



## Neither Free nor Fair, Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran

*“To we who administer the presidential elections, it makes absolutely no difference who wins. As far as we’re concerned, anyone whom the esteemed Guardian Council allows to run is an insider.”*

- Kamran Daneshju, Political Deputy to the Minister of Interior and Head of the Ministry of Interior’s elections headquarters. Speech to a meeting of election officials in Tabriz, *Abrar newspaper*, **20 April 2009**

Once again, the Islamic Republic of Iran has held a nationwide election (this time for president) and once again the campaigning and the voting have become occasions for media accounts that focus on the colorful rallies, the candidates’ personality, and the speeches—while failing to reckon seriously with just how restricted, controlled, and opaque the entire process really is.

This is not to deny the importance of the current campaign. The elections have indeed generated interest and passion among Iranians of all walks of life. They have become the battlefield [where civil society finds space to articulate its demands](#) for a more open and just society. The authorities have tolerated greater public debate, which helps expand the reach of civil society. This, however, does not signify the leadership’s intention to address these demands. Hence, the need to remind those in power that a vibrant campaign is no substitute for the legitimacy bestowed by a genuinely free and fair election.

The flaws are not simply a matter of the individuals currently in positions of power. They are inherent in the current electoral process. To begin with, each presidential candidate—like each and every candidate for parliament—had to be vetted and approved by the Guardian Council. This panel of clerics and jurists is neither elected nor accountable to the public in any meaningful way. Its mission—by law—is not to reflect the will of Iranians, but purely to safeguard the main tenets of the Islamic Republic that has ruled them with brutality for the last thirty years.

In the Council’s unaccountable hands lies not only the power to say who can run, but also control over how elections are conducted and how electoral disputes are settled. Non-conforming parties are banned, and the ban is harshly enforced. Moreover, the authorities who run the Islamic Republic have yet to allow any independent election monitoring, whether local or international. Iran’s elections are opaque at every stage.

Laws have long been in place that deny Iranians the rights to speak and associate freely for peaceful purposes, and otherwise to participate in the political life of their country regardless of their beliefs, religion, or gender.

Over the past three decades, the Islamic Republic has severely punished any attempt by Iranian citizens to form parties and promote ideas or programs that the authorities deem contrary to the existing regime’s core beliefs. This includes parties which, inspired by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, assert as a matter of principle

that all Iranians are equal and competent to determine their own destiny.

Far from the noisy campaign rallies and well out of the media's view, [the Islamic Republic's jails hold in their shadowy depths a number of peaceful citizens](#) whose only "crime" has been the desire openly to associate with their fellow citizens for nonviolent political ends. These prisoners include [Abbas Khorsandi](#), the leader of the Iran Democratic Party, who is serving the third year of an eight-year sentence for "creating an illegal group," as well as Asgar Akbarzadeh, who received five years on the same charge plus the offense of having taken part in Azeri cultural events including folk dancing. [Heshmatollah Tabarzadi](#), leader of the Iran Democratic Front, served more than 5 years for political activism.

Others have been less lucky. [Amir Heshmat Saran](#) went to jail as a witness for the right to associate. After being denied proper medical care, he died in March in the fourth year of a sixteen-year term. [Dariush Forouhar](#) and his wife [Parvaneh](#), nationalists in the tradition to the late premier Mohammad Mossadegh and themselves founders of the Mellat Iran Party, were gruesomely stabbed to death in their home in 1998 after they began reaching out to a new generation of Iranian student activists. In the early 1980s, shortly after the founding of the Islamic Republic, the organization [Paykar for the Freedom of the Working Class](#) was annihilated when the new regime executed more than four hundreds of its members and sympathizers.

Other Iranians too numerous to mention have also paid with their lives for insisting on their right and the right of their fellow citizens to have a say in how they are governed. With so much attention coming to bear on this election, the Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation deems it vital to point out the structural and legal flaws that critically mar Iran's electoral process by publishing: *[Neither Free nor Fair, Elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran.](#)*

Unless corrected, laws that blatantly infringe on the Iranian people's ability to determine their own political destiny will continue to make meaningful democratic change improbable.

The Boroumand Foundation is a non-governmental non-profit organization, founded in April 2001, and dedicated to the promotion of human rights and democracy in Iran. The Foundation is an independent organization with no political affiliation and is committed to promoting human rights awareness through education and the dissemination of information as necessary prerequisites for the establishment of a stable democracy in Iran. [www.iranrights.org](http://www.iranrights.org)