Islamic Republic of Iran

**Political System: Key Facts (This section was last updated on 21 October 2020)**

The legal and constitutional arrangements in Iran, similar to other neighbouring countries, have direct impact on the preservation or destruction of natural ecosystems/and the environment. It is the general consensus that government policies of any country can affect the natural environment locally (as well as globally) through its industrial and agricultural policies. The national parliament also plays an important role in preservation or destruction of the environment by introducing new laws.

Depending on where it stands, the Judiciary can apprehend and punish those individuals destroying the national habitat and environment or punish those who blow the whistle on illegal activities of those linked to the state apparatus. Therefore, it is quite imperative to identify the key decision making bodies in the political system of the country.

On the face of it and similar to any modern democracy, the Islamic Republic of Iran has a written constitution which defines the role of three branches of powers in the country, the Executive, Judiciary and legislative. We also regularly hear from local and international media and news outlets that two dominant political forces in Iran, the conservatives and the reformist, compete against each other in various national and local elections to gain control of key decision making bodies in Iranian the political system. Hence, one can assume/think that Iran possesses all the ingredients of a dynamic democratic political system. However, the political reality in Iran is far from this picture.

In Iran, the independent of three branches of power, which acting as checks and balances against each other in a parliamentary democracy are nothing but a myth and also the two main political forces in the country described above are merely two faces of the same coin. In fact, in one of his very recent public speeches the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, described these two dominant political forces in Iran as snakes wrapping around their prey.

Following the revolution of 1979, the monarchical system of governance in Iran was replaced by a new political system. It is rather difficult to classify this new political system along the ones with the practice in most of countries. So, what is the new political system in Iran actually is? The official name of the country is now the Islamic Republic of Iran. However, there is general consensus among religious and political scholars and commentators, both inside and outside the county, that the current political and administrative system in Iran is neither Islamic nor democratic.

On the face of it, the political system of the country is based on the [1979 Constituti](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Iran)on which was amended on 28 July 1989. According to the constitution, Iran is a republic with separation of powers among the legislative, executive, and judicial branches. However, in reality, the ultimate political authority is vested in a cleric referred to commonly as Rahbar (SupremeLeader). This current Supreme Leader is Syed Ali Khamenei who controls the country’s political system and enforces his power directly by appointing or dismissing loyal individuals to key positions within the country, such as head of judiciary (Judicial branch) and State TV and radio broadcasting. Or indirectly through institutions such as Council of Guardians, Expediency Discernment Council, Supreme Judicial Council and the National Security Council of the Establishment. Figure 1 demonstrates the role of the SupremeLeader and his vast power.

One of the methods that the SupremeLeader uses to influence the outcome of the presidential and parliamentary election is through the Council of Guardian. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic allows Iranians to elect the head of the executive branch (the president), and the members of the legislative branch, every four years. However, in reality, the Iranians are given limited choice of who to vote for because the nominees for elected office are vetted, or it is more correct to say are rather filtered, by the Council of Guardian.

The Council of Guardian is the most powerful non-elected body within Iran’s system of governance. The far-reaching powers of the council include interpretation of the Constitution, supervision of elections and the vetting of legislation passed by the parliament. It is a body of twelve religious jurists. Article 91 of the constitution allows the Supreme Leader, Syed Ali Khamenei, to appoint directly six of the council’s members and the other six are nominated by the head of judiciary and confirmed by parliament. In fact, the head of Judiciary (who must be a cleric) is also appointed by the SupremeLeader for a period of five years (Article 157 of the constitution).

Parliamentary and presidential elections in Iran take place in two stages. The first stage is the vetting of candidates through a selection process conducted by the Council of Guardian. Only candidates deemed qualified are allowed to campaign and to compete in the upcoming elections. In effect, the qualification procedure enables the Council of Guardian to allow only its favoured individuals to run for office. The second stage involves direct ballot by the electorate to choose from the appointed candidates.

During the presidential campaign of May 2017, the Council of Guardian disqualified more than 1600 individuals who had applied to run for president. Looking at the list of disqualified nominees, it was quite clear that the Council of Guardian had decided to disqualify those who might disturb the status quo in the country. Among the disqualified nominees one could see names such as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, former president of the country and his deputy, Hamid Bagheai, and a number of former minsters and members of the parliament. It is also notable to state that the twelve members of Guardian Council had examined the credentials of over 1600 presidential nominees and ruled on their eligibility over a period of only seven days.

In addition to problems emanating from concentration of power in hands of only one individual Supreme Leader, the political system in Iran is also stifled by parallel decision-making apparatus and their lack of transparency in the decision-making process in all three branches of powers; little or no accountability among middle and high level civil servants, nepotism, inefficiency and rampant corruption in all spheres of the political and administrative system.

A clear example of chronic/endemic corruption in all three branches of power could be seen during live broadcasts of presidential debates in 2017. During live broadcast of presidential debate on national TV, three of six presidential candidates were accusing each other of misusing of public funds and embezzlement. All the three candidates were produced evidence on live TV to prove their accusation. The three candidates were Hassan Rohani, the incumbent president who was running for the second term, Ishaq Jahangiri, Rohani’s first vice president and Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf, the former mayor of Tehran. Following the conclusion of the presidential debate, no further action was taken either by ministry of justice, the prosecutor general or any other constitutional body to investigate the alleged misuse and mismanagement of the public funds by all three candidates. Despite this all these, Hassan Rohani won the presidential election and currently serves his second term in office. Ishaq Jahangiri continues to be the vice president. Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf was elected to Parliament from Tehran constituency in February 2020 and is currently the speaker of the parliament.

Another example of rampant corruption in Iran political system can be seen during the campaign for parliamentary election (the Islamic Consultative Assembly legislature election) in February 2020. Council of Guardians disqualified around 7000 of the 14000 who had applied to run for parliament including 90 sitting members of parliament. It is quite interesting that the Council of Guardian announced during a press conference that the majority of the 90 disqualified sitting members of the parliament were excluded of from running again because of their financial corruption.

Despite all these this, no further action was taken by either ministry of justice or attorney general or any other official within the Judiciary, to arrest or question the alleged corrupt members of the parliament. These alleged corrupt members of parliament were allowed to complete their term in office. It is quite clear that the alleged corrupt members of parliament continued to take part in drafting new laws and all voting processes while completing their term of office. These 90 members of parliament had previously been approved for the parliamentary election of 2016. In other words, these parliamentary members were involved in sleaze and financial malpractice during their term in office.

One clear example of nepotism and rule of clan is Larijani’s family. Over a ten-year period, only two of five brothers were controlling two out of the three main branches of power in Iran. Ali Akbar Larijani was speaker of the parliament from 2008 to 2020. In fact, he made himself the de facto head of parliament with the help of his brother (the head of judiciary) and managed to force into law a number of very controversial issues.

Sadeq Larijani (known as Amoli Larijani) is the other brother who was appointed as the chief justice of Iran by supreme leader Seyed [Ali Khamenei](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ali_Khamenei) in August 2009. It was quite clear that the Supreme Leader was appointing a person to the head of judiciary not because of his religious and judicial credential but because the appointee, Sadeq Larijani, was merely a son of a cleric, who had spent some years in exile in Iraq during the previous regime. The constitution of the country required the head of judiciary to be an experienced jurist and high ranking cleric. Sadeq Larijani did not possess any of this above criteria. During his 10 year tenure as the head of judiciary (2009-2019), Sadeq Larijani focused his attention on consolidating his power and that of his family and his allies instead of fighting out of control white-collar crimes in the country, crimes such as money laundering, embezzlement, bribery and extortion by civil servants and public officials. He imprisoned many of his opponents including two top aides to former president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and those who were opposed to injustice and inequality in the country.

It was only after Sadeq Larijani was replaced by one of his deputies, Seyed Ibrahim Raisi, that the vast network of corruption in the judiciary became clear. The chief of staff at Sadeq Larijani’s office, Akbar Tabari, was arrested in July 2019 on various charges, including embezzlement, extortion and bribery and following a trial received a 31 year prison sentence. Akbar Tabari was put on trial along with 21 associates for creating a “criminal network within his office”. Akbar Tabari had received bribes in the form of land, villas and luxury apartments in Tehran and other cities, as well as substantial amount of cash which was estimated to have been more than US$ 5 million.

Despite such manifest wrongdoings within the judiciary, the Supreme Leader, Seyed Ali Khamenei continued to support Sadeq Larijani and appointed him as chairman of Expediency Discernment Council in 2018. The Supreme Leader also appointed Ali Larijani, former speaker of the parliament, as his special advisor and member of the Expediency Council.

Parliament

Iranian Nation

President

~~text here~~

Municipal council

Cabinet

Assembly of Experts

(86 Clerics)

City Mayors

Council

of

Guardian

Supreme Leader

(Rahbar)

Expediency the Expediency Discernment Council of the Establishment

National

Security Council

Supreme

Judicial Council