers of industry and modernization at the expense of non-Persian areas such as Tabriz. Marginalization of the peripheries continued under Mohammad Reza Shah's rule (1941-1979). On the eve of the revolution, provinces with high populations of Azeris, Kurds, and Baloch significantly lagged behind Persian areas in health, education, and income indicators.

Minorities' rejection of the Shah's policies became evident at the end of World War II when, under Soviet forces' control in the north, autonomous movements emerged among Azeri and Kurdish populations, culminating in the establishment of the Azerbaijan and Kurdistan governments in 1945 and 1946. These governments did not last after the Soviet forces withdrew, and the regime regained control.

These separatist movements re-emerged during protests against the Shah's policies before 1979. Azeris, in particular, proved to be a solid bloc challenging the Shah's legitimacy, ultimately forcing him to abdicate the throne. As in the case

of Azeri activism under Mohammad Mossadegh's government in 1953, the community's goals were primarily "entirely Iranian," coupled with some narrow ethnic demands. Since 1977, Tabriz University has been a center for student protests and anti-regime activities in Iran.

In the current Iranian regime, Shiite Islam forms the basis of national identity. The Islamic Republic has founded its legitimacy on a form of cultural hegemony, as well as Iranian nationalism, using religion's influence to transcend ethnic and tribal loyalties. Since the revolution, being Iranian has been largely defined by shared faith (Shiite), a shared culture, and a shared history. This central religious formulation of Iranian identity has greatly benefited the regime when other loyalties challenge its authority. This Shiite religious identity has led to the marginalization and varying degrees of repression of Sunnis and Bahais in Iran since 1979.

Ethnic and religious minorities have benefited from the rise of reformists like Mohammad Khatami and Hassan Rouhani to executive power positions over the past two decades. The reformist movement sought to mobilize these minorities in parliamentary and presidential

elections, serving as a decisive factor in many electoral rounds. In return, reformists have sought to expand linguistic rights for non-Persian minorities and adopted the slogan "Iran for all Iranians," promoting programs granting minorities their social and cultural rights.

Poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment data clearly indicate the continued legacy of minority marginalization in Iran, with the highest rates of poverty, illiteracy, and unemployment concentrated in Kurdistan and Balochistan amid "huge gaps" in development indicators favoring central regions where the Persian majority is concentrated.

Separatist calls -though weak- are focused among small groups of Turkmen, Baloch, Arabs, and Kurds, demanding some form of autonomy and occasionally raising banners of "complete separation" from Iran. These movements are limited but almost entirely absent in East and West Azerbaijan due to the integration of Azeris into the political system based on the overwhelming majority of Twelver Shiites. This integration did not happen overnight but took a long and difficult path, with Azeri opposition boycotting the 1979 referendum on establishing

the republic and the first presidential elections. This period witnessed an open conflict between Khomeini's loyalist clerics and Azeri clerics. Khomeini's loyalist clerics at the time launched a fierce attack on Ayatollah Kazem Shariatmadari, an influential Azeri cleric and Marja who opposed Wilayat al-Faqih.

Shariatmadari enjoyed significant popularity in the Azerbaijani provinces. His confrontation with Khomeini was interpreted as symbolizing the broader conflict between ethnic minorities seeking some degree of autonomy in the new Iran and those advocating for a strong center and continued Persian dominance. Ultimately, Shariatmadari's support for local activists, opposition to Wilayat al-Faqih, and criticism of Khomeini's continuation of the war with Iraq led to his house arrest until his death in 1985.

Since the mid-1980s, Khomeini and the new regime managed to rally support in the Azerbaijani provinces through the war with Iraq, which posed a clear threat to the lives of East and West Azerbaijan residents, in addition to the historical popular rejection among Azeris of "Arab" expansion into their lands.

The Iranian regime continued to soothe Azerbaijan's residents by emphasizing their significant contributions to Iranian history and state defense. This does not negate the existence of relative dissatisfaction among Azeris with the central government's policies towards Azerbaijan and the marginalization of their language and culture.

In the past two decades, the Azeri minority has increasingly played a role in political life, often determining the electoral game rules, as seen in the recent presidential election with the candidacy of Pezeshkian. The Azeri minority has consistently supported a more democratic Iran and does not endorse any separatist rhetoric but rather serves as an advanced center for defending democracy, especially given the continued democratic movements' activism at Tabriz University.

As for the Kurds in Iran, they represent less than 10% of the population but are simultaneously the most sensitive issue for the ruling regime. Over half a century, the regime has failed to convince the Kurds to integrate, unlike the Azeris; they are a "hard-to-handle" minority less amenable to integration.

While Azeris adopted the Twelver Shiite sect, a large portion of Kurds are Sunnis, making them more represented in the bureaucratic apparatus and religious institutions, with even Supreme Leader Khamenei being of Azerbaijani origin, compared to the complete marginalization of Kurds. The situation is further complicated by the accusation of treason that has plagued Iran's Kurds since the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran allied with Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq war.

The relationship between the Kurdish minority and the political system in Tehran is tense and fraught with caution from both sides. The Kurds are the minority most aspiring for independence from Iran, especially after the establishment of the Kurdistan Region in Iraq and the autonomous Kurdish administration in northeast Syria. The Iranian regime currently maintains a heavy security presence in Kurdish provinces and direct control over the population amid ongoing concerns about Kurdish separatist tendencies. However, overall, the Kurdish minority in Iran remains a source of opposition to the regime but does not alone pose an existential challenge to the state.

As for the Baloch, they are an

ethnic, linguistic, and religious minority primarily concentrated in the southeastern part of the Iranian plateau on the border with Pakistan. They were nomadic people, mostly Sunnis, who established what was known as "Baluchistan" in the twelfth century, now divided between Iran, Pakistan, and Afghanistan. The Baloch population in Iran is about 2.7 million, around 3% of the total population.

The Mazandarani, who settled in rural areas along the Caspian Sea and separated from the plateau Persians, are a distinct ethnicity but very close to Persians, with a historically more socially liberal culture. This group belongs to the Shiite sect, facilitating their integration into the political system after the 1979 revolution.

In the past, the Turkmen were called "Ghuzz." Before a century and a half ago, they led a simple nomadic life and did not settle in cities and towns until the Soviet regime limited their movement, concentrating them in the Turkmen desert (northeastern Iran), which became part of the Iranian state. The Turkmen, mostly Sunnis, number no more than two million, about 2.5% of the total population, residing in the provinces of Golestan, Razavi Khorasan, and North Khorasan.

Ethnic and religious minorities in Iran, concentrated in marginalized areas, represent a strategic reservoir for the protest vote against the conservative current and supporters of Wilayat al-Faqih. Consequently, they are a primary supporter of the reformist current if voter turnout rises in parliamentary or presidential elections. The 1997, 2001, and 2017 presidential elections were clear examples of the extent of these minorities' support for reformist candidates, tipping the scales in their favor over conservative candidates.

The Population: End of Growth and the “Elderly” Phase

Iran is one of the largest countries in the region by population, alongside Egypt and Turkey, with a total of 87 million people. However, it currently has the slowest population growth in the region. Iran's population growth rate is clearly declining, reaching about 0.6% in 2023 compared to 1.2% in 2020. The decline in birth rates in Iran represents a national security issue, with the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei criticizing the low birth rate and pushing for policies to increase it as a strategic goal.

The population of Iran has doubled since the early 1980s from 42 million to 87 million in 2024. However, despite the political regime's attempts since 2020 to increase the birth rate, it has failed to convince Iranians of this policy. The number of births in 2023 declined to 1.057 million children compared to 1.075 million in 2022, a decrease of 18,000 children, while the number of births in 2016 was about 1.488 million children. According to Iranian data, the government spends about \$500 million annually to increase the number of births, yet the number of children decreases every year.

The decline in birth rates is a central issue for the Iranian political regime, which hoped the population would increase from 87 million in 2024 to 150 million before 2050. This goal seems impossible given the clear decline in population growth rates, which stood at 0.6% in 2023 compared to 1.23% in 2020.

In the mid-1980s, Iran's population growth rate was about 4.2% annually, the highest at the time in the Middle East. However, by 1999, fertility rates had dropped to less than two children per woman of reproductive age, below the replacement rate. The decline in fertility began in Iran in 1986,

peaking that year at 6.8 children per woman, and within just 30 years, it fell to 2.1 children per woman in 2006, reaching 1.7 children in 2023, a rate below the natural replacement rate (2.1 children per woman). This sharp decline in fertility reflected profound societal changes in Iran, including rising education levels, women's participation in the workforce, and significant rural-to-urban migration.

The decline in population growth rates in Iran has eased government pressures to provide healthcare and educational services for children. However, it has also led to a noticeable decline in the young workforce and increased expenses for the elderly, confronting Iranian society with an “aging” crisis.

In response to the sharp decline in population growth, the parliament passed a law in March 2021 to boost population growth. The law requires government bodies and the state to encourage marriage and childbirth, imposes penalties for non-compliance, and bans any activities promoting birth control. It also prohibits government health services from providing family planning services, such as contraception. The law, named the Family Support and Population Renewal Law, includes

incentives like increased child benefit payments, interest-free loans, and free land allocation for families with more than three children. Concurrently, the marriage rate in Iran has decreased by 40% since 2010, and the birth rate has declined by 35% during the same period.

The significant rise in urbanization at the expense of rural areas has also contributed to the decline in population growth. In 1970, only 42% of Iran's population lived in urban areas; by 2000, 62% were urbanized, and the percentage reached about 77.3% in 2023.

Most major Iranian cities have experienced rapid growth, in some cases faster than Tehran. Although Tehran attracts migrants from all ethnic groups, many cities have ethnic flavors, such as Tabriz, which has a majority Azeri population.

Rural-to-urban migration and the resulting city growth have changed the nature of Iranian society. As shown in presidential elections, poor urban citizens, mostly with rural origins, have a clear sense of grievance and reject the widespread corruption in Iranian society and the wealth it has brought to some prominent individuals politically. At the same

time, urban life has changed the social norms and behavior of those coming from rural areas, with urban values and perspectives being gradually instilled among newcomers. Urban Iranians have smaller families, are better educated, and tend to be less religious than rural Iranians.

The rapid growth of small cities like Mashhad, Isfahan, and Shiraz accelerates the demand for public investment in infrastructure, which Tehran has traditionally disproportionately benefited from. Urbanization has also intensified the potential economic and political costs of government policies.

One of the current population issues facing the Iranian government is the “aging” crisis. According to Iranian reports, it is expected that by 2030, the elderly will make up about 33% of the total population. Iranian reports indicate that the elderly are concentrated in Gilan, with about 17%, more than 12% in Mazandaran, followed by Hamadan, East Azerbaijan, Isfahan, and Tehran.

Statistics show that 10.7% of Iran's population is currently elderly (over 60 years old), which represents 9.3 million people compared to just 5% in 1950. This large number of elderly

people does not receive adequate healthcare, with one bed for every 640 elderly people in Iran compared to one bed for every 18 in developed countries.

Iran's aging crisis will begin in 2031. By 2039, it will enter a “super-aging” crisis, peaking in 2051. Iran faces an increase in the elderly population by about 14% in 2031. Iran is expected to be among the largest countries in the world in terms of aging over the next three decades.

This large elderly population hampers economic growth in Iran due to the declining percentage of young people of working age and the rising dependency ratio. At the same time, the increasing number of elderly people acts as a buffer protecting the political system from the expansion of political unrest led by young people and university students.

According to Iranian observers, many middle-aged adults sympathize with the younger generation participating in protests. However, their family and professional commitments prevent them from joining. The key to political change in Iran largely lies in the ability to mobilize what Hamid Reza Jalaeipour calls the “silent majority.” He estimated this

“silent majority” to be about 70% of Iranians in an article published in July 2023. This “silent majority” does not support the repressive policies of the authorities and shares the youth’s aspirations without joining their protests, remaining supportive of gradual and reformist transformation of the political system. This generation, those over 60 years old, participated in the revolution and thus still prioritizes the stability of the regime and maintaining the moral and material benefits they have gained, whether significant or modest.

The Youth: A Smaller, Urban, and More Open-Minded Demographic

Youth (ages 15-29) constitute about 21.2% of Iran’s population, approximately 18 million people. The age group from 18 to 40 years old makes up about 34.5% of the population, totaling around 29 million people, which is nearly 46% of the total registered voters.

The Iranian society might initially appear young, but as mentioned earlier, it is rapidly transitioning to an “aging” society. Youth constitute

36% of the active population, with the economically active population (ages 15-64) being about 58 million people. The active youth demographic (ages 18-40) still represents less than half of the voters in Iran, giving conservative currents a clear advantage in mobilizing the older age groups (over 50 years old) who experienced the revolution in one way or another.

Educated youth in Iran have become a significant force in weakening the authority of the “Wilayat al-Faqih” over the past two decades. It is evident that university students and newly graduated youth have a deep gap with the religious leadership, with clear aspirations for change or emigration, making them the main force in protests that have taken place since 2009. Youth were at the forefront during the “Green Movement” supporting Mir Hossein Mousavi, as well as during the protests of 2017, 2019, and 2022.

This “rebellious” generation is a product of the Iranian revolution’s success in achieving the strategy of “education for all.” This generation is smaller in number and proportion to the society due to mothers’ extensive participation in the workforce and their higher education levels since the 1990s. They are also more educated

thanks to the spread of universities in Iranian cities.

Over the past 15 years, youth protests have taken a more radical turn, outright rejecting “Wilayat al-Faqih” without proposing an alternative political system. The starting point was the reformist elites’ ability in 2009 to mobilize youth to protest the political system’s shortcomings. The activists in the Green Movement held significant social and political capital, rejected violence, and aspired for peaceful transitions, aiming to establish democratic foundations to change the system from within through elections and participation in an institutional political space.

However, in 2017, protesters raised their demands to openly reject Wilayat al-Faqih with slogans like “Death to Khamenei.” This pushed the reformist current to step back and not support the violent protests that lasted for 10 consecutive days. Most reformist figures, led by Mohammad Khatami, took a stance against the protesters, disappointing voters who had re-elected Hassan Rouhani in 2017, hoping for political and economic openness.

In a new peak in 2019, the poor urban population emerged in protests

carrying a social discourse against institutional corruption and the extreme wealth of the ruling elites. These protests revealed that the popular classes were no longer an exclusive stronghold for the political system.

The 2021 presidential elections revealed that urban youth were more inclined to boycott pre-determined elections as an expression of rejecting the “electoral engineering” carried out by the Guardian Council and Wilayat al-Faqih institutions. In these elections, only about 30% of eligible voters in major cities participated, with the lowest participation rate in Tehran at 26%, followed by Tabriz at 29%. The decline in participation rates was evident in major cities, where the middle class represents the largest bloc, alongside higher youth percentages due to internal migration. The more educated youth bloc showed a clear rejection of electoral engineering, being more interested in democratic values and standards and the struggle of ideas, naturally finding no appeal in the political reality, prevailing culture, and fundamentally undemocratic process.

The youth generation in Iran has reaped the benefits of rapid

urbanization and state modernization over recent decades. This generation is predominantly urban rather than rural and has clearly benefited from the development of higher education, allowing many young people to achieve high academic levels.

This youth generation has made Iranian society more secular compared to 30 years ago. This secularization has accelerated due to the declining status of clerics. Surveys have shown changes in religious behavior and the level of conservatism among the Iranian population. A survey conducted by the Iranian Survey Institute (ISPA) in 2020 provides a good example, indicating that 47.4% of Tehran's residents do not adhere to religious rituals, with a noticeable decline in religious practices, particularly the mandatory Islamic dress code for women and reduced mosque attendance.

Some believe that the move towards secular culture and values in Iranian society reflects the emergence of the third generation born in the 1990s, a generation that received better education and integrated more into global culture, without experiencing the Iran-Iraq war or participating in the revolution. However, the rapid move towards secularism in Iran

is constrained by the continued dominance of the population group born in the 1940s and 1950s, the generation that planned and led the revolution, alongside the Iran-Iraq war group, most of whom were born in the 1960s and early 1970s and participated in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). This generation is thus considered the generation of the revolution and war.

The generational gap is evident in the sharp contrast between the behavior patterns of older and younger generations. Younger generations are less interested in religious rules and behaviors compared to older generations. Some reports indicate a growing trend of irreligion and atheism among Iranian youth as a reaction to the ruling authorities' misuse of religion in various aspects of daily life. The Islamic model promoted by the regime and state institutions has led many Iranians to turn away from religion. Although some argue that these youth sectors do not reject religion per se but rather the excessive control of their lives by the ruling elite in the name of religion, the growing phenomenon of atheism among some youth sectors is a clear indicator of the deep generational gap between the older, more conservative generations who place

significant importance on religious considerations and behaviors, and the younger generations who are less concerned with these considerations and behaviors.

On the other hand, demographic changes in Iran since 2000 have increased women's participation in society, culture, and politics. The rise of women's roles in Iranian society has been accompanied by a higher rate of university enrollment, with women currently making up about 60% of university students in Iran.

Women in Iran today enjoy an exceptional status. Numerous social studies have shown how Iranian women have formed a more cohesive social group compared to men, having experienced profound transformations (decline in childbirth, education, family status, work, etc.) that the regime has continuously fought against, despite having created these changes.

The most recent expression of the rise of the urban women's "voice" was the 2022 uprising of women and youth protesting the death of activist Mahsa Amini. This event highlighted the significant disconnect between urban middle-class women and youth and the "Wilayat al-Faqih" system.

Indicators pointed to a significant participation of middle-class women in major cities, reflected in the high level of support for the reformist current among women in cities during the first round of the 2024 elections. The complex political system managed to end the political boycott of important societal groups at the "high cost" of the rise of a reformist candidate nearing the executive power "constraint."

The importance of the women's issue and the impact of protests over Mahsa Amini's death on the debates among the four presidential candidates was evident. The candidates distanced themselves from the sometimes-harsh police arrests of women refusing to wear the hijab in public places. Mustafa Pourmohammadi, the only cleric among the candidates, stated, "We should under no circumstances treat Iranian women with such harshness." In contrast, the reformist candidate Pezeshkian was more explicit in opposing the mandatory hijab and employing guidance patrols to force women to wear it. Saeed Jalili criticized Western models and highlighted the success of hijab-wearing Iranian women as a model and alternative to opposing the hijab.

The issue of wearing the hijab is not

merely symbolic in Iranian politics; it is a contentious issue illustrating the power struggles within the political system between reformists and conservatives. The political system imposed mandatory hijab-wearing on women in Iran since April 1983, after the situation stabilized in favor of the hardline current and Khomeini's leadership of the state was solidified four years after the overthrow of the Shah.

The conservative current, led by the late President Ebrahim Raisi, fiercely defended the continuation of mandatory hijab-wearing as a main issue reflecting the continuation of the "Islamic Revolution." Conversely, the Iranian reformist front rejects "mandatory" hijab-wearing. The Islamic People's Unity Party, established by supporters of former reformist President Mohammad Khatami, requested the parliament to abolish the mandatory hijab law.

As a societal issue, the hijab is a point of contention between security apparatuses and conservatives on one side and a significant portion of urban women in Iran on the other. Thus, the strictness or leniency in hijab specifications reflects an ongoing societal struggle, with the death of Mahsa Amini being an intense expression of this struggle,

intertwined with the Kurdish issue and minority rights.

Scenarios for the Second Round of Presidential Elections

The second round of the Iranian presidential elections on July 5, 2024, appears "theoretically" decided in favor of the conservative candidate Saeed Jalili if the participation rate remains constant. Jalili received 9.4 million votes in the first round, and adding the votes of the losing conservative candidate Ghalibaf (3.3 million votes), the number of votes supporting Jalili would total 12.7 million, compared to 10.4 million votes for the reformist candidate Massoud Pezeshkian. Thus, Jalili would receive 53% of the votes in the second round compared to 47% for Pezeshkian, assuming the participation rate remains stable.

This situation can only change if the reformist movement and Pezeshkian succeed in convincing a large number of Iranians (more than 3 million voters) to go to the polls in the second round. These votes are concentrated among the youth and women in major cities and in provinces with significant minority

populations, especially in Kurdistan and Balochistan.

Historically, the presidential elections in Iran have only seen a second round once, in 2005, when the hardline candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad faced former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Ahmadinejad won the election at that time, with the participation rate fluctuating to 60% compared to 63% in the first round of that election. This historical precedent makes the task more difficult for the reformist movement, indicating a decrease in participation rates in the second round compared to the first, thereby increasing the chances of the conservative movement winning the executive position.

The deciding factor in the reformists' ability to mobilize may be sending a "positive" and "optimistic" message that there is hope for a comeback and achieving a symbolic victory over the conservative movement. This includes raising the political discourse's ceiling regarding reforms and changes in women's and minorities' issues.

Taking advantage of the Biden-Trump debate in the U.S. elections might contribute to the reformist movement's advantage, as a tilt towards Trump could make Iranians more fearful of the hardline Jalili assuming the presidency,

putting them in a clear confrontation with the U.S. under Trump's leadership.

Ultimately, the outcome of this battle will be driven by clear psychological factors, including the momentum that the first round results gave to the reformist movement. Despite its divisions, the reformist movement has proven its ability to maintain political presence and popularity, especially in major cities. On the other hand, the fact that the more hardline candidate, Jalili, advanced to the second round over the moderate conservative Ghalibaf, representing the conservative movement, may increase fears among a wide audience of Iranians of hardliners dominating most state institutions, thereby increasing Pezeshkian's chances in this decisive round.

In the end, the main institutions of the regime face a difficult test. Their attempt to increase the participation rate in the second round to maintain the legitimacy of the ballot and prevent doubts about the legitimacy of "Wilayat al-Faqih" institutions is countered by a clear realization that higher participation rates will ultimately lead to the rise of a reformist president at a critical time that may witness the absence of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This is the test that the ballot boxes will answer on July 5, 2024.

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