



Washington is Misreading Iranian Politics

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The Biden administration's outreach to Iran is in full swing. A third of a year into its tenure, the new White House appears to be pulling out all the stops in its efforts to reengage with Tehran, and to demolish the "maximum pressure" policy of its predecessor in the process.

That policy reversal has already entailed major political and economic sweeteners on the part of the United States, ranging from stalled enforcement of existing sanctions to the potential unfreezing of up to \$1 billion as a goodwill humanitarian gesture toward Tehran. Administration officials have even signaled they are prepared to abandon other punitive measures (such as those levied in response to Iran's persistent support of terrorism and its egregious human rights abuses) inconsistent with the 2015 nuclear deal they're seeking to revive.

What is driving the breakneck pace of these concessions? The urgency can't be attributed simply to a yearning to return to an agreement that a great many sitting administration officials helped negotiate during the Obama era. It's also a reflection of Washington's desire to influence Iran's domestic politics—and its profound misunderstanding of them.

When Iranians go to the polls in June to elect a replacement for outgoing president Hassan Rouhani, they will take part in a rigged political contest in which real alternatives to official regime dogma have already been sidelined. That's because, within the Islamic Republic, unaccountable clerical institutions overlay secular ones and have veto power over political decisions deemed to be at odds with a revolutionary religious outlook.

Iran's Guardian Council, the regime's senior governmental oversight body, wields the power to disqualify political aspirants it sees as ideologically impure. The council has used this power to bar contenders who aren't sufficiently loyal to the ideas of the Islamic Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Ahead of Iran's last presidential election in 2017, the body approved just six of the 1,636 candidates who formally threw their hats into the political ring. The cycle before that, in 2013, it approved only eight out of nearly 700 hopefuls.

That same process is beginning to play out once more. Official registration of candidates for next month's election has now opened, and the Guardian Council will tender its list of approved contenders later this month. Already, there are signs that Iran's clerical system is asserting its ideological prerogatives. For instance, the council has just imposed new age restrictions on the eligibility of presidential candidates, a move that would eliminate some strong competitors to Ebrahim Raisi, the conservative cleric who the country's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei, clearly prefers.

Therein lies the rub. American interpretations of Iranian politics have long assumed that the country is locked in an existential contest between reformists and hardliners. This conviction has fueled a stubborn hope that, with sufficient inducements, more moderate candidates might win and steer the country into a less confrontational course with the West. That logic undergirded President Barack Obama's outreach to Iran. In much the same way, it appears to be a driving force behind the Biden administration's current attempts to reengage with Iran's ayatollahs.

Yet such a contest is mostly fiction. To be sure, Iran boasts a vibrant and raucous political square, where a multitude of ideas are exchanged. But the regime's clerical institutions serve as the custodians to Tehran's corridors of power, and ensure that whoever ascends to them is unfailingly loyal to Khomeini's radical political vision.

That's a reality the Iranian people understand all too well, even if America's political elites don't seem to. In its most recent poll of attitudes among Iranians, the Netherlands-based GAMAAN research center found that more than three quarters (78 percent) of respondents had no plans to vote in the country's upcoming election, and an equal number said Iran needs a fundamental regime change or at least a "transition away from the Islamic Republic." These statistics highlight that the true political tug-of-war within Iran isn't taking place inside the regime itself, but between the country's clerical elite and the captive population it desperately seeks to control. Only by backing the latter against the former can the United States help steer the country in a more moderate, pluralistic direction.

Unfortunately, at the moment, the Biden administration seems determined to do precisely the opposite.

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