



The Candidate Screening in Iran's Parliamentary Elections, 1984-2012

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Tomoyo Chisaka

Ph.D. student, Osaka School of International Public Policy (OSIPP), Osaka University
Research Fellow, the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science

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【summary】

This discussion paper examines historical development of the candidate screening for Iran's parliamentary elections from 1984 to 2012. Scholars have discussed disqualification of reformists by the Guardian Council, but little is known about to what extent the pattern of disqualification was consistent in the elections. Using various local newspapers, I identified who were disqualified at elections in a long period of time. The result shows that the Guardian Council gradually expanded the target of disqualification. In some cases even incumbents who were once allowed were later disqualified. The paper concludes that the Guardian Council played an important role in excluding those who challenge the Supreme Leader's authority.

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The author's email address: t-chisaka@osipp.osaka-u.ac.jp

1. Introduction¹

This paper examines the Guardian Council's practice of candidate screening for parliamentary elections in Iran. Scholars have argued that candidates who seek political reform (*reformists*) tend to be disqualified by the Guardian Council, whose members are appointed by the Supreme Leader. Sarabi writes, for instance, “[T]he most controversial barriers are the requirement that candidates demonstrate a practical commitment to Islam and to the Islamic government and the constitutional power of the Guardian Council to supervise elections(Sarabi1994,95).”

The question is to what extent the pattern of the candidate screening was consistent. Since the existing literature mostly deals with case studies of each parliamentary election, little is known about exactly when reformists are likely to be disqualified. Little is known either about whether candidates received the same result of screening in the past elections. To answer these questions, I analyzed local newspapers published during the eight parliamentary elections from 1984 to 2012,² such as *Keyhan*, *Ettelaat*, *Jomhuri-ye Islami*, *Salam*, *Sharq*, and *Hayat-e now* (see Table 1 in the Appendix for a list of newspapers) that I collected at the Central Library of the University of Tehran and the Iran’s National Library between February 2019 and February 2020. The result of the analysis revealed that the patter of candidate screening differs from election to election.

The paper presents two findings. First, the screening practice was not consistent. Even incumbents who were approved in the past could be later disqualified. As many scholars point out, reformists were the targets of the Guardian Council’s screening. But there is an overlooked fact that the degree to which reformists were screened varies from election to election. Second, the Guardian Council gradually expanded the target of disqualification from liberalists to the Islamic Left, and to reformists. It may be discerned that the Guardian Council plays a significant role in the removal of anyone who potentially challenges the Supreme Leader.

First, the paper briefly explains the Iranian parliamentary election system. It then presents the findings about changing patterns of the candidate screening over almost three decades and explains features of disqualified candidates. The paper ends with a conclusion and suggestions for a future research.

2. The Iran’s parliamentary election: a mixture of democracy and theocracy

The Iran's parliamentary election system has both democratic and theocratic features. The democratic features are universal suffrage and direct voting. All Iranian nationals over the age of 18 are eligible.³ 290 members of the parliament are elected by direct vote from 207 electoral districts. Electoral districts are allocated seats in proportion of their population. The capital Tehran is allocated the largest number of 30 seats, followed by 6 of Tabriz, 5 of Esfahan and Mashhad, 4 of Shiraz, 3 of Orumiyyeh, Ardabil, Ahvaz, Abadan, Kermanshah, Rasht, Bandar-e Abbas , 2 of 21 cities, and 1 of other areas. 5 seats are allocated to religious minorities.⁴ Representatives are elected through two rounds of voting for a four-year term with no term limitation. Candidates who have successfully secured one-fourth of the votes in the first round are elected. If no one could get one-fourth of the votes, a second round of voting is held (Alem 2011,14).

¹This paper adopts a simplified version of the transliteration system adopted by the *Iranian Studies* journal, with the exception of diacritics.

²While the election-supervising authority of the Guardian Council has been constitutionalized since 1979, appointment of the members of this council was not completed in 1980. Therefore, the Guardian Council started to practice its legal authority of screening candidates for Parliamentary elections in1984. For these reasons, this paper examines the result of candidate screening from 1984.

³ The first minimum age for voting was 16 according to the 1979 election law, however, it became 15 in 1984. In 1999, it again became 16 but changed to 15 in 2000. In 2007, the minimum age was set 18.

⁴ The number of parliamentary seats was increased from 270 to 290 in 1999. The seat allocation is as of April 2020. *Tabanak* <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/956497/> (accessed April 4, 2020)

The seemingly democratic aspects of parliamentary election is a tool for the Supreme Leader, who himself is not directly elected by people, to seek popular support. Tezcur pointed out, “[T]he Supreme Leader has utilized elections as an institutional means to ensure that the regime was perceived to be based on popular consent and appeals to the people (Tezcur 2008, 55).”

The Iran’s parliamentary election system also has theocratic features. The most fundamental is the pre-election candidate screening by the Guardian Council. The 1979 constitution stipulates:

During the absence of the Glorious Lord of the Age (the missing twelfth imam of the Shi’ite sect), may God grant him relief, he will be represented in the Islamic Republic of Iran as religious leader and imam of the people by an honest, virtuous, well-informed, courageous, efficient administrator and religious jurist, enjoying the confidence of the majority of the people as a leader. (Article 5)

The absolute ruler of the world and humanity is God and He alone has determined the social destiny of human ... The nation will use this God-given right to act according to the manner determined by the following principles. (Article 56)

To achieve these constitutional goals, two constitutional levers are provided: the absolute power of the Supreme Leader and the oversight of the Guardian Council (Boroumand and Boroumand 2000, 117).

The Guardian Council consists of six clerics and six jurists. The Supreme Leader appoints six clerics and six jurists are chosen by the legislature from a list prepared by the head of the judiciary who is appointed by the Supreme Leader (Samii 2004, 405). The Guardian Council’s role of supervising elections is spelled out in Article 99 of the Constitution: “The Guardian Council has the responsibility of supervising elections of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, the President of the Republic, the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament), and the direct recourse to popular opinion and referenda (Samii 2001, 645).”

The power to supervise electoral processes is shared between the Supreme Leader and the President, although it is not shared equally, as shown in Figure 1 in the Appendix. The solid line indicates the screening processes under the President while the dotted line indicates screening processes under the supervision of the Supreme Leader. Institutions under the Supreme Leader include the Guardian Council, the Central Supervising Committee (Hey’at-e Nezarat-e Markazi), and branches of the supervising committee in each electoral district. The Central Supervising Committee is chaired by a selected member of the Guardian Council. Meanwhile, the main election-supervision organization under the President is the Executive Committee (Hey’at-e Ejra’i), that is composed of a Governor (Farmandar) who is appointed by the Minister of Interior and 30 locals who strongly support the regime. While the Executive Committee under the President carries out a screening process from the registration to the final judgment, the Supervising Committee under the Supreme Leader has extraordinary power to check the first round result of the Executive Committee; that is, the Central Supervising Committee can reverse decisions made by the Executive Committee.

In sum, while the Iran’s parliamentary election system shows some democratic features, theocratic features influence electoral processes more powerfully. It is noticeable that the Guardian Council under the supervision of the Supreme Leader has an overwhelming power to remove any candidate from the list without legal constraint. The next section examines to what extent this legal authority of screening candidates was exercised by the Guardian Council.

3. Historical development of the candidate screening for parliamentary elections

Excluding Liberalists in the second and third parliamentary elections (1984 -1988)

In 1984, the Guardian Council for the first time screened candidates of a parliamentary election. The theocratic screening committee disqualified a number of incumbent candidates including Mehdi Bazargan, head of the Iran Freedom Movement (IFM), and his followers who were regarded as liberalists. Bazargan had been appointed to Prime Minister of the provisional government by Khomeini in February 1979, but he resigned in November 7, 1979, because of discord with Khomeini over domestic and foreign policies including how to deal with the hostage crisis at the American Embassy in Tehran (November 4, 1979-January 20, 1981). Other disqualified incumbents were Ibrahim Yazdi, Foreign Minister during the Bazargan's provisional government, and members of the IFM such as Azam Talegani, the founder's daughter of the IFM, and Idale Sahabi. They became targets of disqualification because their liberal political views and opposition to the Supreme Leader Khomeini. Members of the IFM were disqualified in the next parliamentary election in 1988 again.

Excluding the Islamic Left in the fourth and fifth parliamentary elections (1992-1996)

In addition to liberalists, the Islamic Left, that won the majority in the third parliament (1989-92), came to be disqualified after the death of Khomeini in 1989. The reason of ousting the Islamic Left from the electoral race was related with the succession issue. On June 3, 1989, the death of first Supreme Leader Khomeini was announced, and within less than twenty-four hours 83 members of the Assembly of Experts⁵ began debating the issue of post-Khomeini leadership. The assembly finally chose Ali Khamenei, with 64 votes in favor and 16 against (Bakhtiari 1996, 176). The Khamenei's succession met opposition from Hossein Ali Montazeri's supporters, most of whom belonged to a political party of the Islamic Left named the Association of the Combatant Clerics (Majma'-e Rowhaniyān--e Mobārez, MRM). Montazeri used to have credentials to succeed Khomeini, but he was deprived of them by Khomeini himself due to conflict over the punishment of political prisoners. In February 1989, Montazeri said in Qom, "[R]evolutionary rhetoric isolated us from the world. People in the world think that we are only doing murder. We must release political prisoners immediately and the military force should work for reconstruction after the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), not for arresting political prisoners (Akhavi 2008, 651)." Morteza Alviri, a deputy from Tehran who visited Montazeri in Qom, said, "80 to 100 parliamentary deputies followed the esteemed source of emulation of Montazeri independently of any political line (Sarabi 1994,92)." The statement implies that Alviri and his colleagues in the third parliament did not agree with instituting Khamenei as leader but that they rather supported Montazeri, the Khamenei's strongest rival.

On June 15, 1991, the Guardian Council introduced a new interpretation of "approbatory supervision" (*nezārat-e estebāvi*) or authority of supervising elections referred to in Article 99 of the constitution. In the 1980s the Guardian Council's main role was limited to a post-election examination of allegations of fraud. But with the new interpretation, the Guardian Council was now given power to carry out pre-election disqualification of candidates (Randjbar-Daemi 2018,87-88). The new interpretation of "approbatory supervision" was criticized by the Islamic Left. Mehdi Karrobi, head of the MRM, said "approbatory supervision" did not exist in the Khomeini era. Some

⁵ According to the constitution, the Assembly of Expert (*Majles-e Khobregān-e Rahbarī*) is composed of 88 clerics and its task is to select the Supreme Leader (Article 107) and to supervise and dismiss the leader (Article 111).

scholars saw this as the Guardian Council's abuse of the constitution to remove a rival faction (Fattāhī Zafarqandī 1397,324).”

Incumbent MRM candidates disqualified in 1992 included Alviri, who openly expressed his loyalty to Montazeri and Asadollah Bayat, who opposed "approbatory supervision". Another disqualified candidate was Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, a deputy from Tehran, former commander of the Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps in Qazvin province. Despite his background of revolutionary and anti-American movements, Asgharzadeh's re-election was prevented by the Guardian Council. The official reason for his disqualification was not announced, but his affiliation with the MRM was most probably a factor.⁶

Similar to 1992, members of MRM and a leftist political party, the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization (MIRO) (*Sāzemān-e Mojāhedīn-e Enqerāb-e Eslāmī*), were disqualified at the 1996 parliamentary election. The MIRO's official newspaper '*Āsr-e mā* wrote, "Our members were disqualified because we were simply against "approbatory supervision"; namely, we were considered to be against the constitution."⁷ Behzad Nabavi, head of the MIRO, said, "We have deeply believed in and followed the *Velāyat-e Faqīh* (Guardianship of Islamic Jurisprudence)⁸ since the beginning of the revolution. But now, loyalty to the *Velāyat-e faqīh* is meaningless to be qualified."⁹ Criticizing the Guardian Council for abusing the constitution, the MRM and the MIRO boycotted the 1996 parliamentary election.

To summarize, in addition to liberalists who were disqualified during the Khomeini period, the Islamic Left came to be removed from the list of eligible candidates during the Khamenei's rule, as they were considered as opponents of the leadership.

Temporal inclusion of reformists in the sixth parliamentary election (2000)

The 2000 parliamentary election was the first parliamentary election held after the victory of a reformist candidate in the 1997 Presidential election, which was a fought between Nateq Nuri and Mohammad Khatami. Due to his political career, Nateq Nuri was well known to the public. He served as Minister of Interior (1981-1985) and Speaker of the parliament (1992-2000). He was one of the founding members of a political party of the Islamic Right named the Society of the Combatant Clergy (*Jāme'eh-ye Rowḥāniyāt-e Mobārez*, JRM), headed by the then President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997). Meanwhile Nuri's rival Khatami served as Minister of Islamic Guidance (1982-1992) and was one of the founding members of a political party of the Islamic Left, MRM. During the election campaign, Khatami promised to promote freedom of speech and the civil society, a slogan that attracted discontents with politics dominated by the Islamic Right or conservatives. Khatami's supporters were mainly younger generations who did not remember the 1979 revolution, in which the conservative Islamists came to rule the country.

This background of the rise of reformists made the Guardian Council acknowledge credentials of members of the MRM and MIRO as well as newly emerged reformist parties such as the Iran Islamic Participation Front (IIPF) (*Jabhe-ye Moshārekāt-e Iran-e Eslāmī*) headed by Khatami's younger brother Mohammad-Reza Khatami and the

⁶ After the revolution, Asgharzadeh served in the Construction Jihad (Jihād-e Sāzandegī), which is an important institution for alleviating poverty and developing the suburbs. He was also one of the leaders of the Muslim Students (Dāneshjūyān-e Mosalmān), which attacked the American embassy in Tehran in November, 1979. *Eṭṭelā'āt*, "Barādar-e Ebrāhīm Asgharzadeh," April 12, 1984

⁷ *Āsr-e mā*, "Nezārat-e Estešbāvi Melāk-e Pazīresh-e Qānūn-e Asāsī?" January 24, 1996.

⁸ *Velāyat-e Faqīh* is the idea of governance introduced by Imam Khomeini. Khomeini preached that while the last Imam is hidden, a source of imitation in the Shi'ite Muslim community has to supervise this governance.

⁹ *Salām*, "Tā Konūn dar Koll-e Keshvar Šarāḥiyat-e 58 Nafar az Afrād-e Jenāh-e Chap Rad shode ast," February 26, 1996.

Solidarity Party (*Hezb-e Hambastegi*). Thus, the 2000 parliamentary election is an exceptional case in which the Islamic Left and reformists, otherwise considered as opponents to the Supreme Leader, were allowed to run.

Excluding reformists in the seventh to ninth parliamentary elections (2004-2012)

The Guardian Council's concession to reformist candidates was only temporal. In 2004, it resumed a strict approach in the screening for the seventh parliamentary election. 165 incumbent members of the parliament registered to seek re-election, but more than half of them (85) were disqualified. Table 1 shows names and party affiliations of disqualified candidates in Tehran.

Table 1: Disqualified incumbents in Tehran (2004)

Name of candidate	Party affiliation
Elahi Kulai	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Elias Hazrati	Solidarity Party
Behzad Nabavi	Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization
Davvud Soleimani	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Ali-Akbar Mousavi Khoiniha	Association of the Combatant Clerics
Mohammad Reza Khatami	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Ali Shakouri-Rad	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Fatemeh Haqiqatjo	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Mohsen Armin	Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization
Mohsen Safaei Farahani	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Mohsen Mirdamadi	Iran Islamic Participation Front
Mohammad Naeimipour	Iran Islamic Participation Front

Note: The Iran Islamic Participation Front, the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization, the Association of the Combatant Clerics, and the Solidarity Party are all major reformist parties and groups.
Source: *Sharq*, February 16, 2004.

Disqualified members of the sixth parliament were those who once tried to challenge the Guardian Council during their four-years tenure. In 2001, the sixth parliament passed a draft law to limit the authority of the Guardian Council to screen candidates. Reformists regarded sources of information used for the screening as biased, because the Guardian Council collected information mostly from institutions, affiliated with the Supreme Leader or conservative factions. Thus, the new law intended to limit the institutions from which the Guardian Council could collect information about registered candidates to only four that were written in the constitution. However, the Guardian Council vetoed the law and the sixth parliament failed to restrict the Guardian Council's screening.¹⁰

In the 2008 parliamentary election, reformists were once again disqualified. Disqualified candidates included those who played an important role in the Khatami administration. They were Morteza Haji, the Minister of Education, Abbas Kalantari, the Minister of Agriculture, Ahmad Khorram, the Minister of Roads and Transportation, and Abd Allah Naseri, the director of the national news agency. Moreover, the newly established

¹⁰ The Guardian Council's veto is constitutionalized. Principle 4 of the constitution writes that "All civil, penal, financial, economic, administrative, cultural, military, political, etc., laws and regulations should be based on Islamic rules and standards. This principle will absolutely or in general be dominant over all of the principles of the Constitution, and other laws and regulations as well, and any determination in this connection will be ade by the religious jurists of the Council of Guardians (Ramazani 1980, 189)."

reformist party named the National Trust Party, NTP (Hezb-e E'temād-e Mellī) became the main target of disqualification. The NTP was led by Mehdi Karrobi, who used to be a leader of the Islamic left party MRM. After losing the 2005 presidential election, he created the NTP.¹¹ The Guardian Council disqualified 70 percent of registered candidates of the NTP, and as a result, the party lost candidates in 160 out of 207 electoral districts. For instance, Reza Nouruzadeh, an incumbent deputy from third to seventh parliaments (a member of the executive board of the NTP) was disqualified.¹² Besides, members of leftist MIRO and other reformist parties were disqualified like the 2004 parliamentary election.

The 2012 parliamentary election was the first national election held after the post-election protest in 2009¹³. In this election, the Guardian Council regarded those who cast doubt on President Ahmadinejad's leadership were as opponents of the Supreme Leader because Khamenei supported re-election of Ahmadinejad in 2009 and suppressed mass protests which claimed that the Guardian Council rigged vote count. For example, Chairman of the committee of social affairs of the eighth parliament, Hamid Reza Katuziyan, was disqualified. Katuziyan was a member of the committee that investigated the 2009 presidential election and accused Ahmadinejad of using government funds for his re-election.¹⁴ Katuziyan also demanded that Interior Minister Mostafa Mohammad (2009-2013), who was in charge of the election implementation in 2009, apologize to people and resign when the Iranian media disclosed that he had embezzled three billion riyals from a bank.¹⁵ Furthermore, incumbent deputies of the parliamentary committee of Article 90,¹⁶ that investigated corruption cases of the Ahmadinejad administration, were also disqualified. They included Haji Mohammad Movahhed, a deputy from Behbahan who had served as a parliamentarian for 16 years from the fifth to eighth parliaments, and Mohammad Ebrahim Nekunam, a deputy from Golpeygan and chairman of the committee of Article 90 in the seventh and eighth parliaments.¹⁷

In sum, the post-electoral protest in 2009 made the Guardian Council fear the rise of an opposition force that could become popular among the majority of people. With loss of candidates the reformists were able to mobilize frustrated mass for demonstrations against electoral fraud even though the Supreme Leader accepted the outcome of the election. Thus, the Guardian Council completely excluded candidates who were involved in the post-election protest and who opposed the Supreme Leader's decision, so as to prevent them from being elected or from gaining further popularity.

¹¹ Karrobi used to be a leader of MRM. But, he left from MRM and established the National Trust Party, realizing that he can no longer get support from members of MRM in the 2005 presidential election. ('Abd allah Shamsī 1393, 23).

¹² *E'temād-e Mellī*, "Fehrest-e Nānzadhā-ye rad-e Šalāhīyat shode Hezb-e E'temād-e Mellī," Bahaman 3, 1386 [January 23, 2008].

¹³ On June 12, 2009, state media announced a landslide re-election victory for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad only hours after the polls closed. However, losing candidates Mir-Hosein Mousavi, the last Prime Minister (1981-89), and Mehdi Karrubi¹³, the chief of the National Trust Party, did not accept the result, asserting that the Guardian Council rigged the vote count and that Mousavi was the true winner. In sympathy with the losing candidates, thousands of Iranians took to the street to stage mass protests, chanting, "Where is my vote?" The protest of 2009 was the largest anti-government protest since the revolution. On June 13, 2009, the day the election results were announced, more than 100 reformists were arrested. Protests took place at Tehran University, Amirkavir University, and Shahid Beheshti University, and large demonstrations across the country (Elson et al. 2012, 14, 17-18).

¹⁴ Masih Alinezhad, "Vezārat-e Keshvar va Rad-e Šalāhīyat-e Namāyadegān-e Montaqed-e Dowlat-e Īran," *BBC News Persian*, 22 January 2012, https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2012/01/120122_139_alinejad_disqualification_majlis9th. Accessed: 22 October 2019.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* Of note is that the Interior ministry is in charge of elections along with the Guardian Council, although the degree of their authority is not equal.

¹⁶ The Article 90 committee is charged with responding to complaints from the public. The Article 90 states: "Whoever has a complaint concerning the work of the Assembly or the executive power or the judicial power can forward his complaint in writing to the Assembly. The Assembly must investigate his complaint and give a satisfactory reply. In cases where the complaint relates to the executive or the judiciary, the Assembly must demand proper investigation in the matter and an adequate explanation from them, and announce the results within a reasonable time. In cases where the subject of the complaint is of public interest, the reply must be made public." Translated by the Iranian embassy in London, 1992.

¹⁷ *E'temād*, "Rad-e Šalāhīyat Chandīn Dīge az Namāyadegān-e Fe'lf" February 13, 2012

5. Conclusion

The paper has examined whether the Guardian Council's candidate screening was consistent for the period from 1984 to 2012. The analysis of the elections revealed variations of the screening practice. The pattern shows a gradual expansion of the target of disqualification from liberalists, to the Islamic Left and reformists. Why was it necessary for the Guardian Council to expand the target of disqualification? A plausible explanation may be a legitimacy crisis of the Supreme Leader after the death of Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic. It is also necessary to explain the exceptional case of 2000, in which most reformists were approved, in a more satisfactory way. To clarify this puzzling phenomenon, a further analysis is needed about perceptions of the Supreme Leader as he can influence the decisions of the Guardian Council about candidate screening.

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Appendix

Table 1: Newspaper Sources

Parliamentary Election	Reformist	Middle	Conservative
1984	Āṣr-e Āzadegān	Eṭṭelā‘āt	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
1988	Āzadegān	Eṭṭelā‘āt	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
1992	Āṣr-e mā	Eṭṭelā‘āt	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
1996	Salām	Eṭṭelā‘āt	Resālat, Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
2000	Sharq	Eṭṭelā‘āt, Īrān	Resālat, Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
2004	Yās-e no	Eṭṭelā‘āt, Īrān	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
2008	Hayāt-e now, E‘temād –e Mellī	Eṭṭelā‘āt, Īrān	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
2012	Sharq, E‘temād	Eṭṭelā‘āt, Īrān	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān
2016	Sharq, E‘temād	Eṭṭelā‘āt, Īrān	Jomhurī-e Eslāmī, Keyhān

(Note1) Since reformist newspapers were frequently banned, this paper used various sources for reformist candidates' data.

