While he plotted to overthrow the shah and establish Islam as the basis for administering Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini lectured that, “Islamic government is constitutional because its leaders are subject to a set of conditions in governing and administering the country, conditions set forth in the holy Quran and the Sunna of the prophet [Muhammad]. Islamic government is based on the laws and regulations of Islam and can therefore be defined as the rule of divine will over humanity.” Knowing that even “the rule of divine will” needs manifestation through human leaders, Khomeini observed further, “The Shiite view of government and of individuals who can assume leadership was clear from the time following the demise of the prophet [Muhammad] down to the occultation [of the twelfth imam]. It specified that the [supreme] leader should be foremost in knowledge of the laws and regulations of Islam.” Speaking up against the growing totalitarianism of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi, Ayatollah Khomeini suggested, “It is necessary that the regulations of Islam upon government be preserved and maintained in order to prevent anarchy. Consequently, the establishment of an Islamic government is necessary.” In many ways, those statements were self-serving—both personally and on behalf of other ayatollahs who ascribe to the activist school of religio-politics.

However, while they were swept up by revolutionary fervor in 1978 and 1979 against a despotic monarch, many Iranians assumed Ayatollah Khomeini was a pragmatist who would temper Islamic fundamentalist mores with notions of representational government. They based their assumptions on Khomeini’s own writings: “Islamic government is not tyrannical nor absolute ... [It] is a government of law.” Moreover, with the shah’s
heavy-handedness manifest in many features of life at that time, restoring a balance to society by placing greater emphasis on Shiism seemed appropriate to many Iranians. So even Iranians who feared the ascendance of religion in public life united with those who sought it, to demonstrate, face bullets, and run Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi out of their country.

Unfortunately for those seeking democracy, Khomeini had assimilated theocratic ideas unsuccessfully expounded by the archconservative mojtahed or independent Islamic legal authority, Fazlollah Nuri, during the Constitutional Revolution seven decades earlier. Khomeini augmented Nuri’s belief that clergymen must rule because secular governance fails to follow divine will with an additional religious concept, that of maslaha or fundamentalist Muslim interests aimed at ensuring Islam’s welfare. Khomeini then used his personal popularity and revolutionary authority to install an absolutism centered on Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Jurist) wherein an autocrat rules as rahbar (also rahbar-e enqelab) or supreme leader to ensure “the rule of divine will over humanity”—or at least the particular interpretation of divine will that the clergy who hold power deem appropriate.3

The current supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei follows the tenets of his late teacher, regarding himself as God’s singular representative on Earth and his use of force as jihad or holy war justified by divine mandate. All who fail to show pliancy toward the Velayat-e Faqih, be they persons in Iran or nations like the U.S. and Israel, are regarded as falling under the rubric of those against whom violence is religiously justified—just as Nuri had called for during the first decade of the twentieth century. Yet, now the political system established by Khomeini and upheld by Khamenei is under considerable stress from domestic and global pressures. The ayatollahs fear their rule could be swept away, forcing them back into their former roles as religious guides rather than power-wielding politicians.4 In an effort to legitimize their continued rule, they have begun to blame Iran’s domestic and foreign challenges on conspiracies by outside forces who aim at regime change in Iran. Determined to thwart any transformation in the current theocratic system, Supreme Leader Khamenei now has made it clear he “will not accept meddling” in affairs of state and has moved on domestic and global fronts to reinforce the theocracy’s absolutism. Such actions by Khamenei, and Khomeini before him, go against the objections of many mollahs—those of the Quietist school—who prefer less direct involvement in politics.5

In their fervor to ensure that the concept of Velayat-e Faqih permeates and regulates every aspect of the Iranian polity, the hardline ayatollahs around the supreme leader have begun to regard all their actions as at most valid and as at least justifiable. Rigging elections, disbarring candidates, arresting opposition leaders, silencing reporters, even executing protestors have all become acceptable and common under...
the alleged mandate of God’s will. But even if the ayatollahs succeed in the near term, their own totalitarian actions are laying the stage for their ouster over the long term. Across the range of Iran’s political spectrum, from the traditional conservatives to the radical reformers, there is a growing sense of despondency as more and more Iranians are reaching the conclusion that “even elections are not sufficient to realize the national will” because “I do not have any rights.”

The Legitimacy Crisis

“ELECTIONS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN A CHALLENGING ISSUE FOR OUR COUNTRY. WE should be careful that this challenge does not hurt the country’s security. Everyone should be vigilant. The various authorities should guard the elections,” Supreme Leader Khamenei told worshippers at prayers marking the end of the Muslim holy month of Ramadan on August 31, 2011. Indeed, many Iranians have begun to ask why, after having deposed a monarch thirty-three years ago, their nation is now led by religious despots. Many now seek to oust the theocracy. So the supreme leader’s words capture the sense of anxiety that fundamentalist Shiite theocrats ascribe to ensuring each and every election goes in their favor, and “without protests like those which marked the last elections” for the country’s presidency in 2009.

Khamenei therefore took no chances in the parliamentary elections on March 2, 2012 when approximately 48 million Iranians over the age of 18, or 64 percent of the Islamic Republic’s population, were eligible to cast ballots to elect 290 representatives for four-year terms of office in the majles or Islamic Consultative Assembly. The majles is the legislative or parliamentary branch of Iran’s government—alongside theocratic, executive, and judicial branches—and the source of legislation; hence its importance to the system of Islamic governance in Iran. Led by Khamenei, ayatollahs allied to the theocratic branch of Iran’s government have increasingly shown less and less tolerance for engagement with those who seek other political, social, and religious norms even through the ballot box. As a result, ordinary Iranians are prone to comment with both fear and dislike: “If the supreme leader could kill all of us, he would so he would have no opponents.”

Events involving the 2012 parliamentary elections are broadly instructive because they suggest that regime change through domestically-inspired, popularly-determined politics is less likely than ever before in Iran owing to ever-rising tyranny from the ayatollahs. The long-term significance of the election’s outcome is that, faced with the most serious political, social, and economic challenges in three decades to
their rule, the ayatollahs manipulated (and in the near future will seek to radically transform) the representational process through a combination of maneuvers not just to thwart reform but to ensure that all avenues for change are shut down. The ayatollahs wanted to project a consensus for continuing the Shiite theocracy—so they sought to impose the image of one via the elections of 2012. Indeed, Supreme Leader Khamenei forewarned the public: “Don’t blame the elections ... an atmosphere of conflict should not be displayed.”

Iran’s 2012 parliamentary elections occurred at an extremely turbulent time for that nation’s people, society, and economy. Iranians increasingly do blame their leaders, especially those inflexible Shiite clergymen who govern through the theocratic branch, for the nation’s internal woes and international isolation. The populist uprising that was violently suppressed by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij paramilitary after June 2009’s rigged presidential election continues to simmer, periodically erupting in protests, work stoppages, and violent clashes between demonstrators and authorities. Iranian youth, who comprise over 50 percent of the country’s population, were born after the last shah was deposed. They have known only the Islamic Republic’s repressive ways and have begun to overtly reject clerically-mandated behavioral codes. Even the younger residents of Qom, the ideological center of Islamist Iran, are no longer swayed by the clergymen.

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, having sensed the shifting winds of popular sentiment, has begun opposing the mandates and mores of his clerical overlords, too. The economy is in shambles due to domestic mismanagement and international sanctions. The country now ranks a lowly 171/175 for freedom in internal commercial activities, and the rial has lost so much of its value against international currencies like the U.S. Dollar that many citizens have seen their purchasing power and assets decline by upwards of 50 percent. Those who can still afford to do so are buying up much of the gold bullion that was circulating within the country. Simultaneously, as Iranians experience daily shortages of essential goods and endure increasing separation from the world, more of them are questioning the wisdom of enhancing nuclear technology against the community of nations’ wishes. Not surprisingly, a Gallup poll in December 2011 and January 2012 found that “Iranians are more likely to approve of Iran developing its nuclear power capabilities for non-military use (57%) than for military use (40%).”

Political parties in contemporary Iran that vie for power range from fundamentalist to reformist ones. The fundamentalist political parties include the Islamic Society of Engineers led by Ali Larijani who has served as the Speaker of Parliament; the newly-formed Moderation and Development Party led by former IRGC commander turned 2009 presidential candidate and now Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen
Rezai; the newly-formed Insight and Islamic Awakening Front of parliamentarian Shahabuddin Sadr; and the Society of Combatant Clergy whose founders included the Islamic Republic’s first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini. Linking many of those fundamentalist groups together is the hardline United Front of Principlists, or Jebhe-ye Mottahed-e Osulgarayan, which is led by Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, the chair of the Assembly of Experts. The Islamic Revolution Resistance Front (also known as the Islamic Constancy Front or Jebhe-ye Paydari-ye Enqelab-e Eslami) of the messianically-inspired Ayatollah Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi had recently fallen out with President Ahmadinejad. For these reasons, the front allied itself with the United Front for electioneering purposes. Indeed, as the March 2012 parliamentary elections became more hotly contested and rhetoric increased between the principlist factions, Mesbah Yazdi’s followers came into contention with the factions around Ahmadinejad whom they blame for the violence after the 2009 elections. This demonstrated vividly how fragmented the incumbents have become ideologically and administratively. The Islamic Coalition Party led by Gholam Hossein Elham, who has served as a Guardian Council member and as Minister of Justice, is the main political group in this alliance brought together by Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi.

The best known reformist groups are the Green Path of Hope party, or Rah-e Sabz-e Omid (popularly known as the Green Movement), which was established by former Prime Minister and 2009 presidential candidate Mir Hossein Mousavi, and the National Trust Party or Etemad-e Milli of former Parliament Speaker and 2009 presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi. Both are proscribed from civic activities. Other reformist groups include the Islamic Labor Party of Hossein Kamali who served twice as Minister of Labor, the Democracy Party (Democratic Coalition) linked to former two-term president Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and to parliamentarian Mostafa Kavakebian, and the Popular Front of Reforms.

Situated in the political landscape between the traditional fundamentalists and emergent reformists are groupings of religiously conservative yet socially progressive politicians. They derive from an offshoot of the Principlist Abadgaran or Builders Alliance, and are known as the Monotheism and Justice Party led by former Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki. They support the “Iranian Islam” or Eslam-e Irani ideas of presidential Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

Khamenei and the hardline ayatollahs who line up alongside him responded to the turmoil generated by both insiders and outsiders through focusing on the March 2012 parliamentary elections as a mechanism for drawing a red line against any major transformations within Iran. In all, approximately 5,200 Iranians including 490 women had submitted their candidacies to the Ministry of the Interior, which reports to President Ahmadinejad, is headed by the president’s ally Mostafa Mohammad Najar,
and technically administers the elections. The number of candidates represented a 27 percent decline from registrations for the 2008 parliamentary elections. Women’s electoral participation, especially among reform-minded candidates, was down too. Overall, even by the Interior Ministry’s own reckoning, only 14 percent of candidates campaigned as reformists. But Khamenei no longer trusts Ahmadinejad’s officials and so he had an ace up his sleeve, knowing full well that registering as a candidate provides no guarantee of actually being permitted to participate in an electoral cycle.

An Iron Fist in God’s Name

All candidates for public office are scrutinized by the Council of the Guardians of the Constitution as decreed by Articles 91 to 99 of the Islamic Republic’s Constitution, which grants the Council “responsibility of supervising the elections.” The Guardian Council also must ratify electoral results—as it did in Ahmadinejad’s favor during the hotly contested presidential election of 2009 after examining only 10 percent of ballots—and can even choose to annul electoral outcomes. The power-broker Guardian Council has been chaired since 1988 by the much-feared and much-hated octogenarian fundamentalist Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati. Jannati, a close revolutionary ally of Supreme Leader Khamenei, publically denounces those who seek any degree of political, social, and religious change in post-revolution Iranian society as “heretics who should not be permitted to participate in politics,” even calling for “execution of opposition members ... as enemies of God.” The Guardian Council intervenes routinely and unhesitantly to ensure that political change does not occur within the Islamic system through representational governance. Reformist and liberal candidates seeking seats on the 86-member Muslim scholar-filled Assembly of Experts, which appoints and can impeach Iran’s Supreme Leader, are consistently rejected on the basis of “insufficient theological qualifications.” Female candidates to the Assembly often are precluded en masse on the basis of their gender supposedly making them unqualified to render decisions about national issues.

Disqualification of candidates by the Guardian Council has become especially frequent in recent parliamentary elections. For instance, of the 7,168 registered candidates during the 2008 parliamentary elections, only 4,946 or 69 percent were allowed to contest. Those struck from the ballots included one-third of the earlier majles membership. So the Guardian Council provides a constitutionally-sanctioned means for the ayatollahs to consolidate their political power by determining the eligibility of candidates for the parliamentary elections and then utilizing a pro-clergy legislature to
thwart democratic aspirations by the people or by former allies like the incumbent president.

Only 700 reformist and opposition candidates, among the approximately 5,200 parliamentary office-seekers, were even permitted to register for the March 2012 elections. Subsequently, the Guardian Council began systematically throwing out the candidacies of anyone suspected of harboring notions of sociopolitical transformation—including retired ambassadors and provincial governors, even honorably discharged police and military commanders. Names of at least several dozen outgoing members of the majles also were not allowed onto the ballot for having disobeyed Supreme Leader Khamenei in the past. Ultimately only 65 percent of registered candidates’ names were allowed on the ballots—with the number of reformist candidates from within and outside the regime substantially reduced. Grounds for disqualification included allegations of “not believing in Islam,” “not being a practitioner of Islam,” “not being loyal to the Constitution,” and most importantly to the ayatollahs, “not being loyal to Governance by the Islamic Jurist.”

Politically, Khamenei, Jannati, and other fundamentalist clergymen appear seriously threatened by the waning of Islamist ideology among Iran’s masses. For this reason, the clergy denounces the Green Path which seeks to reform the political system, Ahmadinejad’s supporters who wish to transform it from within, and the youth who desire to excise it completely as “a triangle of seditionists, deviationists, and counter-revolutionaries” who need to be “neutralized.” Even long-term and high-ranking service within the Islamic Republic no longer safeguards those clergymen and politicians who seek to alter the absolutist Velayat-e Faqih system. The regime’s hardliners are systematically utilizing diverse pressures to silence opponents, successfully ensuring that the opposition remains fragmented and still trying to build consensus.

Ayatollah Rafsanjani participated in the Islamic Revolution of 1979, served two terms as Iran’s president, and chairs the Expediency Discernment Council—a 28-member appointed governmental organization charged with resolving disputes between the Parliament and the Council of Guardians. Nonetheless, fundamentalists forced Rafsanjani to cede his position as chairman of the Assembly of Experts when he un成功fully canvassed its members to remove Khamenei after the populist uprising of 2009. Subsequently, in March 2012, he held on to chairmanship of the Expediency Discernment Council after much difficulty. His daughter Faezeh, a feminist activist, was sentenced to 6 months prison-time for “spreading propaganda against the ruling system,” one son Mehdi who headed the private Azad University system was forced into European exile, and another son Mohsen was stripped of his directorship of Tehran’s underground transportation network. The family and their supporters, including reform-minded deans and professors, have been stripped of all political,
social, and educational influence. Supreme Leader Khamenei made a very public example of Rafsanjani for having dared challenge the Velayat-e Faqih broadly and the Rahbar specifically.27

In January 2012, Ahmadinejad’s presidential media advisor Ali Akbar Javanfekr was sentenced to twelve months imprisonment and banned from all civic activities for five years for “publically insulting” the supreme leader and for suggesting that the hejab or conservative dress code “should not be enforced” on women.28 This judicial action deprived the president’s allies of a key spokesman at election time. Some ayatollahs and their supporters have even called for presidential chief of staff Mashaei’s arrest and execution on charges of heresy and witchcraft because he campaigns for excising the clergy from politics.29 Last month, when former IRGC commander and up-and-coming politician Admiral Hossein Alaei suggested the supreme leader and other fundamentalists were abusing the political system and trampling the rights of Iranians, his home was besieged by the ayatollahs’ supporters, his fellow officers were lined up to denounce him and cast suspicion on his loyalty to Iran, and Khamenei’s representatives sought to persuade him to publically recant.30

Leaders of the Green Path of Hope and the National Trust Party, including Mousavi and Karroubi, have been under house arrest since early 2011 and, therefore, are unable to participate in elections. Other leading opponents of the regime, like Mostafa Tajzadeh, Behzad Nabavi, Mohsen Mirdamadi, Feyzollah Arabsorkhi, Abdollah Ramazanzadeh, Mohsen Aminzadeh, and Abolfazl Ghadiani are in jail, too. All political, social, and religious organizations have to register with the state, which can ban their existence on the basis of “violating Islamic morals,” “failing to serve the public good,” and “promoting sedition.” Under these broad and politically-motivated guidelines, not just the Green Path and the National Trust, but many other political parties that challenge the ayatollahs’ hegemony have been banned from civic life and driven underground—including the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF) and the Organization of Islamic Revolution Mojahedin (OIRM).31

Journalists and bloggers are detained, their equipment confiscated, and their families and associates intimidated verbally and physically with increasing frequency. Indeed, Human Rights Watch notes that Iran imprisoned more journalists and bloggers in 2011 than any other nation. At least one blogger is currently on death row in Tehran’s notorious Evin Prison for criticizing the regime.32 Opposition websites are periodically censored and blocked, including those of the Green Path. So are those of government agencies and officials regarded as working toward electoral, administrative, or civic reforms—such as one run by supporters of Ayatollah Rafsanjani—for “committing illegal activities.”33

With the Green Movement and National Trust Party out of serious contention and
factions loyal to Iran’s president emerging as the main opposition to the ayatollahs, even media outlets associated with President Ahmadinejad are being jammed on the basis that those sites propagate messages of sociopolitical change. Indeed, Mahramane News, Raha Press, Zaman News, Super Enherafi Blog/News, Khordad Press, and Hemmat Negar News display pictures of Supreme Leader Khamenei but proceed to attack his appointees and policies as detrimental to Iran, Iranians, domestic affairs, and foreign policy. Those new-media outlets allied with the president’s policies are well-known and viewed favorably by many Iranians for criticizing hardline ayatollahs and politicians like Assembly of Experts Chairman Kani and Speaker of the Parliament Larijani. Pro-Ahmadinejad media outlets also direct a steady stream of criticism against the IRGC’s high command for siding with the ayatollahs against the wishes of many others within the armed forces.34

In an even broader attempt to control Iranians’ access to and use of the Internet, the government has begun reducing Internet speeds and interrupting access to frustrate users to the point of abandoning online dissent and seeking information from pro-fundamentalist sites which are easier to access. Likewise, the government’s firewalls have been blocking access to websites that facilitate encrypted electronic communications between Iranians and the outside world. Simultaneously, the authorities have worked feverishly to disable software that facilitates bypassing of state-controlled firewalls. Email access to large segments of the general population is cut off for days at a time whenever the regime fears protests may erupt or an opposition cause may gain some popularity. Additionally, the government’s technologists are constructing a national internet which will facilitate official oversight and blocking of uploads, downloads, browsers, and webpages. Ultimately, the authorities hope to force all users inside Iran, including persons within the regime such as Ahmadinejad and his allies, on to the state’s own internet so that all e-communications can be monitored for individual and collective conformity to the dictates of the supreme leader.35

Not surprisingly, Iranians are concerned that the national internet will cut them off from the rest of the world, and put them under increased surveillance by authorities. However, a proliferation of electronic news outlets, political party websites, and fundamental rights websites, in addition to Twitter feeds and Facebook pages, has made the ayatollahs’ attempt to censor internet traffic most difficult—indeed, when the censors act aggressively their actions also end up impacting those outlets favored by the fundamentalists. Moreover, despite the arrest of editors, reporters, bloggers, and activists, Iranian public media has proven remarkably diverse and resilient, with prominent newspapers even publishing letters and opinions critical of the supreme leader and of his intolerant domestic policies and isolationist foreign actions.36

Electronic means of stifling change are not limited to control of communication,
however. The Islamic Republic’s security apparatus—centered on the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS), also known in Iran as VEVAK—conducts extensive surveillance operations, sometimes for the personal voyeurism and gain of Khamenei. Those who oppose the rahbar and his Velayat-e Faqih have their homes, offices, and automobiles bugged and followed; others are beaten up, arrested, imprisoned, tortured, and even executed for supposedly opposing the “will of Allah and the imams.” Each evening the supreme leader is said to listen to surreptitious recordings of senior officials and colleagues talking about him in a summary compilation that usually lasts twenty minutes. Khamenei thereby gains knowledge of those attempting to oust him—like Rafsanjani’s attempts within the Assembly of Experts in late 2009 and Mashaei’s maneuvers within the executive branch which also gained steam in 2009.37

Beyond its impact on political elites who oppose Khamenei, the clandestine information facilitates crackdowns by Islamic Guidance Patrols supervised by the Committee on Public Morals seeking to “rigorously” enforce the ayatollahs’ pro-Islamist, anti-individualist, Social Discipline Plan on a daily basis in the cities, towns, and villages of Iran. The ayatollahs’ cohorts in the security forces justify their sweeping intolerance for dissent and diversity by claiming, “The public expects us to act firmly if we see any social behavior defying our Islamic values. We will first warn, then arrest and imprison those women and men.” Approximately the equivalent of $6.5 billion is expended each year on internal security to terrorize the population and another $4.5 billion to enforce public conformity. To buttress his control over the instruments of domestic terror, Khamenei also has carefully nurtured links with the militant high-ranking officers of the IRGC to ensure that opposition to his rule can be combated violently in public—as happened in the fall of 2009. Surely and steadily Khamenei has built around him a clique of like-minded persons who benefit vastly from the incumbency and therefore are hostile to plurality, moderation, political change, and fundamental rights.38

As part of the crackdown on all forms of political and social dissent, Minister of Intelligence Heidar Moslehi, a cleric close to Supreme Leader Khamenei, whom Ahmadinejad tried but failed to oust from his cabinet in 2011, even alleged “the enemy is trying to create tension and dispute in the election process; this requires extra vigilance by the security establishment and by the brave revolutionary nation.” To that end, Moslehi established a schedule of weekly meetings where commanders of the IRGC, regular armed forces, and Basij paramilitary briefed Supreme Leader Khamenei on how their organizations were imposing the theocracy’s will upon the population.39

The ayatollahs’ attempt to control the polity seems to know fewer and fewer boundaries the less secure the clergymen feel. In the wake of mounting tensions with the executive branch over whether unelected clergymen should have such broad sway
over national and international affairs, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei suggested publically in late 2011, “There may no longer be the need for the country to have a president; rather, an official appointed by parliament can be in charge.” Quickly, hardline members of the majles including Speaker Larijani seized this opportunity for abolishing a major, independently elected, center of executive power. Larijani, who hails from a family of ayatollahs (even though he did not become a cleric) and whose own position will be enhanced by termination of the presidency and elevation of his role to that of prime minister, has been especially vocal on implementing the constitutional change.40

**The Dissolution of Representation**

Due to disqualification and intimidation of candidates, censorship of media, and a seeming inevitability that the ayatollahs and their cronies are determined to prevail at all costs, some factions in Iran’s opposition reached the conclusion that results of elections will always be rigged in favor of fundamentalist candidates. So the Green Path of Hope and National Trust parties began a de facto boycott of the franchise process just prior to the majles elections of 2012. In a sense they have few other options; despite popular support for their causes both groups had little on-the-ground organization outside of the main cities still intact after Khamenei’s concerted crackdown.41 However, their decision not to mount concerted campaigns plays into the clergy’s hands. Those political parties that champion extremism quickly realized that if the already small groups of opposition candidates cease to present electoral challenges, fundamentalists may succeed in maintaining control of state institutions and passing constitutional changes they fancy, such as amending the Constitution, abolishing the presidency, and declaring reformist actions unlawful and sacrilegious.

Sensing these dangers, President Ahmadinejad’s supporters took more pragmatic approaches during the parliamentary elections of 2012. Some even signed up to run as independents and as regime loyalists—attempting to hide their true intentions when possible (and many could not for their public stances were well known) from the Guardian Council to prevent disqualification. Covertly financed by the president and his backers, these pro-Ahmadinejad candidates also targeted constituencies where they enjoy strong support, especially in the smaller cities and rural areas. As in the 2009 presidential election, Ahmadinejad’s allies have not hesitated to use their
control over the Interior Ministry, which handles the voting process, to manipulate electoral outcomes to increase their share of power in the branches of government. Controlling the parliament would let them thwart any moves by the ayatollahs to eliminate the presidency. Placing additional supporters in both elected and appointed positions also enhances their ability to push aside the theocratic branch of government and to prune the power of IRGC generals loyal to the supreme leader. So the regime’s factions that view internal reforms as essential remain committed to their belief that the clerics are “not capable of administering a country.”

Aware of this strategy, the ayatollahs’ supporters tried as best as possible to identify and disbar these opponents in the executive branch, fearing “the deviant current [Ahmadinejad’s supporters] is like a termite eating up the regime from within and its danger is much bigger than one can imagine … for it intends to separate Islam without any coup from the political establishment.” Attempts to link the president and his supporters to the messianically-inclined Hojjatiyeh Society, which had been banned by Ayatollah Khomeini, have gathered steam as the clerics seek to convince ordinary citizens to turn their backs on reform and the president’s policies. Claiming the executive branch is part of the Hojjatiyeh, Khamenei’s supporters have alleged that, “They believe in the Satanic thesis that one must spread corruption to hasten the emergence of the Imam of the Era [i.e., the twelfth imam], and so champion embezzlement, corruption, theft of public funds and moral and economic corruption.” Essentially, the fundamentalist clerics suggest “the Twelfth Imam remains hidden during this government and his deputy, His Holiness Ali Khamenei, is in charge of affairs” rather than the president or independent-minded parliamentarians.

Yet the ayatollahs are aware the president’s allies or any other opposition group including the Greens could decide to mobilize the public. To thwart such plans, Khamenei’s appointees like Tehran Governor Morteza Tamaddon do not hesitate to warn of dire consequences for those citizens who dare challenge results decreed as valid by the Guardian Council: “We will confront such moves with full preparation and all kinds of security measures.” Indeed, since the events in 2009, the state’s security forces have been instructed to ensure that even silent marches and peaceful demonstrations remain both few in number and small in size. The Guardian Council also has taken a far more active role in overseeing the Interior Ministry’s Commission on Elections to ensure that the executive branch is stymied in its efforts to stuff the ballot boxes in its favor, and that the ayatollahs’ strategy of saturating the electoral field with its subordinates leads to victory.

The two rounds of parliamentary elections in 2012 were hailed by Iranian hardliners as a sweeping victory for Supreme Leader Khamenei’s fundamentalist policies and a deathblow to President Ahmadinejad’s reformist agenda. Western scholars, an-
alysts, and reporters followed suit—partially hoping that Khamenei would have a free hand in quashing the political infighting that doomed nuclear deals in 2009 and 2011, even though he may remain averse to broader accommodation with the US. Yet the new 9th majles will be little different from the outgoing one, even though there will be 196 new parliamentarians serving four-year terms of office. Indeed, Iranian political scientists and analysts have noted, “The traditional principlists claim that the executive branch was defeated in the recent election, but that it is not so for the number of President Ahmadinejad’s supporters in the [next] parliament will be more or less the same ... so the conflict between the executive and legislative branches will grow deeper and greater during the coming year.”

A total of 290 parliamentary seats were up for grabs. The final tally gave hardline groups supporting Supreme Leader Khamenei 65 seats, other pro-Khamenei conservatives 15 seats, reformists within the regime who support President Ahmadinejad 25 seats, reformists who are not part of the incumbency 21 seats, and religious minorities the usual 5 seats (after the election commission initially misreported that Christians, Zoroastrians, and Jews had gained a few more seats). But 61 seats also went to individuals who ran as candidates jointly for the pro-Khamenei and pro-Ahmadinejad factions. And another 98 incoming majles members are independents—the largest block and clearly the swing vote which could serve as powerbrokers resistant to clerical influence. So the new parliament, which took office in late May 2012, reflects the political disunity that is engulfing the Islamic Republic.

Knowing that election results have compounded Iran’s instability, Ayatollah Mohammad Reza Mahdavi Kani who chairs the pro-Khamenei Assembly of Experts recommended that “the branches of government cooperatively deal with issues the people face.” But when President Ahmadinejad appeared before parliament shortly thereafter, Khamenei’s supporters among the legislators found his testimony “unconvincing” and “insulting.” Indeed the president showed scant regard for the legislative branch’s power by sticking to his socioreligious positions including not enforcing “chastity and the hejab” by saying “Let me be quite clear that cultural approaches are incompatible with harsh methods because the youth’s wishes must be respected,” preferring “Iranian nationalism over Islam” by emphasizing “I love the greatness of the Iranian nation and I am proud of it,” and even ridiculing parliamentary foes and their questions by concluding “those who designed these questions were from among those who got a master’s degree by just pushing a button.” Iranians found the entire exchange entertaining and disheartening, joking ironically, “Where do wild asses compete to prove who’s brightest? In Tehran’s parliament building, where else!”

Ultimately, like the pro-Ahmadinejad groups and the reformists, the ayatollahs
themselves know full well that their totalitarianism is increasingly becoming unpalatable to many Iranians. Even some of their supporters in the majles are acknowledging that “the public should have the right to criticize the Velayat-e Faqih and other branches of government” and warning that denying that right demonstrates the “Islamic Republic is moving towards the direction of authoritarianism.” So even though they may successfully control the outcome of elections, the ayatollahs are in a bind. Supreme Leader Khamenei and his cohorts cannot get away from the reality that broad-based public support and participation in the political process is necessary for the theocracy’s survival. Consequently they do their best to portray elections that they manipulate as nonetheless being “manifestations and instances of the people’s partnership in deciding the country’s future.” They counsel that other governmental organizations including the Assembly of Experts are in “the position of preserving the Guardianship of the Jurist and not in a position to criticize or weaken it. Therefore, we should demonstrate greater self-sacrifice and forgiveness.”

Such portrayals do not however fool most Iranians among whom there is widespread apathy owing to the whole process being a sham. Officials like retired IRGC Major General Yahya Rahim Safavi who now serves as a senior adviser to Khamenei are reduced to pleading with fellow citizens “to take elections seriously for the national good.” Ayatollah Jannati advises, “Show your religious zeal by voting for those who oppose the enemies of Islam.” Supreme Leader Khamenei even declared voting to be a “religious obligation” or vajeb. More desperately the influential cleric Gholam Reza Mesbahi Moghaddam, who is also a parliamentarian, openly suggests “giving people cash handouts to encourage them to vote.”

Yet, invoking state, faith, and pocketbook after ruling by fiat no longer compensates for the disenfranchisement that Iranians from all walks of life increasingly experience. A prominent blogger who supports the notion of an Islamic Republic yet has grown dissatisfied with how it has evolved in Iran sums up the dire situation that the ayatollahs face from their own people: “Each time in the past when dissatisfaction led me to conclude ‘do not participate,’ speeches by the supreme leader, reports on television, and patriotic songs convinced me to vote for maintaining the [Islamic] Revolution. But this is no longer enough. [Political] participation should convey what the people want. They want economic stability. They do not want to witness confrontations between the majles and [other branches of] the administration. They do not want to be a tool in the games that the political elite play. I believe that participation will make the regime even more emboldened to repeat its mistakes in the future.”
International Reverberations

THE AYATOLLAHS’ ATTEMPTS TO CONTROL POLITICS AND SOCIETY HAVE NOT BEEN restricted to Iran for they firmly believe that fundamentalist Muslim polities elsewhere will bolster their global influence while mitigating the possibility of domestic democratic movements succeeding. Consequently, when the Arab uprisings began in December 2010, leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran were quick to claim credit, declaring their 1979 revolution as its “religious and ideological progenitor.” Iran’s ayatollahs not surprisingly proposed that fundamentalist Islamic theology should direct change from Morocco to Yemen. They expected that Sunni Muslims across the Middle East would install governments similar to their own system of Velayat-e Faqih. Indeed, the ayatollahs had carefully nurtured ties with Tunisia’s Islamic Renaissance Movement since 1988 when its leaders were exiled to Europe. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and Libya, in addition to the Islamic Action Front in Jordan, has received clandestine Iranian support for decades. Bahrain’s politically disenfranchised Shiite majority views Iran as a potential supporter. So do Shiite minorities in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Shiite Houthi rebels along the porous border between Yemen and Saudi Arabia look to Iran’s ayatollahs for support too. The ayatollahs have even maintained a covert relationship with al-Qaeda, despite the fact that the Sunni terrorist organization’s global jihad is often at odds with Shiite Islamist ideas of leading the worldwide Muslim Nation. All this suits Iran’s leaders well, for they covet a prominent place on the world stage.53

Yet, when the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen fell, citizens there did not seem too eager to replace autocratic leaders with intolerant Muslim clerics. Indeed opinion polls demonstrated the ayatollahs’ esteem had fallen since Arabs witnessed images of Tehran’s hypocritical leaders unleashing violence against their own citizens in 2009, stifling free speech and individual rights, and tailoring election results to create illusions of widespread domestic support. Essentially the more Supreme Leader Khamenei, his clerical cohorts, and their iron-fisted comrades in the armed forces and paramilitary impose a religiously-based minority viewpoint upon Iran’s people, the more other Muslims in the Middle East realize that the ayatollahs’ ways should not be duplicated lest Arabs, too, end up replacing one form of despotism with another. Arabs see that Iran’s Velayat-e Faqih is not constitutional and does not adhere to the essential principles of Islamic law or Sharia, but turns Islam against its followers. Those realizations are reshaping and rejecting favorable dispositions towards the ayatollahs in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Jordan, and Egypt. More Sunnis than before are becoming concerned about Iran’s negative influences in
the domestic politics of other Middle Eastern nations. Even the ayatollahs’ nuclear program is no longer seen as an Islamic bomb to counter Israel’s assumed nuclear capability. Perhaps most distressingly for those in Iran who seek to shape other Muslim societies in their own image, more Arabs are supporting a Saudi-led Gulf Cooperation Council pushback against Iran’s Middle East adventurism.54

The ayatollahs’ predicament is made worse by their own, handpicked yet increasingly independent president whose penchant for Iranian nationalism routinely emphasizes the divisions between Arabs and Iranians even in religious matters. For instance, on a state visit to neighboring Tajikistan in March 2012, Ahmadinejad claimed “Ferdowsi [the poet who compiled Iran’s national epic, the Shahnameh in the early eleventh century] saved the Faith of the Great Prophet [Muhammad] by removing the unenlightened from carrying the burden of the Faith [Islam] and put it squarely on the shoulders of the Iranian Nation which has well-fulfilled this responsibility.” In addition to deriding Arabs as “unenlightened” and linking Iranian nationalism to the survival and flourishing of Islam, Ahmadinejad was also taking a dig at the ayatollahs themselves for those clergymen are often derided as “Arabs” or as “Arab-like” by the Iranian public for preaching that Islamic fundamentalism should prevail in Muslim belief and custom. The president’s supporters have additionally been mounting a campaign to re-write another aspect of Islamic and Iranian history by depicting the arrival of Islam in Iran during the Arab invasions of the seventh century as an “act of war.”55

Not surprisingly, as the Arab Spring unfolds, many Sunni Islamist groups have begun to distance themselves from Tehran. Some Sunni Islamists have even argued that they are moderates who can accommodate themselves with civil democracy. Just before Tunisians went to the polls in October 2011, the Islamic Renaissance Movement projected Turkey, not Iran, as a preferred political model. It was the principal winner in that Tunisian election, garnering 89 out of 217 electoral seats. During Morocco’s November 2011 elections, the Justice and Development Party focused on efficient, transparent governance rather than pushing strict Muslim codes. That Islamist group emerged as the largest parliamentary block with 107 out of 395 seats. In Egypt’s elections the Muslim Brotherhood too garnered nearly half the parliamentary seats while Salafis, who advocate even stricter socio-political rules more akin to those of the ayatollahs, took only 20 percent. Moreover, following its victory the Moroccan Justice and Development Party issued an announcement that, “Religion belongs in the mosques; we are not going to interfere in people’s personal lives.” Likewise, the Muslim Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party claimed, “Millions of Egyptians voted because they want a strong, democratic Parliament.”56

Yet those words may not reflect how Sunni Islamists will govern once in power—for they too are predisposed by years of revolutionary ideology based on fundamentalism
to seek theocratic solutions to political, social, and economic issues. Indeed, like Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s and 1970s, they, too, have been careful not to actually renounce their officially-declared Islamist stances. So Iran’s Shiite ayatollahs continue to publically urge the emerging Sunni leaders of post-revolutionary Arab countries to stay true to Islam as the only way forward. Privately, the ayatollahs press home to their Sunni political counterparts that Khomeini spoke conciliatory words only out of necessity until his supporters gained control of Iran. At the very least, Morocco, Tunisia and Egypt will be governed by religio-political groups which may be tempted to gradually institute foreign policies that are more in line with Tehran’s regional agenda. Indeed, already the new Egyptian parliament has voted to send home Israel’s ambassador and turn off energy exports to that nation.

The ayatollahs are by no means blind to changing circumstances abroad having negative impacts on Iran’s geopolitics. They have watched Azerbaijan on Iran’s northwestern border, another nation that is predominantly Shiite, slip out of their ideological orbit and into the American and Israeli ones diplomatically and militarily. Now they fear Baku will extend logistical assistance against Iran’s nuclear program. Despite threatening words, Iran’s fundamentalists have been stymied by Saudi Arabia from assisting the Shiite majority’s uprising against the Sunni minority ruling family in Bahrain. As the Bahraini and Saudi royal families talk about uniting the two countries—a move which would turn the Shiite majority on the Persian Gulf island into a minority—there seems to be little Tehran can do to keep the two monarchies apart. And they know full well that the greatest setback on the global stage to Iran’s revolutionary and messianic goals has been the uprising against Syria’s Alawite elite led by dictator Bashar al-Assad.

When Syrian protestors—a majority of whom were Sunnis—began seeking change in their country, Khamenei initially ensured that Tehran would provide guidance and technology to Assad’s forces. But as the revolt spread, President Ahmadinejad and other officials of Iran’s executive branch urged Assad to accommodate his “people’s legitimate demands” while warning against Libya-like “interference by foreigners.” Increasingly, Iran’s president has written off his Damascene counterpart and made contact with Syrian opposition groups in what appears to be an effort to reconfigure Iran’s longstanding relationship with Syria and protect it for the future. The uprisings in Syria have clearly divided Iran’s powerbrokers, and have contributed to schisms among political elites over domestic demands for socio-political liberalization.

The ayatollahs did not concur with abandoning Assad, who has aided in channeling Iranian resources to militant organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, and began using the IRGC to spearhead the shoring up of Assad’s troops despite the executive branch’s wishes otherwise. IRGC Quds Force Major-General Qasem Soleimani (who is
a loyal appointee of Supreme Leader Khamenei, and who despite having UN and EU sanctions upon himself is able to travel freely in that region) aided the ayatollahs by ensuring that “15,000 troops from the IRGC Quds Special Force” reportedly “were sent to Syria to offer intelligence support and security consultations to the regime of Syrian President Al-Assad ... and to participate in the crackdown on pro-democracy protests.” However, it appears the ayatollahs made the wrong call, for as the Syrian revolt spread, IRGC Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari eventually had little choice but to “order Iranian troops in Syria to move to the Lebanese Bekka Valley region” in February 2012 for their own safety and to try and secure the Lebanese Hezbollah, who are also Shiite allies of Tehran, against political change there. Worse still for the ayatollahs, the Hamas leadership, too, is sensing that siding with the Islamic Republic is a no-win cause. So the Palestinian Sunni organization declared it would not intervene on the ayatollahs’ side if war were to occur between Iran and Israel over Syria or over the nuclear standoff. The unraveling of a two-decade militant partnership between Iran, Syria, Hezbollah, and Hamas is occurring and with it Iranian fundamentalists’ worst foreign policy nightmare is coming to pass.

Despite these impediments, the ayatollahs still nurture hopes of spreading their radical model of Islamic politics across the Middle East. Because the dissatisfaction fueling Arab protest is homebred, they realize that Sunnis may not be able to hold the line against fundamentalism. Indeed once Tunisians concluded voting, Iran’s Foreign Ministry revealed Islamic Renaissance Movement leaders were in regular contact with Tehran while planning election strategies. Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi organizers, too, have visited Iran frequently since Mubarak’s fall, while preparing for Egypt’s elections and for Pan-Islamic Awakening conferences. Houthi leaders have also participated in those meetings, and their ties with and dependence on Tehran for financial support and arms appear to have deepened.

Because of their ideology and resources, the ayatollahs remain a potent threat to the establishment of new representative governments throughout the Arab Middle East. Their biggest appeal is anti-monarchist, anti-Western words and deeds. As Arabs seek significant political restructuring and attempt to rebuild their nations, Iran’s ayatollahs will continue to point to the U.S., Britain, and Israel as obstructing tangible change. Likewise, the Supreme Leader’s cadre regards “the Saudi and Qatari regimes as playing the role of the errand boys of the United States and the West ... This will certainly be to the detriment of Saudi Arabia and Qatar, [ensuring] the days of those regimes are numbered.” Taking on the U.S. and its Western and Middle Eastern allies also facilitates the ayatollahs’ efforts to portray themselves to the Arab masses as defiant Muslim victims of the global powers. In attempts to bolster their credibility among Muslims, the ayatollahs have continued sponsoring a series of international
conferences—under titles like Youth and Islamic Awakening Conference, Islamic Awakening Literature Congress, and “International Unity Conference”—and all within the space of a few months in early 2012. But even those attempts are undermined by the ayatollahs’ disdain for popular representation in national governance. Hojjat al-Eslam Ali Saidi, the supreme leader’s representative to the IRGC predicted, “The result of the [2012 parliamentary] elections will have a great impact on the Arab Spring.” He was correct, but not in the manner intended—for Iran’s flawed electoral process has failed to inspire confidence anywhere in the Middle East.

Likewise, more and more of the ayatollahs’ foreign policy actions are facing criticism at home for causing isolationism rather than cooperation and pan-Islamism. Ordinary Iranians blame the regime for bringing the world’s wrath upon the nation through reckless actions: “With sanctions, poverty, and a government that knows nothing but force, the condition of our society will only get worse.” Similarly the executive power block, especially the Foreign Ministry, blamed fundamentalists for the sacking of the British Embassy in Tehran in November 2011 and then apologized publicly to London. The ayatollahs who instigated that attack by student members of the Basij expressed outrage at the response by Ahmadinejad’s appointees because the clergy stand to benefit from the increased isolation of Iranians. But subsequently even some hardline clerics like Ahmad Khatami who oppose Ahmadinejad’s outreach to the West on economic and nuclear issues have also questioned the wisdom of antagonizing Europeans who provide many commercial goods Iranians need. In that manner, the embassy attack revealed schisms over how Iran’s power blocks should be acting in the nation’s interest.

The ayatollahs are not above seeking to deflect the Iranian public’s attention from domestic problems by generating foreign affairs crises—as they did, for example, with the British embassy attack, and with the U.S embassy seizure and the subsequent diplomatic hostage crisis from November 1979 to January 1981. Indeed, a standard tactic of the clerical regime is to provoke threatening reactions from the U.S. and Israel specifically and the European nations generally, in the hope this will rally Iranians around their nation. So, just before negotiations began in Baghdad in May 2012, Iranian scientists loaded 20 percent enriched uranium plates into the Tehran reactor; and once the talks ended it announced the construction of additional reactors. At the same time, the elected leaders in Tehran are fearful of actually confronting the West directly in a military engagement knowing Iran will take a beating and that the public could then turn against the regime for needlessly bringing foreign calamity upon the nation. For these reasons, even as Iran inches forward on the nuclear front in defiance of the world’s wishes and allegedly plans assassinations of other nations’ diplomats, leading politicians associated with the executive branch under President
Ahmadinejad make sure to repeatedly emphasize that “Iran is not a threat,” despite knowing that many at home and abroad do not take those words at face value.66

Iran’s current executive branch is not alone in its attempts to reach out to the West, however. Even Ayatollah Rafsanjani had attempted, during the early months of his presidency in late 1979, to convince Khomeini to acknowledge that negotiations and diplomatic relations with the U.S. were necessary. Rafsanjani’s public revelation in April 2012 of those attempts reflects yet another effort by him to normalize Iran’s foreign relations with the U.S.: “The way we have now, which is not talking with the United States and not having relations, is untenable. The United States is a primary power in the world. What difference is there between Europe, China, and Russia and the United States? If we negotiate with them, why should we not negotiate with the United States? Negotiations do not mean surrender. We should negotiate. If the U.S. accepts our position or if we accept its position, the problems will be over.” For similar reasons, Rafsanjani has also urged that Tehran nurture good relations rather than antagonism with Riyadh and Cairo.67

On the other hand, immediately dangerous actions are being undertaken by the IRGC’s high command loyal to Khamenei—including military maneuvers in the Persian Gulf as a threat to the world’s oil supply and assassination attempts against foreign diplomats within the U.S. and in Third World countries as retaliation for attacks inside Iran on its scientists.68 Military engagement with the U.S. and/or Israel would be most welcomed by the ayatollahs because future elections could be cancelled (under Article 68 of the Constitution), reformists rounded up, and all dissent silenced under the guise of national survival. As such, if another nation decides to take on the ayatollahs it will not end with mere tactical strikes but would necessitate complete elimination of the ayatollahs’ means of external and internal tyranny to be successful.69

A Fragile System

The 1979 revolution that overthrew the shah produced a system that awkwardly tried to reconcile mechanisms for popular representation with what is essentially a clerical dictatorship. The consequence of events beginning with the suppression of popular dissent after presidential elections in 2009 and culminating with the attempt at fixing parliamentary elections in 2012 lies in that the ayatollahs are persisting in their Machiavellian scheme to consolidate power even further domestically. Consequently, the bottom line is that representative governance is unlikely to emerge in Iran so long as the theocracy endures through force and freedom-seeking
Iranians lack the might to overthrow it. Yet, the political process also demonstrates the limits of the ayatollahs’ ability to predetermine events inside Iran. For instance, even with the majles on their side, abolishing the presidency requires a national referendum that the clergy are unlikely to win.

Politically weakened by protests and infighting, Iran’s theocratic leaders are maneuvering to secure their own, often individual, futures just as they have been doing since late 2009. In the meantime, the security and military apparatus, including the MOIS, the IRGC, and the Basij, that sustains the ayatollahs’ despotism is showing widening ideological differences between commanders whose allegiance lies (often for self-serving reasons) with Ayatollah Khamenei and the lower-ranking officers and conscripts who find the reformist ideas championed by Ahmadinejad and Mashaie and even by Mousavi and Karroubi to be appealing. Fundamentalist clergymen have begun fretting not only about their declining influence within the ranks of the state’s security forces but even within their own clerical ranks as many mollahs reassert notions of being politically Quietist. Essentially, the Islamic Republic and its revolutionary creed are now being destabilized from within by the very religious, political, and social dynamics that propelled the ayatollahs to power in 1979.

The ayatollahs’ undemocratic actions at home have negative consequences for their image in the rest of the Middle East, too, as has been analyzed. Despite fervent claims by them to the contrary, freedom rather than Iranian-style religious radicalism is the main factor rallying Arab citizens against their autocratic heads of state. Indeed, understanding this, even Arab Islamist groups funded by Iran have decided to bide their time rather than demand that countries like Tunisia, Egypt, and Jordan transform into Sharia-based nations. Additionally, many Arabs are now well aware that the ayatollahs violently and unhesitatingly suppressed Iranian citizens’ aspirations for freedom—in the summer and fall of 2009 and again in February 2011. Arab intellectuals and activists have witnessed even a political event like parliamentary elections, which should be routine, being far from free and fair in the Islamic Republic—and therefore at odds with Arabs’ own political aspirations. So Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, realizing that the mantles of Khomeini and Khamenei will not serve them well either with their own people or in creating the needed working relationships with the U.S. and the E.U., continue distancing themselves from the negative images of Iranian fundamentalism.

Supreme Leader Khamenei presents himself and his supporters as defending not only Iran but Islam as well against internal and external foes—comparing their actions to the trials of the Prophet Muhammad and the earliest Muslims. These ayatollahs regard the Islamic Republic as “established according to the decree of the twelfth Shiite Imam [the Mahdi or Savior] and, therefore, any criticism of the regime is unacceptable.”
Yet, despite the Supreme Leader’s best efforts, alliances of convenience have been forming—even between once arch-foes like the former President and current Expediency Discernment Council chairman Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad, who has returned to attending that council’s meetings after a three-year boycott. Moreover, far from backing down from Khamenei, Ahmadinejad is expanding the executive branch’s overt challenge to the principles and institutions of the Guardianship of the Jurist. He is gaining support among reformist ayatollahs, too, for his attempts to have the executive branch monitor implementation of the Constitution. More brazenly, upon the heels of the recent election, the Iranian president issued an executive order that all officials within the executive branch are not bound by the laws passed by parliament. Ahmadinejad also continues to employ controversial yet publically popular supporters like Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei and Executive Vice President Hamid Baghaei despite orders from Khamenei and other high-ranking ayatollahs to dismiss them. Both of these men have openly called for an end to the theocracy, much to the citizenry’s widespread delight. The executive branch persists as well in its efforts to blame Iran’s growing international isolation, worsening economic woes, and stifling socioreligious codes upon the clerics’ “Arabian-style Islam.”

As dissent continues to mount, all the political factions are busy preparing for the next conflict—not with the UN, the United States, EU, or Israel, but over Iran’s presidential election to be held in June 2013. Former presidential candidate Rezai has said that “six or seven prominent political figures will run for that office” in what is likely to be the most hotly contested and politically unpredictable balloting since the founding of the Islamic Republic.

At the heart of the Islamic Republic’s problems is a moribund political system which is spiraling into absolute dysfunction. Paramilitary commanders close to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei have boasted that their troops “can secure elections,” and the IRGC does not mince words when urging its troops to “vote for Islamic candidates” and “safeguard the Islamic state.” Yet fixing ballots in favor of the ayatollahs does not translate into holding back the tensions that are building into a populist tsunami. Even the Basij and IRGC may not be able to suppress the next revolt. “It is in reality increasingly a show, a political farce,” commented a University of Tehran political scientist about the Islamic system of government. The popular Tehrani female rapper Bahar captures her fellow citizens’ longing for regime change:

The land of Iran is a prisoner of a cold night.
Tomorrow the bright dawn will come.
You [Khamenei] are not a wise man, you tyrant.
You’ve shown how you believe in God.
So you have only a few criminal disciples.  
Where does the Quran say ‘be vile and corrupt?’  
Why do your clothes smell like blood?  
What are you trying to hide?  
Why do you crush this cry for justice?  
The people don’t deserve such disdain.  
Know that no regime can hang on through hatred and violence.  
We are ready and waiting.

She adds:

They think they’ve put out the fire.  
But we’re the smoldering coals under the ashes.78

Ironically, it was a former stalwart of Ayatollah Khomeini, the late Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, who laid down a theological basis for challenging the Islamic Republic’s very existence: “A political system based on force ... is illegitimate. Taking action against it entails paying heavily, but will be rewarded greatly by God.” Essentially, the will of Iran’s people is regarded as superior to that of any leader and his cohorts, a viewpoint enshrined in Iran’s current constitution as well. History as well as current trends suggest that Iranians will eventually succeed in separating religion from state. Naturally, they will not reject Shiism and its mollahs completely, for faith has been central to Iranian life for centuries. Instead, the object of Iranian reformers will be to return the clergymen to an appropriate place in society as religious guides rather than politicians. In this, Iranian nationalists may be inspired by the example of those early Iranians led by Darius the Great who, in the year 522 BC, successfully ousted the magi or Zoroastrian priests who had seized political power through their leader Gaumata.79 Yet, exactly when Iranians will succeed this time around remains unclear.

NOTES


9. Quotation from Kaveh Omid, “At Low Point, Leader’s Popularity Ebbs.”

10. Quoted by *Asriran News*, “Elections Matter,” (February 3, 2012), http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/199686/%D8%A2%D9%86%D9%87%D8%A7-%D9%83%D9%87-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%86%D9%85%D9%8A%E2%80%8C%D8%A2%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%86%D8%AF-%D9%85%D8%B1%D9%87%D9%85%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%A8%8D%
The ayatollahs’ attempts at the majles elections are described in Jamsheed K. Choksy, “The Fix is In,” *Foreign Policy* (February 27, 2012), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/02/27/the_fix_is_in.


26. Quotation from American Enterprise Institute, Iran Tracker (January 4, 2012), http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-january-4-2012. Other details can be found


118 ■ CURRENT TRENDS IN ISLAMIST IDEOLOGY / VOL. 13
http://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/feb/15/election-watch-3-election-crackdown-media;
A poignant Iranian cartoon critiquing internet censorship can be seen at http://alef.ir/vdcgqt9qwak9t34.rpra.html?144613.


http://fararu.com/fa/news/111827/%D8%AA%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%A7%D8%AD%D9%85%D8%A9%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D9%86%DA%98%D8%A7%D8%AF%D9%88%D9%87%D9%87%E2%80%8C%D9%BE%D8%AC%D8%A7%DB%81%DB%8C%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%86%D8%A7%DB%81%DA%AF%D8%B0%D8%A7%D8%B4%D8%AA%D9%86%D9%A8%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%DB%8C%D8%A8%DA%A9%D9%87%D9%86%6D%8B%D8%AA%D9%88%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97%D8%B1%DB%8C%DA%A9%D9%84%DB%8C%D8%A7%DA%98%DA%96%6D%8B%DA%97


56. Quotations and other details are taken from Choksy, “Iran Frustrated Attempting to Take Charge of Arab Rising.”


67. Tehran Times (April 3, 2012), http://www.tehrantimes.com/politics/96559-persian-press-headlines-april-03; Asriran News (April 4, 2012), http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/207829/%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B6%DB%8C%D8%AD%D8%A7%A9%97%D8%A7%D8%B4%95%DB%8C%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A8%97%B1%D9%8B%D3%AE%D9%86%D8%A7%96%D8%B4%8D%AF%D8%B1%8D%A7%98%B1%97%D9%87%95%DB%8B%D8%A7%DA%A9%97%98%97%98%DA%A9%8D%A7%95%DA%8B%D8%8C%DA%A9%97%AA7; Muhammad Sahimi, “Rafsanjani: I Wanted to Reestablish Ties with US, But ‘Could Not’,” Frontline: Tehran Bureau (April 6, 2012), http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2012/04/media-watch-rafsanjani-i-wanted-to-reestablish-ties-with-us-but-could-not.html#ixzz1rHCYJQzh; and American Enterprise Institute, Iran Tracker (April 2-3, 2012), http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-april-2-3-2012, and (April 4, 2012), http://www.irantracker.org/roundup/iran-news-round-april-4-2012.


70. See for instance a similar assessment by Hooman Majd, “Christmas is No Time for an Iranian Revolution,” Foreign Affairs (January 12, 2012), http://www.foreignaffairs.com/features/letters-from/christmas-is-no-time-for-an-iranian-revolution; and Choksy, “The Fix is In.”


75. Quotation from *IRNA News* (January 20, 2012), http://irna.ir/News/30774352/%D8%A7%D9%85%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D8%AC%D9%85%D8%B9%D9%87%20%D9%85%D8%B4%D9%87%D8%AF%20%D9%86%D9%82%D8%AF%20%D9%83%D8%B1%D8%AF%D9%86%20%D9%86%D8%B8%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%85%DB%8C%DA%86%20%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%85%20%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%AA%20%D9%86%DB%8C%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%8A/.


78. Bahar’s words, like the other denunciations of the regime, were recorded clandestinely by Manon Loizeau, “Chroniques d’un Iran interdit,” (2009-2011), http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D3TksM4oLDM, with an abbreviated English subtitled version...
“Letters from Iran” at http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/letters-from-iran/. For the Basij boast see Tabnak News (February 27, 2012), http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/229137/85%9D%87%D8%8B%2D8%A7%8B%2D8%A8%8D%B3%DB%8C%D8%AC%DB%8C%D8%A8%8B%2D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%AA%8D%A7%9D%85%DB%8C%D8%A7%9D%86%DB%8C%D8%AA%8D%A7%8D%8A%8D%A7%DB%8C%D8%A7%8D%AA%8D%A7%9D%86%DB%8C%D8%A8%8D%A7%8D%AA. The professor is quoted in Asriran News (February 28, 2012), http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/203247/%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%8A%D9%8A%D8%A7%DA%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%85%9D%84%8D%A7%8D%AD%2D8%8C%D8%B7%9D%84%8D%A8%8D%A7%8D%9D%85%DB%8C%E2%80%8C%D8%A2%9D%85%DB%8C%AF%D9%86%8D%A8%9D%87%D8%82%9D%86%8D%A7%8B%8C%9D%84%DB%8C%9D%85%DB%8C%2D8%8C%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%85%DB%8B%1D9%85%9D%88%8D%AA%9D%88%8D%B8%84%DB%8C%9D%BE%9D%88%9D%84%9D%86%DA%AF%8D%B1%9D%81%8D%AA%9D%85%DA%9D%87%9D%85%8D%B1%8D%AF%9D%85%8D%B1%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%8D%9D%81%8D%AA%9D%81%8D%A7%9D%87%9D%85%8D%B4%8D%AF%9D%87.