

Briefing

# Iran's 2017 Presidential Election

Implications for Human Rights



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Center for  
**HUMAN  
RIGHTS**  
in Iran

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## About us

The **Center for Human Rights in Iran (CHRI)** is an independent, nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights in Iran. CHRI investigates and documents rights violations occurring throughout Iran, relying on first-hand accounts to expose abuses that would otherwise go unreported. We bring these violations to the attention of the international community through news articles, briefings, in-depth reports and videos, and work to build support for human rights inside Iran as well. CHRI engages in intensive outreach and international advocacy aimed at defending the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Iranian people and holding the Iranian government accountable to its human rights obligations.

## Key Findings

- > Iran's presidential election, scheduled for May 19, is taking place within a context of the growing suppression of political voices in the country by hardliners who wish to prevent the centrist incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani, from winning a second term.
- > The three main challengers to President Rouhani at present, Ebrahim Raisi, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, are all candidates with a record of egregious human rights violations.
- > There are reports of large and growing numbers of summons aimed at the intimidation and silencing of centrist and reformist voices, and numerous activists and journalists have been arrested during the run-up to the elections.
- > Social media platforms typically used by pro-government and reformist political forces are increasingly being targeted for blocking and suppression.
- > Activists inside Iran have expressed growing concerns over the potential for an intensification of the current crackdown as the election approaches, as well as concerns over the possibility of polling irregularities if the election results are close.

## Recommendations

- > EU members should express in meeting with their Iranian counterparts their concern over restrictions on freedom of speech in Iran. They should urge the authorities to:
  - Stop harassing, summoning and interrogating journalists, activists and students.
  - Allow full access to the internet and social media platforms.
  - Provide an environment where people can freely and fully express their political opinions and views.
  
- > EU members should express their concerns regarding the wave of summons and arrests of journalists, activists and students, noting that this undermines the safe public space for debate which is necessary for free and fair elections, and request that judicial officials release the individuals who have been arrested during the recent months.
  
- > EU members should express their expectation that the May 19 presidential election in Iran takes place in the context of rigorous transparency and fairness, in which all parties have access to monitor polling stations.

# Introduction

Iran's 12th presidential elections will be held on May 19. According to Iran's Ministry of Interior, 1636 individuals have registered. Only a handful of these individuals will be approved by the Guardian Council, the clerical body that vets candidates for political office in the Islamic Republic.

The election is taking place in a context in which there have been increasing concerns regarding the repression of civil society, the arrest and summoning of journalists, activists and students, the potential for possible polling irregularities in the event that the election results are close, and the ability of the citizenry to participate in fully free and fair elections.

The polarized political environment, the intensification of challenges by hardliners in Iran to the re-election of President Rouhani despite the Islamic Republic's tradition of granting the incumbent a second term, and the heightened political tensions in the country speak to the importance of this election. Political forces in the country are positioning themselves for the major transition to a new supreme leader, who will likely be chosen to replace the current supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, over the next few years.

There are growing concerns that the current suppression of political voices in Iran and the spate of arrests could deteriorate further into a more intense crackdown as the election approaches.

# The major candidates

In addition to president Hassan Rouhani, who is running for re-election, at present there are three other candidates who are considered major candidates for the presidency.

- > **Hassan Rouhani, current president of Iran:** Rouhani has publicly expressed support for civil rights and liberties in Iran. While running for office in 2013, he called for the release of political prisoners and spoke out against the house arrests of Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi and Zahra Rahnavard. He has publicly defended the Iranian people's right to access to information and freedom of expression and pushed back against hardliners who have sought to curb people's access to social media. He also introduced the Citizen Rights Charter, although with no enforcement capabilities, the charter is toothless.

Nevertheless, Rouhani's Ministry of Intelligence has been one of the institutions responsible for the arrest of dozens of political activists and journalists. For example, the complaint filed by this ministry led to the arrest and prosecution of Iran's prominent human rights activist, Narges Mohammadi who received a -10year prison sentence by the judiciary. It is unclear the extent to which Rouhani has the willingness or ability to reign in his Ministry of Intelligence.

Many activists in Iran have expressed to CHRI their frustration with Rouhani's lack of action, the arrest undertaken by the Ministry of Intelligence and Iran's Revolutionary Guards' (IRGC) Intelligence Organization (which has come to operate as a parallel security apparatus answering only to the country's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei) and the worsening repression in the country.

- > **Ebrahim Raisi, head of the Astan Quds Razavi Foundation and Chief Prosecutor of the Clergy Court:** Raisi is implicated in some of the gravest human rights violations in contemporary Iran. In 1988, he was part of a four-man commission that implemented the extrajudicial executions of thousands of political prisoners. This commission, which came to be known as the "death committee," decided in inquisition-like proceedings whether prisoners, who had already been tried and were serving their prison sentences, would



live or die based on their perceived loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Any public criticism of the massacres of 1988 is still extremely costly, preventing other candidates from raising this issue of Raisi's past in a critical light in any public debate.

Since that time, Raisi has held high positions in the judiciary, although he has never run for public office. At present, he is Chief Prosecutor of Iran's Clergy Court, the court used to try clerics, which has been singled out for its rights violations. On April 2017, 14, prominent Iranian lawyer and activist Nasrin Sotoudeh told CHRI that the Clergy Court is "much worse than the Revolutionary Court in violating legal tenants," with deliberations "behind closed doors" and the families of the accused often refused any access to information regarding the proceedings.

In May 2016 Raisi was made head of the Astan Quds Razavi Foundation. This is a major tax-exempt religious institution in Iran that operates without any transparency as a huge business conglomerate, with major assets and property holdings.

> ***Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, current mayor of Tehran:*** Ghalibaf has been Tehran's mayor since 2005. In 2016, he was accused of corruption and wasting public funds. The news was revealed by Memari News, which later was suspended for publishing a letter from Iran's National Inspection Organization to the Tehran Municipality that declared the sale and grant of certain lands to municipality workers and other officials to be against the law.

Prior to 2005, he was the chief of Iran's police. During his tenure there, many journalists and activists were arrested and kept in secret detentions run by the police. He was also the architect of the "Moral Security Plan" which institutionalized the moral vigilantism of the paramilitary Basij force, aimed at restricting people's (especially women's) social freedoms in public. During his tenure, he also supported the violent suppression of the peaceful student protests in 1999.

> ***Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former president and a member of Iran's Expediency Council:*** President of Iran from 2005-2013, Ahmadinejad presided over a period in which not only were there

grave human rights violations in all walks of life in Iran, but also in which the violent and massive crackdown of 2009 also took place. In this crackdown, the government violently suppressed massive, peaceful protests against the results of the presidential election that year, which brought Ahmadinejad a second term amidst widespread allegations of electoral fraud. Ahmadinejad's Minister of Intelligence continued the intense crackdown that took place after the election over the next four years. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, he also appointed Saeed Mortazavi, who was the main suspect of in the deaths of at least four detainees at the Kahrizak detention center, as the head of Iran's Welfare Organization.

## Indications of a close election

Rouhani's supporters believe that by signing the nuclear deal, he removed the potential for a military attack against Iran and, through the lifting of international sanctions, brought economic relief to the country. They point to a sharp decrease in the country's inflation rate, from roughly 40 percent to 10 percent, and maintain he needs a second term to build upon these improvements.

The forces against the president have been rallying. Rouhani's opponents portray him as a weak president who gave away the country's nuclear program (and pride) for little in return. Iran's supreme leader Ali Khamenei has denied that Iran faced a security threat prior to the nuclear deal and has questioned the worth of the sanctions relief given the continuation of US sanctions. He has stated that economic growth has not been meaningful.

Rouhani's major opponents, including the IRGC, hardliners in Iran's parliament, Iran's state-run National TV, Tehran's Mayor, media outlets close to the IRGC, and other influential and wealthy conservative institutions, have forged a media campaign in the past two months to make their narrative of the nuclear deal and its impacts dominant. The Rouhani administration does not have the resources to effectively challenge these narratives.

At the same time, reformists, centrists and others that would be potential public voices of support for Rouhani have come increasingly under attack. Over the last few months, dozens of journalists and activists have

been arrested. CHRI's investigations, including interviews with dozens of activists in Iran in February and March, indicates that more than a hundred influential actors in the political and social sphere have been summoned by the Revolutionary Guards' Intelligence Organization, including student activists. These activists believe the aim is to spread fear and silence their voices during the election season. In March, the Revolutionary Guards also arrested eight administrators of twelve popular pro-government Telegram Channels, who could have been impactful during the elections by supporting the administration's political agenda.

## Rouhani's struggles for a second term

The upcoming elections are the first in the Islamic Republic's history in which the incumbent president has been challenged to this degree. Several factors have combined to make Rouhani's bid for a second term weaker than prior incumbent presidents. His first term was won with only slightly more than 50 percent. With the media campaign launched by hardliners against him, particularly over the past three months, his inability to translate the lifting of international sanctions into economic relief felt by average citizens, and his unfulfilled promises on social and political rights, he may not only face difficulty attracting new voters, he could have difficulty holding on to his base of support from the 2013 election.

In 2013, Hassan Rouhani won 18,613,329 of the 36,704,156 votes cast which represented %50.71 of the vote, compare to former President Mohammad Khatami who won 70 percent of the vote when he was elected in 1997. In 2001, Khatami won the second term with 23 million and 77 percent of the vote. If any candidate receives less than 50 percent of the vote in the first round, the two top candidates will then compete in the second round which, under current circumstances, would threaten Rouhani's second term in office.

## Future transition to a new supreme leader raises the stakes of this election

There is a strong belief in Iran that during the next four years, the country's

next supreme leader will be chosen by Iran's 88-member Assembly of Experts. The magnitude of such transition for the country encourages Iran's various political forces to use all their means to make sure that such transition will take place while their like-minded allies are in power in order to influence that process in their favor.

## The possibility of electoral irregularities or a state crackdown

The democratic legitimacy of Iran's elections is compromised before the people cast their votes: women are prevented from running for president, as are religious minorities, and all candidates are vetted and must be approved by the Iran's hardline clerical body, the Guardian Council.

Yet competition between even those who have received the approval of the Council can lead to human rights abuses by forces who have the support of hardline military, militias, state owned media, and religious organizations. This was the case in 2009, when the polarized political environment was accompanied by severe human rights violations.

In addition, because Iran's election system is not automated, whenever elections are close, the possibility of fraud is increased. A close election can encourage political forces to try to change the results in their favor. A number of activists in Iran have privately voiced concerns to CHRI regarding voter fraud, concerns that have grown as the election results seem to grow less certain. Massive electoral fraud would be unlikely, but small amounts of "irregularities" that could sway the results in a close election is less improbable.

At present, the focus appears to be in suppressing influential centrist and reformist voices in order to quell their potential impact. The arrest of a dozen of centrist and reformist journalists and activists two months before the elections, such as Hengameh Shahidi, Morad Saghafi, Ehsan Mazandarani, Zeinab Karimian and Tahereh Riahi, follows a similar pattern seen during previous electoral cycles in which hardliners believed that the election results might be tight and therefore their intervention could influence the result.

CHRI has also learned from informed sources that the Rouhani administration is under significant pressure by hardline institutions such as the judiciary and Iran's cyber police to shut down the popular mobile messaging app Telegram during the elections—a platform that was heavily used to significant success by centrist and reformist candidates during the 2016 parliamentary elections.

In addition, five pro-administration journalists in Tehran told CHRI that they have been summoned by the IRGC's Intelligence Organization and told they were being watched by the security forces during the elections.

There are also concerning reports emerging of the summons of large numbers of students. In a joint letter to Hassan Rouhani on April 2017 ,16, seventy-two student organizations wrote, "Interference from outside and the summoning of students by agencies outside the university have escalated the problems facing student activists to the point that the number of judicial summons issued against students has reached nearly 50 and members of the Islamic students' societies and media activists make up most of them." By using such intimidation tactics, hardliners are directly threatening the freedom of speech required to hold a free and fair election.

Activists inside the country have expressed fears of an intensification of the current crackdown, by further suppression of civil and political society, shutting down the means of communications and filtering social media platforms. In such an environment, the potential for human rights violations will increase, even though few political forces in Iran are likely to desire a repeat of the violent and costly events that followed the 2009 presidential election.

## The near-term trajectory of human rights in Iran

Rouhani's inability to deliver on his stated support for an improvement in civil and political liberties in Iran, and the other major candidates' involvement in severe human rights violations, does not bode well for the immediate future of human rights in Iran.

In such a context, CHRI is concerned about a continuation of repression in Iran, if not a further deterioration, with direct impact on current areas of concern for human rights that include:

- > Executions without due process, for crimes not considered “serious” and for juveniles.
- > The imprisonment of activists, human rights defenders, journalists, and individuals who have peacefully expressed views or beliefs with which the government disagrees.
- > The arrest of numerous dual-nationals who have been unlawfully imprisoned on unsubstantiated charges.
- > The continued house arrests of Green Movement leaders Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnavaard.
- > The routine denial of due process, including prolonged detainment without charge, denial of access to counsel, and closed trials with convictions made on the basis of forced “confessions.
- > The denial or delay of medical treatment to prisoners, and punishments tantamount to torture, including amputations and flogging.
- > Widespread discrimination in Iran based on gender, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and disability.
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## Conclusion

The May 19 presidential election in Iran should take place within a context of freedom of speech, full access to information, rigorous electoral monitoring, and free and fair voting. The current repression of civil society and political voices, the suppression of access to information, and the summons and arrests of activists, journalists and students do not support such a context. The authorities in Iran should institute all measures necessary to respect their international and domestic obligations to guarantee free and fair elections.

