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Internal Mechanisms and the Political Establishment in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Myth or Reality
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On the 26 February, 2016, Iranian electorates went to the polls to elect the members of the legislative body (parliament / *Majlis*), and the Assembly of Expert, the body responsible for the appointment of the Supreme Leader. The significance of these elections is evident in Iran's ongoing assertive foreign policy to open a new page in its relations with the West. This was evident as they concluded the deal on Iran's nuclear program, and its unstopped military intervention in Syria as well as its growing rivalry with Saudi Arabia, which paralleled the Iran's improved relations with China and Russia. The fact that the so-called reformists are believed to have won most seats in both the *Majlis* and the Assembly of Experts increases the optimistic predictions that Iran's approach to these issues will witness a significant change as the pragmatists are on the verge of dominating the process of decision making in Iran. However, this is overly simplistic and shortsighted in capturing the political structure of Iran and the mechanism of decision making. Understating Iranian politics and power relation requires that we understand the power struggle between the elected and appointed bodies. Towards this end, understanding the balance of power between various political establishments is the prime purpose of this paper.

A quick look into the political establishment in Iran, captures the elected bodies represented in the president, the parliament and Assembly of Experts, the appointed bodies like the Supreme Leader, the nonpolitical bodies like Revolutionary Guards, the traditional and conservative religious bodies who are indeed controlling Iran' politics in general and influential in the foreign policies in particular. The appointed bodies are more powerful and influential in deciding on Iran's national interests and the strategies to pursue these interests. Their strengths vis-a-vis the elected bodies stems from their ability to work together and stand up against their reformist opponent with deep policy differences among the various factions that constitute the reformist camp. Therefore, the elected bodies are complementary bodies to the appointed ones, and their involvement in decision making is part of the cosmetic fulfillment of the democratic requirements i.e. the indirect participation of people in decision making.

Iran's Political Establishment: The Secret

The power structure is key to understanding the clerical regime and its stability. The system is characterized by the multitude of loosely connected competitive power center that are both formal and informal or elected and appointed.

The appointed nonpolitical bodies like political religious association, revolutionary foundation and paramilitary

organizations who strongly believe in the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or rule of the Islamic jurist. These bodies work together to ensure the survival of the state is guaranteed. On the top these bodies is the supreme leader whose office where the strongest power of the Islamic Republic lies (Bruno 2008). The supreme leader does not intervene directly to issues concerned to the state's executive; however it closely monitors the state policies through clerical commissars who are considered the long arms of the Supreme Leader. The stability of Iran is maintained through the cooperation between Supreme Leader and the President whose power is subservient to the former. In the event of disagreement and confrontation between the president and the supreme leader, the supreme leader's voice prevails. For example, the rise of neo-conservatives to the presidency of Iran was permitted by intense internal political wrangling between the different Iranian conservative camp topped by the supreme leader and reformists led by Muhammad Khatami. This provoked the supreme leader to enable a neo-conservative president who is close to the supreme leader to the presidency of Iran in 2005 (Ehteshami & Zweir, 2007; p 99). The growth of the reformist camp in their challenge to the absolute power of the supreme leader necessitate the cooperation between the conservative president Ahmadinejad and the supreme leader to crush on the green movement which gained momentum on the wake of 2009 elections. The Supreme Leader is the most important figure in the shaping of Iranian foreign policy. This is evidenced in the article 110 of the original 1979 Islamic constitution which gives him the power to declare war and peace, to command the armed forces,

and to call for general troop mobilization. The power of the supreme leader is also extended by him to other appointed bodies like the Revolutionary Guards (Jones 2009).

The Revolutionary Guards are a non-appointed political body, yet influential body, in Iran political establishment. Appointed by the supreme leader, the Revolutionary Guards' power stems for their close affiliation the teaching of revolution and the strong economic position in the Islamic republic. This body is the viable arm of the supreme leader in two ways. First, it is the economic source of the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards is the main investor in leading Iranian industries since the end of Iraq-Iran war (Hafezi 2016). However, their economic power flourished particularly after former guardsman Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election as president in 2005; and the Guards were also given major contracts after suppressing pro-reform protests that on the wake of Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election in 2009. It was in the context also that a company affiliated to the Revolutionary Guards bought the state-run telecoms company for about $8 billion. It is estimated that business activities under the control of the Guards had an annual turnover of $10-12 billion (Hafezi 2016).

Under the international sanctions, the Revolutionary Guards did well, and as the sanctions are lifted, the leadership will ensure that the elite military force become richer to endure the efforts in the regional crisis, including the Syrian civil war. Politically, the overseas arm of the Revolutionary Guards, the Qods force, interacts and responds with regional crises to the extent that guarantees Iran's national interests. Its

intervention in the regional crises are motivated by the political, economic and security concern than sectarian one. This was evident in its intervention in the Iraq-Iran war. Due to their important role in Iran's foreign policy, their leaders are appointed by the supreme leader (Hafezi 2016).

In addition to the Revolutionary Guards, traditional conservative religious bodies like *bonyads* are influential in Iran political establishment. Originally they were established to collect alms-tax and *awaqf* as an effort to improve social and economic statues of the weak elements of the society. Therefore, they played significant role in implementing the populist economic policies. Ultimately, they are a mechanism to consolidate the power of the supreme leader; and they closely work with the office of the supreme leader as well as with the Revolutionary Guards to influence the decision making process in Iran. (Saeidi,2004; p 480).

The elected bodies are grounded in the constitution and the governmental regulations; however, they have less power relative to the appointed bodies like the supreme leader and the Revolutionary Guards. These bodies include the Presidency, the *Majlis*, or the parliament and Assembly of Experts. While the role of the Assembly of Experts lies in electing the supreme leader, the *Majlis* introduces and passes legislation. The existence of these bodies is an illustration of Iran's commitment to show their respect for the representation of people in the political establishment. However, they have little influence in shaping the decisions related to fate of the country. Perhaps the presidency is the elected body that enjoys that power and who have to

coordinate with the supreme leader to project Iran's foreign policy (Ehteshami & Zaccara 2013). Although the different Iranian governments can make realistic or idealistic calculations about Iran's relative advantages and vulnerabilities, and how to achieve Iran foreign policy objectives under different circumstances, what remains truth is that Iranian presidents seek to achieve identical foreign policy objectives embedded in the constitution of Iran. Pursuing these objectives remains central to the coordinated work of the presidency and the office of the supreme leader (Ehteshami & Zaccara 2013). Thus, Iran's foreign policy towards the region or to international context is shaped by the dynamics of power politics in the domestic domain. In other words, Iran's foreign behaviors in either Syria or Yemen or its nuclear agreement with the West, are nothing but the manifestation of agreed-upon decisions taken by Iran's political establishment and are dominated by the appointed bodies. In the case of the nuclear agreement, it important to understand the fact that president Rouhani being a security adviser to the supreme leader before he was appointed president in 2013 implies that there were no divergent views between him and the supreme leader, who has to approve the deal before it would go further towards the implementation.

Conclusion

Looking at the political landscape of the Islamic Republic revealed the existence of two establishments i.e. appointed bodies and elected bodies. Understanding the dynamics of power and the decision making process in Iran

requires that once appreciate the power of appointed bodies. The appointed bodies within Iran's political establishment exist to work together to achieve the state's most crucial goals represented in the securing and the survival of the clerical regime. Iran's war with Iraq in the 1980s, its intervention in Iraq in 2003, the involvements in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon should be understood in the context of Iran's effort's to maintain its survival.

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