The 2009 Elections and Iran’s Changing Political Landscape

by Mehran Kamrava

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Abstract: Iran’s June 2009 elections set into motion four processes that are central to the operations of the Islamic Republic regime. They include: the growing gap between large sections of Iranian society from the Islamic Republican state; the steady militarization of the political system; the unprecedented degree to which the Supreme Leader has become an active partisan in the increasingly bitter political infighting among regime insiders; and—most significantly—the violent disruption of an emerging set of “rules of the game,” that previously served as a safety check against excessive factional infighting. This last consequence of the election and its aftermath is likely to leave its most enduring imprint on the State. Specifically, the elections have taken Iran from manageable factionalism to the brink of complete political paralysis. As such, given the untenability of the State’s present predicament, far-reaching changes are almost certain to come.

It is no exaggeration to argue that the June 2009 presidential elections in Iran marked a significant watershed in the political history of the Islamic Republic. Although the elections’ consequences are not fully understood, it is clear that the elections have forever changed the nature of the Islamic Republic’s political system and its relationship with Iranians politically and socially. The personal consequences of the election and its aftermath, no doubt, have been traumatic for countless Iranians, many long supportive of the Islamic Republic, and yet many also victimized by the brutal clampdown that followed the elections. Equally profound are the institutional and ideological consequences of what transpired, following the elections, for the political system itself, having forever changed the internal assumptions that had become its modus operandi since the late 1980s.

In this article, I argue that the June 2009 elections have set into motion four processes that are central to the regime’s operations. Three of them are
generally inconsequential to the regime’s overall survivability. They include the unprecedented deepening chasm that separates Iranian society from the Islamic Republican state; the steady militarization of the political system; and, the degree to which the Supreme Leader, the Vali-ye Faqih, has become an active partisan in the political infighting among regime insiders. None of these developments, I maintain, necessarily undermines the Iranian state’s ability to effectively govern the country, though in the long run none can be helpful to its *longue duree*. However, a fourth process, unleashed by the election and its aftermath, is likely to have more serious consequences for the State. Up until the elections, the Islamic Republic state relied on a precarious equilibrium whereby the various factions competed but also observed vaguely-defined boundaries that the voluntarily respected. But this implicit gentlemen’s agreement collapsed in the election’s aftermath. And this breakdown in these emerging rules of the game has pushed the political system from manageable levels of factionalism to seemingly untenable political paralysis characterized by bitter infighting. More specifically, what was once factionalism that did not seriously impede governability has now been transformed into a political paralysis that has the potential of bringing the system to a grinding halt. As such, given the untenability of the State’s present predicament, far-reaching, changes to the State are almost certain to come.

This article looks first at the larger political and ideological contexts within which the 2009 elections took place. More specifically, the article examines the reasons for and the processes through which factional alignments changed markedly during President Ahmadinejad’s first term in office. The president’s confrontational style and polarizing administration brought about both a steady realignment of the factional line-ups and, more ominously, a steady sharpening of their acrimony toward one another. The bitter campaign leading up to the June 2009 elections only fueled the growing animosity, ending in a near-complete rupture soon after the election results were announced. What the future holds for the Islamic Republic state is quite uncertain. What is clear, however, is that its present predicament is unsustainable and is bound to change—a change that is likely to be substantive rather than superficial.

**The Political Context**

The start of the Ahmadinejad presidency in 2005 coincided with important shifts in the position, resources, and alliances of each of the Islamic Republic’s factions. Prior to Ahmadinejad’s electoral victory and his assumption of power, the country’s political landscape included three main factions. The most powerful faction appeared to be the Religious Conservatives, who were, ironically, the least institutionally organized of the three. This group
primarily of senior clerics based in Qom. The group had reached political ascendency within the first year or two of the revolution, and continued to approach religious and theological precepts through comparatively traditionalist interpretations of jurisprudence (fiqh) and exegesis (ijtihad).

A second group comprised individuals and political figures who were still relatively conservative in their vision of the revolution’s direction and legacy. Yet, at the same time, they were generally pragmatic in considering Iran’s foreign policy objectives and its economic and developmental needs. These Conservative Pragmatists included, most notably, former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, along with an expanding crop of professionals and technocrats, the loyalty and managerial competence of some of whom had propelled them to influential positions within the political system. A prime example was the former mayor of Tehran, Gholam Reza Karbaschi, who was later tried on corruption charges most believed to have been trumped up.

Finally, there were the Reformists. Former President Mohammad Khatami, serves as the symbolic head and continues to command respect among the urban middle classes, who were institutionally and organizationally bereft of power. Khatami’s presidency ended on a whimper in 2005, with the popular euphoria of his 1997 election and first term in office steadily turning into disillusionment in the latter years of his second term. The Reformists might have been popular electorally, but politically and institutionally they were too weak to overcome the entrenched resistance of conservative elements spread across most of the sensitive positions within the State who repeatedly blocked and frustrated their policies. The combination of unfulfilled promises, apparent political impotence, and a vastly disillusioned electorate resulted in the Reformist candidate’s abysmal performance in the 2005 presidential elections.

Before discussing the factional realignments that ensued, following the 2005 election of Ahmadinejad, two points must be kept in mind. The first concerns the position of the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, during this time. From the time he assumed the office of Valiy-e Faqib, following Ayatollah Khomeini’s death, Khamenei has possessed neither the stature of Khomeini, nor his shrewd sense of political timing. Unlike Khomeini, who rarely intervened in the frequent bickering of his underlings, Khamenei repeatedly has made known his own traditionalist preferences. But even when he expressed his direct displeasure with the president’s policies, he did so indirectly. In many ways, while making his preferences known, from 1997 up until the 2005 election, Khamenei managed to keep the office of the Valiy-e Faqib above the factional fray, therefore preserving a modicum of impartiality as the ultimate arbiter of the regime’s internal contradictions.

Second, despite the significant differences that characterized their organizational resources, their connections with and popularity among their
respective audiences, and their access to levers of power, the three primary
factions—the Religious Conservatives, the Conservative Pragmatists, and the
Reformists—more or less balanced each other out. At one level, no single
faction was sufficiently powerful to effectively sideline the others, and each of
the factions begrudgingly tolerated the others. The upshot was the beginning
of a set of “rules of the game” and a *modus vivendi* among each of the
country’s political factions and actors.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to the presidency in 2005
set into motion steady processes of change along multiple fronts. Apart
from a radical change in the tone of politics, away from Khatami’s emphasis
on dialogue and inclusion in favor of sloganeering and confrontational
rhetoric reminiscent of the revolution’s early days, three specific changes
occurred in the country’s political system from 2005 to 2009. The first
change took place right before the president took office, when the Con-
servative Pragmatists and the Reformists formed an alliance, in the second
round of the election, to beat Ahmadinejad. This maneuver initiated two
parallel processes. On the one hand, it began changing the factional
alignments that had taken shape since 1997. Instead of the three factions,
discussed above, two larger coalitions began to form. One was made-up of
Conservative Pragmatists and Reformists on one side and another com-
prised of Religious Conservatives and a new group, the so-called Princip-
lists, of whom Ahmadinejad was the most visible representative, on the
other side. One of the most significant outcomes of the 2005 election
was the redrawing of the factional alignments in Iran. At the same time,
the coalitional politics, as well as the groups that emerged out of the
election, polarized the political process and gave rise to increasingly bitter
verbal exchanges among key regime insiders. This, in turn, laid the ground-
work for the explosive rupture that followed immediately after the 2009
election.

A related outgrowth of the 2005 election was the steady political
ascendancy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Their increasing
political clout was not by design but rather the result of former military
commanders, many of them decorated veterans of the war with Iraq, steadily
integrating themselves into the civilian apparatus of the State beginning in the
early 1990s. Most also enrolled in university graduate programs and, therefore,
enhanced their career mobility and their positions within the State. As the
1990s wore on, they became institutionally distanced from the IRGC. Yet they
often retained strong emotional and ideological bonds with likeminded
cohorts. Provincial governorships and mayoral offices, the Ministries of
Intelligence and Interior, and newspapers such as *Keyhan* and *Resalat* became
especially favorite places of employment for these and other ideological
purists who began calling themselves Principlists. Even those Principlists
without backgrounds in the IRGC found, in the paramilitary organization, a
powerful ideological ally. These purists believed themselves to be the true
bearers of Ayatollah Khomeini’s mantle and the arbiters of the revolution’s correct path.

This militarization of the political system had actually begun before Ahmadinejad’s election in 2005. Tensions between Iran, the United States, and Israel—and frequent bellicose statements from Washington and Tel Aviv—had elicited increasingly sharp responses from Iranian military commanders following 2001. The possibility of a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran from early 2003 onward only helped to enhance the profile and influence of IRGC commanders within the Iranian political system.¹ With the Principlists in control of the executive branch after 2005, the ascendancy of the IRGC assumed a new dimension, with an overwhelming majority of the president’s administrative and diplomatic appointments comprised of individuals with connections to the organization. In June 2009, when, following the announcement of election results, mass demonstrations threatened to erode the IRGC’s privileged position in the executive, it placed itself at the forefront of suppressing the demonstrators and ensuring that the Ahmadinejad presidency continued into a second term. Not surprisingly, Ahmadinejad is likely to be even more reliant on—in fact, beholden to—the IRGC during his second term.

A third change following the 2005 election concerns the profile of the office of the Supreme Leader regarding the rest of the political system. As the new president started to implement his populist agendas, seeking to appoint ministers and others who were unknown or on the margins of the state bureaucracy, he faced strong opposition even from within the traditionalist camp, so much so that some groups identifying themselves as Principlists broke off their alliance with him. The acrimony within the Majles—Iran’s parliament—over the president’s cabinet appointments was especially bitter. Proposed candidates to head the Ministries of Oil, Foreign Affairs, and Interior were subjected to particularly harsh criticism and rejection. Time and again, Khamenei had to step in, to support the president, and involve himself in a level of detail that the Supreme Leader had previously stayed above.

The question of why Khamenei chose to ally himself with Ahmadinejad on almost all political issues, at a cost to his own legitimacy, remains a mystery. No doubt ideological affinity is a critical part of the answer. The ideological positions that Khamenei has taken over the years reflect a deep-seated sense of conservatism on many jurisprudential, political, and socio-cultural issues.² Regarding politics and diplomacy, there appear to be few, ¹For a discussion of the possibility of a U.S. attack on Iran at the time see, Mehran Kamrava, “The United States and Iran: A Dangerous but Contained Rivalry”. Middle East Institute Policy Brief, March 2008. Although the possibility of a U.S. attack on Iran has subsided substantially following the departure from office of President George W. Bush in January 2009, the threat of an Israeli attack on Iran, as of this writing at least, continues to be very real.
if any, substantive differences between him and Ahmadinejad. But equally important in Khamenei’s calculation appears to be his apprehension about the alternative, not just concerning “reform” of the system, but doing so in a way that would precipitate its collapse. This fear on Khamenei’s part was revealed in his much-anticipated Friday Prayer sermon following post-election disturbances in June 2009:

Those distinguished Western diplomats who until recently used diplomatic protocol to communicate with us have finally removed their masks and have revealed their true face. And the most vile of them is the government of Britain . . . [The disturbances and the riots are] not the work of supporters of candidates but the work of mercenaries and puppets hired by the Zionists and by Western intelligence agencies. Naively, they thought Iran is Georgia! A few years ago, a Zionist American industrialist admitted in the media that he spent ten million dollars to start a velvet revolution in Georgia and to change the government. These idiots think they can do the same thing with the Islamic Republic and its powerful people.³

The repeated allusions to the machinations of “the enemy” in Khamenei’s speeches cannot all be dismissed as mere rhetoric and hyperbole.⁴ Neither, can his fears be dismissed as completely groundless in light of the U.S. Congress’s allocation of some $67 million for purposes of “democracy promotion” in Iran.⁵ Recent revelations of efforts by the U.S. Consulate in Dubai to recruit operatives in Iran, only add credence to deep-seated fears by Khamenei and others.⁶

Whatever the motivating factors for Khamenei’s actions might have been, the ultimate outcome has been his unprecedented level of involvement in state affairs, and, in the process, consistent support for the president and for his controversial policies and appointments. For his part, Ahmadinejad, who was the republic’s first president to have to go to a second round of balloting to win a presidential election, and who soon discovered that his electoral victory did not necessarily translate into widespread institutional support for his populist agenda, repeatedly sought shelter and support in the office of the

⁵ Kenneth Katzman. “Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses”. Congressional Research Service. (May 19, 2009), p. 44. The 2006 National Security Strategy of the United States of America, issued by the White House, could not be more pointed in its warning about Iran: “We may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran . . . we will continue to take all necessary measures to protect our national and economic security against the adverse effects of their bad conduct. The problems lie with the illicit behavior and dangerous ambition of the Iranian regime, not the legitimate aspirations and interests of the Iranian people. Our strategy is to block the threats posed by the regime while expanding our engagement and outreach to the people the regime is oppressing.” The White House. National Security Strategy of the United States of America, 2006. (Washington, DC: The White House, 2006), pp. 20–21.
Supreme Leader. In one famous example in 2008, when, after repeated tries, the Majles simply refused to approve Ali Kordan, Ahmadinejad’s nominee for the Interior Ministry, the president told parliament deputies that Kordan was the Supreme Leader’s candidate.7

Such was the general state of Iran’s domestic political scene as the country entered the 2009 presidential elections. As noted earlier, the three broad factions that had emerged in the 1990s had coalesced into two, broader ones, with an alliance of Pragmatic Conservatives and Reformists, on the one side, and Religious Conservatives on the there. The IRGC had become increasingly visible and influential in the political process, owing to both the Principlists’ ideological dispositions and institutional heritage, as well as the tensions the country faced internationally. The Supreme Leader, meanwhile, was becoming more involved in the minutia of government policies and politics, thus exposing the office to loss of credibility among urban, middle class voters.

Although tensions resulting from internal infighting and conflicts still inhered in the system, a precarious balance continued to characterize the relationships between the different factions. The two contending coalitions, in other words, existed in an uneasy, at times tense, equilibrium, where the ultimate goal of “preserving the system” (hefz-e nezam) presented them with implicit redlines, which neither party was able or willing to cross. The rules of the game that were beginning to emerge in the 1990s were well on their way to being redrawn toward the end of Ahmadinejad’s first term in office. But they were still strong enough to keep the two opposing camps begrudgingly tolerant of one another. However, this was not to last, and the managed tensions that characterized the 2005 to 2009 interlude boiled over into open conflict in the June elections.

**The 2009 Elections**

Despite its lackluster start, the election campaign, to the surprise of most observers, soon kicked into high gear and featured huge mass rallies across the country. Several developments combined to generate considerable interest by urban middle class voters. For one thing, the candidacy of Mir Hussein Mousavi energized an electorate that, for the most part, had lost faith in the system’s ability to reform itself. Back in 2005, many Iranian voters sympathetic to the reformist cause initially stayed away from the polls and boycotted the first round of the elections. They were frustrated by the Traditionalists’ incessant institutional undermining of reformist agendas. At first, the coalition representing the Conservative Pragmatists and the Reformists appeared to have a difficult time

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7 Initially approved by the Majles, Kordan subsequently had to resign his post when it was revealed that his Oxford University degree was a forgery.
fielding a viable candidate. Khatami reluctantly declared his candidacy, but his campaign never picked up the steam necessary to generate electoral excitement. But in Mousavi, the collation found a winnable candidate who at once had impeccable revolutionary and managerial credentials and symbolized a desire to change the system from within.8 To the left of Mousavi was Hojjatoleslam Mehdi Karrubi, a former Majles Speaker and presidential candidate, whose sharp verbal attacks on the establishment steadily forced Mousavi’s campaign to sharpen its own organizational efforts and campaign rallies. The open support of Khatami and Rafsanjani for Moussavi meant that two influential personalities with widespread popularity among the electorate were in his corner.

Apart from the importance of the personalities involved, the 2009 election brought with it several new developments that helped deepen popular excitement and involvement in it. For one thing, the election featured real campaigning on the part of all three of the main candidates running, and even the long-shot Mohsen Rezai, former IRGC commander who had also run in 2005, traveled across the country giving rousing speeches.9 An online “get out the vote” campaign, launched informally by a number of celebrities and other well known personalities and artists, only helped deepen the mass excitement surrounding the election campaign.10 And, for the first time, the election featured live, televised debates between the four candidates. Apart from their novelty, the widely-watched debates impressed the electorate with the real differences among the candidates and the spectrum of views they represented, and demonstrated that each had a different platform, and, for those previously disenchanted with the system, that the elections indeed mattered.

Perhaps more than any other single development, the televised debates both exposed the depth of the fissures within the political establishment, and indeed, further deepened them. Renowned for his oratory attacks on opponents, Ahmadinejad did not hold back and promised to expose the massive corruption of his opponents and their underhanded ways.11 In turn, he was accused of incompetence and undemocratic ways by both Mousavi and Karrubi. And Rafsanjani and his supporters launched their own media attacks on the president. The election was not just acrimonious in tone and appearance, it was sharply divisive in substance. This was unlike anything the system had experienced before. The implicit rules of the game that had emerged before, and the rules of the game that had been observed for much of the regime’s existence, were all now being publically breached. And the subtle, behind-the-scenes factional bickering that was often so carefully concealed

9 Ibid. p. 6.
10 See, for example, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HaEBTyueCs.
11 The video of the widely-watched debate between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi is available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=f5gGxwDPTTk.
from the larger public was, suddenly being fought out in the open, on
television, in newspapers, and, increasingly, in the streets.

According to the official results released by the Interior Ministry (Table 1
below), of the record forty million Iranians who went to polling stations, 63
percent voted for Ahmadinajad and only 34 percent voted for Mousavi, with
Karrubi and Rezai managing to garner embarrassingly negligible support.

For several weeks leading up to the election, the Mousavi and Karrubi
camps had warned about fraud as a real possibility and had called for
independent monitors to be stationed at the voting booths on election day.
Initially, as the Mousavi camp monitored the election returns on the day of the
election, it believed that Mousavi had won handily, only to be surprised late at
night by the Interior Ministry’s sudden announcement of the final results.

Was the election “stolen,” as Ahmadinejad’s opponents claim? Perhaps
we will never know. But there are several reasons to question the accuracy of
the data supplied by the Interior Ministry. According to an analysis of the data
by Chatham House, in two provinces, Yazd and Mazandaran, the official
figures indicate a turnout of more than 100 percent. “In a third of all provinces
the official results would require that Ahmadinejad took not only all former
conservative voters, and all former centrist voters, and all new voters, but also
up to 44% of former Reformist voters, despite a decade of conflict between
these two groups.” Moreover, the report found no correlation at the provincial
level between the increased turnout and Ahmadinejad’s sweeping victory.
“This challenges the notion that his victory was due to the massive participa-
tion of a previously silent Conservative majority,” particularly in light of the fact
that in the 1997, 2001, and 2005 elections, conservative candidates, “and
Ahmadinejad in particular, were markedly unpopular in rural areas.”

That the countryside always votes conservative is a myth. The claim that this year
Ahmadinejad swept the board in more rural provinces flies in the face of these
trends.12

Additionally, for the first time in the republic’s history, the incumbent
president won every single province, bucking the “favorite son” phenomenon
that in all previous elections had carried at least one of the provinces for one or
more of the long-shot candidates.

Election.” (London: Chatham House, June 21, 2009), p. 2. All the information in this paragraph
comes from this report.
Whatever the veracity of the results, the outcome of the election was met with mass protests in Tehran and in the country’s other major cities. The “Green Wave,” that had come to symbolize Mousavi’s campaign for change from within, brought hundreds of thousands of protestors to the streets. For several days following the elections the country was brought to a standstill by throngs of middle class Iranians marching under “where is my vote?” signs and chanting “death to the dictator.” A few pro-Ahmadinejad rallies also took place, but not nearly of the magnitude of those calling for a recount of the vote and a reversal of the results.

As the street marches grew larger and more frequent, previous tensions within the system quickly became uncontrollable, instigating a rapidly spreading social movement with Mousavi as its inadvertent leader. Ahmadinejad, by naming names in the televised debates, lashing out at his opponents and publically accusing them of corruption, and now by apparently rigging the election results so massively, had opened a Pandora’s Box that could not be easily closed. Only two options appeared open to him, and, by implication, to the IRGC-backed Principlists: either give in to the demands of the protestors and their leaders and make room for the Green Wave, or reinstate order and authority by force. The blanket repression that followed was shocking in its scope, breadth, and its intensity. And, just as the magnitude of the street protests had taken everyone by surprise, so did the brutality of the violent crackdown that followed.

The Consequences

Given the unprecedented character of the 2009 election and its immediate aftermath, the full ramifications will likely take several years to unfold. What transpired before and immediately following the election will undoubtedly be a significant marker in the life of the Islamic Republic system. The long-term nature and direction of the forces unleashed are impossible to predict. In the short run, however, four significant trends can be detected, all of which are centrally relevant to the conduct of politics by the Islamic Republic state.

The first trend is the ever-widening chasm between State and society. For much of its life, particularly after the end of the war with Iraq in 1988 and the redrafting of the constitution the following year, the Iranian political system had featured a mixture of authoritarian populism and a theocratic democracy. Here pre-approved candidates vied for elected offices in the parliament and the presidency. Despite its flaws and restrictions, the system contained enough accountability and transparency through elections that it appeared legitimate to the urban middle classes. From the beginning, often

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under adverse circumstances, the regime loyally held elections for the presidency and the parliament. These elections were not fair—with the Guardian Council's matrix for approval of candidates changing arbitrarily from one election to the next—but they were generally free. Vote rigging and other forms of electoral irregularity were rarely characteristic of Iran prior to the 2009 elections.14

But the 2009 elections transformed the Islamic Republic system from one with certain democratic features to one that is thoroughly undemocratic and repressive—complete with arbitrary arrests, the rape and torture of prisoners, and show trials of well-known public figures. Whatever vestige of popular legitimacy the regime may have had before June 2009 was swept away in the election’s violent aftermath, thus resulting in a significant narrowing of its base of support among urban-based, middle class Iranians. Without public opinion data or other reliable means of measuring regime legitimacy, one way to gauge the steady decline of the regime’s popularity in the urban areas is to point to the number of anti-government demonstrations in various urban areas whenever the opportunity presents itself. On university campuses across the country, on national holidays, during football matches, during official visits by state officials and dignitaries, and on many similar occasions, spontaneous outbursts of popular anger at the regime or at specific personalities affiliated with it illustrate that the regime’s legitimacy in the urban areas has reached something of a nadir.15

Significantly, the decline in the popular legitimacy of the regime has coincided with an inverse rise in the power and influence of the IRGC. Since the June 2009 elections, the IRGC has re-emerged as one of the State’s most central institutions of power, entrusted, largely on its own accord, with the task of rooting out the regime’s domestic enemies.16 In the process, what was once a partially democratic theocracy is being steadily transformed into a “mukhaberat state,” of the kind found in Algeria, Egypt, and Syria, in which a deliberately cultivated sense of fear from the State is meant to ensure popular political acquiescence.17 We are currently witnessing in Iran a realignment among the various institutions of the State, whereby the steady ascent of the IRGC, that had started in the first term of Ahmadinejad’s presidency, has reached new levels at the beginning of his second term, with the paramilitary organization more visible in domestic politics than perhaps at any other time. For now at least, it is difficult to determine which state institutions have paid a

price for this rise. But a logical likelihood might be the Majles. The continued relevance or marginalization of the Majles, or other state institutions for that matter, remains to be seen. What is obvious for now is the rise in the powers and influence of the IRGC.

Equally consequential changes appear underway in the office of the Supreme Leader. Most notably, despite his thinly veiled efforts to appear objective and not to favor Ahmadinejad over other candidates, a perception of Khamenei has emerged as the President’s ultimate patron and guardian, and, therefore, intimately involved in the bitter animosity gripping the regime’s central figures. This perception has been reinforced both by Khamenei’s own statements and speeches, in which he has repeatedly dismissed post-election protests as the work of malcontents and agents of foreign powers, and also by the repeated appeals of Mousavi and Karrubi, asking the Supreme Leader to intercede on their behalf, to no avail. More than ever before, the regime’s factional infighting has centered on the Leader’s ideological and political disposition. In fact, for the first time in the republic’s history, there have been credible rumors of moves within the Assembly of Experts, which is constitutionally empowered to oversee the office of the Supreme Leader, to have Khamenei removed from office because of his partisanship and open involvement in the regime’s factional drama, which reached new heights after the 2009 elections.

The direct intrusion of Khamenei and the IRGC into the political process has greatly changed the precarious balance of power that had long characterized the relationship between the different factions. Previously respected rules of the game have been traversed, and the IRGC-Principlist coalition has proactively sought to destroy the opposition—the coalition of the reformists and the Conservative Pragmatists. This has been effected by imprisoning and harassing its key figures and severely limiting the movement of the handful of individuals who remain out of prison. By doing so, the Principlists and their allies have entered into uncharted territory.

Up until now, despite the depth of their disagreements or the intensity of their disputes, all factions shared one over-riding objective: the survival of the Islamic Republic system. Regime survival required accommodation and tolerance toward one another. But the 2009 elections made the stakes too high, and the Principlist-IRGC coalition has decided to destroy their Reformist-Conservative Pragmatist opponents once and for all. The high stakes game that has ensued has turned some of the most trusted members of the regime’s inner-circle against one another, opening the way for a possible political explosion, or implosion, that neither side can contain. Managed, and at times

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deliberate, “suspended equilibrium” among the component parts and factions of the Islamic Republic has rapidly given way to potentially unmanageable tensions among key members of the elite and the institutions they use as lever.

Looking to the Future

Will the regime’s factions regroup and seek to strike reconciliation for the sake of convenience and mutual survival? Will the IRGC and the Principlists, joined by Religious Traditionalists, ultimately prevail by eliminating the alliance of the Conservative Pragmatists and the Reformists and forever redraw the Islamic Republic’s political map? Will the Supreme Leader continue to rule more as an unrestrained autocrat or once again resume his mostly symbolic role as an arbiter within the system? Will Iran slide deeper into the abyss of political dysfunctionalism, or will it adopt the so-called China model of authoritarian economic development, or will it once again embark on a slow and painful march toward greater electoral accountability and transparency? Only time will tell what the next chapter in the life of the Islamic Republic holds. What is abundantly clear, however, is that political change, major change, is in the offing in Iran.