



# Collaborative Gulf Insight

## Pathways to Democracy and Political Inclusion in the Gulf States

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## Table of Contents

02	Introduction Dr. Maryam Al Kuwari
03	State of Qatar Dr. Amna Sadiq
06	Kingdom of Bahrain Dr. Aisha Al- Rashdi
09	United Arab Emirates Dr. Haya Al-Noaimi
13	State of Kuwait Dr. Abdulla Al-Etaibi
15	Islamic Republic of Iran Dr. Luciano Zaccara

## **Introduction**

**Dr. Maryam Al Kuwari- Director of Gulf Studies Center, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar  
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Despite ongoing discussions and debates on democracy, electoral laws, the right to representation and political participation in the Gulf region, there has been very little progress in these areas over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> In the United Arab Emirates, there has been some progress in women representation, but overall political representation and participation have not seen any significant progress. A similar trajectory was recently seen in Qatar, which showed initial signs of democracy, before the democratic electoral experiment was cut short following a referendum.

In contrast, Bahrain and Kuwait have a far more established electoral practices, although progress over the past few years has been highly questionable. For example, Bahrain has seen no real steps toward democracy or representation since the events of the Arab Spring in 2011, which culminated in a Saudi-led military intervention and a subsequent crackdown on political freedom. Even Kuwait, which has the longest and most established democratic customs and traditions in the Gulf region, seems to have witnessed regression, as evident in the repeated dissolution of its National Assembly in the past few years. Across the Gulf, the democratic electoral experience in Iran has not fared much better, with parliamentary institutions and elections generally under state control, raising questions about the value of representation and participation.

It is safe to conclude that the region's path toward democracy, representation and political inclusion through elections and representative bodies appears to have stalled. This has been the result of new laws and regulations that have actually stifled institutions and mechanisms, the

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under "Gulf Insights" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

suspension and dissolution of institutions and processes, or the manipulation of processes and laws. Hence, instead of witnessing actual progress in these areas over the past decade, it seems that the Gulf region has actually experienced regression, leaving the societies of the region with less democracy than ever.

### قطر والتمثيل السياسي: رهانات الماضي ومتطلبات الحاضر

د. أمنة الصادق- أستاذة مساعدة في مركز دراسات الخليج كلية الاداب والعلوم - جامعة قطر

في عام 1906، حرر ما يقارب عشرون وجيهاً في دولة قطر وثيقة تُعرف بوثيقة الغريفة ونصت على:

إلى حضرة قائم مقام قطر حضرة الشيخ قاسم المكرم

نعرض لحضرتكم نحن يا أهل قطر وسكان قراها وأطراف عشائرها بأننا جميعاً بطوعنا وحسن رضائنا

انتخبنا على أنفسنا ولدكم المحفوظ الشيخ عبدالله وولينا جميع أمورنا ونحن ألوف تحت امره ومطيعين له ومنقادين اليه

وعلى هل الكيفية حررنا هذا المقال..

وختمناها جميعاً والله ولي التوفيق 8 محرم الحرام 1324 هـ

وثيقة الغريفة جاءت بعد اجتماع حاكم قطر الشيخ جاسم بن محمد بن ثاني مع عدد من وجهاء الدولة في الغرفة في سوق واقف ليستشيرهم في تعيين ابنه الشيخ عبدالله بن جاسم خلفاً له. تشير التقارير بأن حاكم قطر قد اعتاد على مشاورة أعيان البلاد وأبناء عمومته في شؤون الحكم في مجلسه بشكل ودي ومستمر، فقد اتاحت له هذه الاجتماعات الودية قناة تواصل أساسية مع المجتمع يمكن من خلالها الاطلاع على احوالهم وآرائهم.

من الجدير بالذكر بأن مجالس الحاكم لم تُغلق بعد وفاة الشيخ جاسم بن محمد، ففي رواية مماثلة، تشير الوثائق البريطانية

أنه في العام 1948 م قام الشيخ عبدالله بن جاسم بالاجتماع مع أبناء عمومته ولفيف من المواطنين لاستشارتهم في أمور ولاية العهد وانتقال الحكم بصورة مشابهة لما قام به والده في العام 1906 م. وقد ترسخت هذه الممارسة العرفية بين الحاكم والمحكومين

في الدولة لما يزيد عن القرن من الزمن، وقد استشار حكام قطر أعيان البلاد في الكثير من القضايا المهمة في تاريخ الدولة حتى وقتنا الحالي.

بالتوازي مع استمرار مجالس الحكام كقناة تواصل مع أعيان البلاد، شهدت المؤسسات التشريعية تطوراً في الدولة منذ استقلالها عن معاهدة الحماية البريطانية في العام 1971، حيث أصدر الشيخ خليفة بن حمد آل ثاني حاكم قطر آنذاك النظام الأساسي المؤقت (المعدل) في العام 1972 والذي تضمن تأسيس أول مجلس شوري في دولة قطر وقد ضم حينها عشرين عضواً معيناً. وقد خضع المجلس التشريعي، في إطار النظام الأساسي المؤقت، لعدد من التعديلات تمثلت في زيادة عدد أعضائه حتى عام 2017، حيث بلغ عددهم 48 عضواً، من بينهم ثلاث نساء.

كان التحول الجذري في قانون مجلس الشورى عام 2004 عندما دخل الدستور الدائم للدولة حيز التنفيذ، والذي أقر انتخاب أعضاء مجلس الشورى لأول مرة بتاريخ الدولة قطر، إلا أنه ولأسباب مختلفة لم يتم عقد أول انتخابات تشريعية في الدولة إلا في العام 2021. لم تدم هذه التجربة الشعبية طويلاً، فسرعان ما جاءت التعديلات الدستورية في العام 2024 م بتعديل المواد المتعلقة بانتخاب مجلس الشورى واستبدالها بمجلس مُعين.

وقد نصت التعديلات الدستورية التي تم اعتمادها بعد إستفتاء عام على تعديل عدد من مواد الدستور وأهمها المادة 81 لتصبح " مدة المجلس أربع سنوات ميلادية تبدأ من تاريخ أول اجتماع له، ويعين أعضاء المجلس الجديد خلال الستين يوماً السابقة على نهاية تلك المدة، وإذا لم يتم التعيين عند انتهاء مدة المجلس، أو تأخر لأي سبب من الأسباب، يبقى المجلس قائماً حتى يتم تعيين أعضاء المجلس الجديد. ولا يجوز مد الفصل التشريعي إلا للضرورة وبمرسوم، على ألا يتجاوز ذلك المد فصلاً تشريعياً واحداً" بجانب إضافة المادة 75 -مكرر- والتي نصت على "للأمير أن يدعو مجلس العائلة الحاكمة وأهل الحل والعقد ومجلس الشورى، أو أياً منهم، لمناقشة ما يراه من الأمور".

الملفت للنظر أن هذه المواد الدستورية تمثل استراتيجية تجمع بين الممارسة المعتادة من استشارة أعيان البلاد والمؤسسة السياسية المتمثلة في مجلس الشورى. على أكثر من صعيد، تطرح هذه الاستراتيجية أساساً للتوازن بين متطلبات المؤسسات السياسية وبين صياغة تجربة على أسس تاريخية راسخة في علاقة الحاكم والمحكوم. كما أنها تركز العودة إلى العادة التقليدية للمشاركة الشعبية في القرار السياسي، مع الرهان على قدرة الممارسات التاريخية على الاستجابة لمتطلبات قطر الحديثة، في إشارة إلى أن النهج الغربي في التمثيل السياسي لم يكن مثالياً عند الممارسة.

رغم ذلك، كان الهدف الأساسي لهذه التعديلات الدستورية هو الحفاظ على التماسك المجتمعي والهوية الوطنية من ترسبات القبلية الناتجة عن الديمقراطية الحديثة. وهو ما تجلّى في تعديل المادتين 80 و 117 واستبدال عبارة "جنسيته الأصلية قطرية" إلى "جنسيته قطرية"، الأمر المتوقع أن يتيح شمولية في عملية التمثيل السياسي. ومع ذلك، تظل هذه الشمولية حذرة في أقصى تقدير، وذلك من خلال ربطها بقرارات التعيين وعدم فتح المجال للانتخاب. وهو مؤشر على الرغبة في خلق توازن بين الشمولية السياسية وبين التطور السياسي.

يبقى دخول هذه التعديلات الدستورية حيز التنفيذ هو التحدي الأكبر لهذه الرهانات، خاصة فيما يتعلق بقدرة المبادئ التاريخية على تشكيل بيئة سياسية متوازنة وقادرة على توفير فرص عادلة للمكونات المجتمعية في التمثيل السياسي، مبنية على الكفاءة بشكل أساسي. وهو التحدي الأكبر للتحول السياسي في دول الخليج.

### **The Evolution and Challenges of the Bahraini National Assembly: A Historical Perspective on Democratic Development**

Dr. Aisha Al- Rashdi- Assistant Professor of International Affairs, Department of International Affairs, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University

The origins of the Bahraini Parliament can be traced back to the 1920s, with the establishment of the first legislative body, the Consultative Assembly, in 1926. This body, however, was short-lived and dissolved in 1932, reflecting the limited political engagement of the era. The contemporary parliamentary system in Bahrain began to emerge after the country attained independence from its status as a British protectorate in 1971. The establishment of the 1973 Constitution marked a significant development, as it instituted a bicameral legislature known as the National Council. Yet, despite being the government's legislative body, the council functioned more as a consultative assembly with limited authority. Bahraini scholar and leftist activist Abdelhadi Khalaf, among the first elected members of the first National Assembly in 1973, was imprisoned in 1974 for calling for a constitutional monarchy. He viewed the experience as a

failure, arguing that the first parliament exhibited deficiencies in democratic principles, functioning instead as a system of institutionalized tribalism and sectarianism guided by specific rules. The experiment concluded when an emerging nationalist coalition violated these established rules in an attempt to undermine the Al-Khalifa family's ruling authority.

In 1996, another round of reforms was introduced to the legislative body, but the changes further strengthened the executive body of the government. The king unilaterally revised the 1973 Constitution, subordinating the elected parliament to the appointed Consultative (Majlis Al-Shura) Council consisting of 40 members appointed by the executive authority. This effectively deprived the parliament of the ability to introduce new legislation or to exercise financial oversight over government ministries, consolidating power in the king's hands. The weakening of the elected body, along with electoral gerrymandering designed to ensure supporter dominance, led to a widespread opposition boycott of the 2002 parliamentary elections. In 2004, a coalition of opposition parties (Al-Wifaq, Al'Amal, the National Democratic Action Society, and the National Democratic Coalition) submitted a petition signed by 7,000 individuals to the king; objecting to his amendment of the constitution and calling for a more powerful elected parliament instead of the appointed consultative council. The government ignored the petition, and in 2005, it enacted a law criminalizing unregistered political societies, unless they were "officially" registered. This law was an attempt by the government to incorporate the opposition into the existing system without giving in to their demands- for a more powerful elected rather than appointed parliament, as a counterweight to the executive branch- as well as forcing them to acknowledge the legitimacy of the government and its institutions. The 2006 elections highlighted the fragmentation of the parliament, with the coalition of -Sunni parties- Al-Asalah and Al-Minbar securing 12 seats (5 and 7 respectively) to form an alliance against the opposition party Al-Wifaq-Shi'i party-, which won

17 seats. In 2010, Al-Wifaq increased its majority to 18 seats. However, in 2011, the opposition members resigned in solidarity with protesters, which further eroded trust in the government system. The government discredited of the opposition's quest for reform, an equal distribution of state resources and a better political representation. The government's sectarianization of the opposition and the division of these parties along sectarian lines, allowed the government to maintain control by weakening the opposition's ability to mobilize masses and large-scale protests as well as shattering any cross-sectarian anti-regime coalitions. Labeling the demands for reform as a sectarian issue rather than a political one was a method to delegitimize the 2011 events and any future aspirations for change that might challenge the regime's authority.

Prior to the Saudi-led intervention in 2011, Crown Prince of Bahrain, HRH Salman bin Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, sought a political solution launching the national dialogue project, an initiative led by his legal advisors. The initiative outlined seven points that needed urgent addressing: 1) an elected parliament with full vested powers and prerogatives; 2) a government reflecting the will of people; 3) fairly-demarcated electoral constituencies; 4) naturalization; 5) combating financial and administrative corruption; 6) state properties; and 7) addressing sectarian polarization and animosities in addition to other principles and topics. However, the initiative was hindered with the implementation of the Saudi-led military solution and the hesitation of some of the opposition parties to take part in the dialogue.

Needless to say, the intervention put an end to any prospects for constitutional reform in Bahrain. The 2002 Constitution remained in effect with minor changes and adjustments that regulates the election laws. The King still had power over the legislative and executive branch of the government, and the biggest opposition parties are banned, and dissolved based on terrorist accusations, and some of the opposition members had their nationality stripped away. In the 2018 parliament elections,



opposition groups were excluded under a new electoral law, that passed in 2018, which stated that candidates “should not be one of the leaders and members of the political societies dissolved by a final judgment for committing a serious violation of the provisions of the kingdom's constitution or any of its laws”. This isolation law disturbed a free and fair election competition within the societies and prevented the exercise of political rights asserting the government’s absolute authority.

### **Women’s Representation in the Emirati Federal National Council (FNC)**

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On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2005, Sheikh Khalifa Al Nahyan, president of the United Arab Emirates at the time, [announced](#) the country’s first-ever ballot where half of the Federal National Council (FNC) were to be elected, with the remaining half being appointed by rulers. The right to vote and run for elections was now a real possibility for Emirati women nationwide. By 2019, Presidential Resolution No. (1) established a 50% quota for women in the FNC, leading to an increase in women’s representation in the Council from 7 to 20 seats (out of a total 40)<sup>2</sup>. Consequently, this section explores the UAE’s approach to women’s political participation in the FNC, characterized by the implementation of gender quotas within a controlled electoral system. It raises questions about the relationship between formal representation, state-driven gender equality directives, and broader societal engagement.

The UAE’s electoral system, where only half of the FNC’s members can be elected, is conducted through indirect elections via a preselected electoral college chosen by the seven rulers,

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<sup>2</sup> Langworthy, M., Naguib, R. (2024). Through the Eye of the Needle: Lessons in Women’s Empowerment and Public Policy from the Arab Gulf. In: Naguib, R. (eds) Women's Empowerment and Public Policy in the Arab Gulf States. Gulf Studies, vol 11. Springer, Singapore. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6006-4\\_7](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-99-6006-4_7)

with the remaining half being appointed Participation in the FNC elections are also limited to a pre-selected group of citizens selected by the rulers of each emirate with limited information on who can vote or run for office. Vania Carvalho Pinto argues in her book *Nation-Building, State and the Gender framing of Women's rights in the UAE* that despite the restriction of the process to a merely selected few “the elections, limited as they were, did constitute a positive step towards democratic transformation” .”

Most Emirati citizens cannot directly elect their representatives to the Federal National Council (FNC) because of the country's restricted voting system. Consequently, both the representation of female candidates in the FNC and general voting behavior are shaped more by government policies rather than public opinion. For example, in [the 2006 ballot](#), the electoral college, whose members were appointed by the seven rulers, comprised of 6, 5095 individuals, including 1162 women<sup>3</sup>. Out of the pre-selected electoral college, 456 eligible individuals presented themselves as candidates, 65 of which were women. Of those, 29 were from Sharjah, 15 from Dubai and 14 from Abu Dhabi.

Out of the 65 candidates who ran, only one woman, Dr Amal Al-Qubaisi from Abu Dhabi succeeded in being elected, alongside eight others that were appointed, bringing the total to nine female MPs. By the end of the 2006 elections, women's representation in the FNC came to 22.4 %, signifying the highest level of female political representation in the Gulf at that time, a significant achievement for *Khaleeji* women's political suffrage as a whole.

Pinto argues that the election of Al-Qubaisi in 2006 came after ten years of *gender framing* by the UAE government through government campaigns that highlighted women's contributions

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<sup>3</sup> National Election Committee. (2006). *Federal National Council elections 2006*. <https://uaenec.ae/en/about-us/previous-fnc-elections/federal-national-council-elections-2006>

to society and leadership, that actively sought to soften Emirati society's generalized belief that they were not ready for women's political participation in the FNC and to increase acceptance of women in political roles. Notably, Dr Al-Qubaisi's election reflected a broader trend that would continue to reoccur in future elections as well: female FNC members tend to be highly educated professionals with strong tribal ties to society. Nearly half of the women elected or appointed to the FNC held PhDs -at a rate significantly higher than their male counterparts in the council. The high educational attainment level of female FNC members reinforces a narrative of exceptionalism: that women must be remarkably qualified in their careers to gain access to political power. This suggests that women's political participation is conditional on elite status, such as academic credentials or family/tribal connections, making political participation less accessible to a broader and more diverse segment of the female Emirati public.

Emirati society, like other Gulf societies at large, is patriarchal, and many members of society continue to hold traditional views on women's participation in public life. According to the World Economic Forum's 2021 [Global Gender Gap index](#), out of the 156 countries [measured](#) for women's political empowerment, Saudi Arabia ranked 138, Oman at 150, Kuwait at 153, Qatar at 148, Bahrain at 143, and the UAE at 24. This positions the UAE as a leading Gulf country regarding political empowerment for women. The UAE's high ranking reflects institutional and state-led efforts to increase female representation in government bodies through ministerial appointments and mandated gender quotas in the FNC. This starkly contrasts with other Gulf states that have approached female political representation through modest or cautious reforms.

A significant turning point in the UAE's policy towards promoting gender representation was spearheaded by state-led initiatives like the UAE's Gender Balance Council in 2015. The council was tasked with developing and promoting national policies to advance gender equality

across all sectors. Even before the formal institutionalization of this Council, women held 22.4% of seats in the FNC following the 2006 elections. Building on this success, the UAE introduced an official gender quota, mandating 50% of FNC seats to be held by women in line with the country's National Vision 2021. . The Emirati government's adoption of a 50% gender quota marked a shift in gender dynamics within political participation, signaling the UAE's commitment to aligning gender parity with its national development goals.

Critics of gender quota systems as a form of 'affirmative action' argue that electoral quota systems inhibit meritocracy, where selecting individuals based on their gender rather than qualifications and abilities can compromise the parliament's overall effectiveness. Conversely, and based on interviews carried out by May Al Dabbagh and Lana Nusseibeh on the first FNC elections, respondents who supported quotas "tended to see discrimination as part and parcel of the experience of participating politically"<sup>4</sup> One respondent went on to say that "If no seats were specified, the number [of women in the FNC] will not increase. But in the future, once political life changes and women take their rights via the quota system, then the quota should not be adopted"<sup>5</sup>

Despite the UAE's top-down progress towards gender parity in political participation, the (gendered) struggle for meaningful political participation continues. While increased female representation in the FNC is a necessary first step, the substance of this representation as an indicator of genuine female empowerment remains in question. Are women in the FNC only symbolic figures that fulfill gender quotas, or does their presence in parliamentary bodies like the

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<sup>4</sup> Al Dabbagh, M., & Nusseibeh, L. (2009). *Women in parliament and politics in the UAE: A study of the first Federal National Council elections*. Dubai School of Government, p. 31

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p 31

FNC create a space for advocacy to address structural gender inequalities? The real challenge I believe exists is not only guaranteeing women's physical presence in governance, but in creating a culture where both female and male candidates are willing to champion gender equality for the good of society, even in the absence of state-led involvement.

### **Kuwait's Parliamentary Evolution and the Challenge of Political Stability**

Dr. Abdulla Al-Etaibi- Assistant Professor of International Affairs, Department of International Affairs, College of Arts and Sciences, Qatar University

The Kuwaiti Parliament or National Assembly (*Majlis Al-Ummah*), established in 1962, represents a leading model of political participation in the Gulf region. The Parliament gave an opportunity for its citizens to elect representatives which made the state's political landscape one of the most pluralistic and dynamic in the Gulf. However, the National Assembly has been faced with persistent challenges, recently highlighted by the dissolution of the National Assembly which underscored the balance between the state's democratic aspirations and its monarchical authority that defines its constitutional framework.

The dissolution of parliament in Kuwait is a recurring feature, often prompted by disagreements between parliament and the executive branch over issues ranging from budget priorities and economic reform to accountability and transparency. These dissolutions illustrate both the vibrancy and volatility of its political system and reflect a dual tension: on one hand, an empowered legislative body that vigorously debates policies and holds officials accountable; on the other, an executive authority that intervenes to prevent perceived gridlock or legislative overreach. Each dissolution renews debates over Kuwait's political direction and constitutional structure, with proponents of reform calling for clearer boundaries to mitigate conflicts between

the branches of government. The executive's authority to dissolve parliament—while a constitutional right—raises questions about the consistency of democratic practice and the prospects for stable governance. Critics argue that these dissolutions weaken Kuwait's democratic institutions, while supporters maintain they are necessary to ensure political continuity and avoid legislative deadlock.

Kuwait's parliamentary system is notable not only for its relatively broad political engagement but also for its symbolic role within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). In a region where monarchical rule dominates and legislative bodies are either appointed or consultative, Kuwait's parliament stands out as a progressive structure. Other Gulf countries, like the UAE, have established advisory councils, yet these bodies lack the legislative power and accountability mechanisms found in Kuwait. Consequently, Kuwait's National Assembly offers a model of participatory governance, albeit one that has yet to achieve a sustainable balance between elected power and monarchical authority.

The Kuwaiti experience thus serves as both an inspiration and a cautionary tale for other Gulf states. It highlights the potential for civic engagement in decision-making processes while underscoring the risks of unresolved tensions between democratic and monarchical governance. Despite frequent dissolutions, the National Assembly has spurred debate on economic policies, citizen rights, and governance reforms—issues that might otherwise remain unaddressed in less participatory systems. Yet, this ongoing cycle of election and dissolution indicates that political engagement alone does not guarantee institutional resilience.

Kuwait's political landscape stands at a crossroads. The frequent dissolutions point to an underlying need for structural reform to enhance the stability of the political system. Reforms could include constitutional adjustments that set clearer parameters for dissolution, establishing

mechanisms to encourage productive dialogue between branches rather than resorting to dissolution as a default response to conflict. Another potential reform could involve fostering a culture of consensus-building within the parliament itself, which might reduce the frequency of confrontational politics.

Moreover, Kuwait's experience raises broader questions about the role of parliament in Gulf monarchies. If Kuwait can evolve a model that balances democratic engagement with executive authority, it may serve as an example for other Gulf states considering pathways to greater public participation. In an era where citizen expectations are shifting, finding a sustainable model for participatory governance is increasingly critical for maintaining social cohesion and political stability.

The recent dissolution of Kuwait's parliament encapsulates the complexities of balancing democratic practice with executive power in a Gulf context. While Kuwait's parliamentary system embodies the potential for inclusive governance, repeated dissolutions signal a need for structural reform to stabilize and strengthen its democratic institutions. In the broader Gulf landscape, Kuwait's experience offers a unique perspective on governance, highlighting both the challenges and potential benefits of political participation. For Kuwait, the road ahead will require careful balancing to ensure that its parliamentary experiment can evolve from a cycle of contention to a model of sustainable, resilient governance.

### **The particularities of the Iranian electoral system**

Dr. Luciano Zaccara- Research Associate Professor, Gulf Studies Center, College of Arts  
and Sciences, Qatar University

The Iranian electoral system, established following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, is unique in its structure and function. It operates within a hybrid political regime, combining religious legitimacy, embodied by the Supreme Leader (velayat-e faqih), with popular legitimacy obtained through elections. This dual legitimacy is enshrined in the Iranian Constitution of 1979, later amended in 1989, which provides the foundation for the country's political and electoral processes.

The Constitution emphasizes the importance of public participation in governance, as stated in Article 6:

“In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the affairs of the country must be administered on the basis of public opinion expressed by the means of elections, including the election of the President, the representatives of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the members of councils, or by means of referenda in matters specified in other articles of this Constitution.”

Elections in Iran include those for the Presidency, Parliament, Assembly of Experts, Municipal Councils, and referendums. A complex legal framework governs these elections, including specific laws enacted by the Majlis for each type of election and regulations that define the supervisory role of the Guardian Council, as outlined in the Law of Interpretation of Article 99 of the Constitution.

One defining characteristic of the Iranian electoral system is the absence of open or closed party lists. Candidates register individually with the Ministry of Interior, and their applications are subsequently approved or rejected by the Guardian Council after an initial screening. This process underscores the system's uninominal nature, despite the constitutional recognition of political parties under Article 26.



Iran is divided into 309 electoral districts, where the system varies between single-member and multi-member constituencies. However, the absence of pre-printed candidate lists requires voters to write the names of their preferred candidates by hand on the ballot paper. This practice, particularly in large districts, can be cumbersome and confusing. For instance, Tehran electoral district voters are required to list 46 names -with their corresponding alphanumeric codes- for concurrent elections to the Majlis (30 seats) and the Assembly of Experts (16 seats), a process that is both time-intensive and susceptible to errors.

The electoral formula follows a two-round system (TRS) with a majority threshold. Another unique feature is the lack of voter registration and the absence of pre-assigned polling stations. Voters can cast their ballots in any constituency, creating logistical challenges in accurately determining turnout rates at the district or provincial level. This flexibility has often resulted in reported voter participation rates exceeding 100% in specific districts. For example, polling stations such as Hosseiniya Ershad in Tehran often experience long queues, primarily due to the concentration of reformist voters, while other stations remain underutilized. Official data showing those percentages has been published by the Ministry of Interior in many occasions, without that representing, according to the characteristics of the system, evidence of fraud or wrongdoing.

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, Iran has held 14 presidential elections, 13 parliamentary elections, six Assembly of Experts elections, six municipal elections, and three referendums. Until 2006, Iranians were called to vote almost annually. To reduce administrative burdens and encourage participation, elections have since been conducted concurrently.

Participation rate has been a critical feature along the Islamic Republic history. Official data shows that while there were processes that witnessed very high turnout – 80% in the 1997

presidential elections and 83% in 2009 -- there were others with a turnout below the symbolic 50% threshold – 48% in the 2021 Presidential elections, and 41% and 42% in the 2024 and 2020 Legislative elections respectively.

Although political parties are constitutionally permitted, formal parties ceased to exist following the dissolution of the Islamic Republican Party in 1987. Instead, informal political alliances, known as factions, dominate the electoral landscape. These factions lack clear ideological boundaries, creating a fluid and often ambiguous political environment.

Candidates may appear on multiple electoral lists, sometimes without their consent or even their knowledge. These lists frequently include candidates with conflicting political ideologies, further complicating the identification of winners and losers along factional lines. This fluidity weakens governmental control over opposition groups, allowing informal factions to grow in influence without a formal framework to contain them.

Within this context the Guardian Council, a non-elected institution that also serves as an upper chamber in the legislative process, plays a central and often contentious role in the electoral and factional system. It acts as a gatekeeper, selecting candidates aligned with the establishment's political and ideological tendencies and limiting the participation of radical or reformist figures. By regulating access to the electoral race, the Council influences factional competition and defines the boundaries of acceptable political discourse.

Despite its extensive powers, however, the Guardian Council has not been able to fully suppress political competition. Several non-official factions have achieved electoral success, as demonstrated by unexpected candidates like Mohammad Khatami in 1997, Mahmood Ahmadinejad in 2005, and Hassan Rouhani in 2013, all of whom gained significant popular support.

Elections in Iran serve multiple functions within its unique political system. They act as a mechanism to highlight intra-elite disputes and provide the government with a means to periodically assess public sentiment. Additionally, elections bring candidates into office while fulfilling distinct roles for legislative and presidential contests. Legislative elections address discrepancies among political factions and function as a tool for recruiting members of the elite into the political system. In contrast, presidential elections are pivotal for forming a government that operates within the framework of the Islamic Republic, shaping the executive branch's composition and direction. Since the foreign policy orientation is, within the limitations of the broader political system, determined by the President and its Foreign Minister, the presidential elections have been usually followed with a huge interest by policy makers and governments around the world.

The Iranian electoral system is, therefore, a complex amalgamation of religious oversight and popular participation. While it emphasizes the role of public opinion, its unique features—such as uninominal candidacies, the absence of formal parties, and the powerful influence of the Guardian Council—create a political landscape that is both distinctive and highly controlled. Nevertheless, the system's inherent flexibility has allowed for unexpected political outcomes, reflecting the dynamic interplay between state control and popular will.