

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Iran

### Preelection assessment

*Presidential election set for June 2021*

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Iran's presidential election will take place in a tightly controlled political environment. Political power ultimately lies in the hands of the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the undemocratic institutions under his control. The unelected Guardian Council vets all candidates and has the authority to disqualify those that are deemed insufficiently loyal to the clerical establishment. Approved candidates will not be announced until a month before the election. Voter turnout dipped to a record low in the February 2020 parliamentary elections, a sign of widespread disillusionment with the electoral system. President Hassan Rouhani will leave office amid a crippling economic crisis, the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, and continuing civil unrest, all of which may exacerbate voter apathy.

Despite the fact that Rouhani often employed more moderate rhetoric, he fell far short of fulfilling campaign promises to improve Iranians' personal freedoms. Tens of thousands of websites are blocked, including content about human rights, criticism of the government, and religious expression. Access to major social media platforms remains restricted, including Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. During repeated mass protests, the government has restricted access to additional platforms and, at times, cut off internet traffic entirely. The state dominates the information landscape through state-run media, strict controls on reporting, and paid progovernment commentators. As a result, Iranians often struggle to access independent sources of information and tools for online campaigning, thus contributing to a restrictive preelection environment.

Freedom House has identified the following as key issues to watch ahead of election day:

- **Blocking and filtering websites:** There was evidence of election-related blocking and filtering during the 2016 midterm elections; the parliamentary monitoring platform Majlis Monitor was filtered shortly before the election. In the lead up to the 2013 elections, Iranians noticed that online posts or websites that contained certain words, such as candidates' names or slogans, were temporarily blocked or taken offline. Iran's history of extensive blocking, including around elections, suggests that more sites could be blocked ahead of the vote. Websites and online platforms used for independently monitoring election results or fact-checking candidates could be targeted for censorship.
- **Influence operations:** Iranian authorities have been linked to numerous influence operations in recent years. In October 2020, the US government disrupted a disinformation campaign involving dozens of Iranian-backed websites posing as independent media outlets and targeting countries in the Americas, Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. In 2019, Twitter announced the removal of nearly 5000 accounts linked to the Iranian government for coordinated manipulation

targeted at international and domestic audiences. While research on domestic operations remains scant, Iran's extensive foreign campaigns demonstrate the existence of a sophisticated covert influence apparatus that could also be deployed domestically. Iranian authorities regularly manipulate the domestic information environment in other ways, issuing coverage guidelines and pressuring journalists and the media to avoid “government red lines” when covering sensitive topics, including elections.

- **Internet shutdowns:** The state maintains legal and technical control over the internet backbone, facilitating any restrictions on internet connectivity. Authorities disrupted access for one week in response to massive antigovernment protests in November 2019. Shutdowns have continued intermittently; in February 2021, in Sistan and Baluchistan in February 2021, when the government suspended access in Sistan and Baluchistan amid protests. Protests before or after the June election could trigger similar restrictions by the authorities. Any sign or suspicion of public upheaval around the June election could trigger similar shutdowns by the authorities.

Iran has a score of 17 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House’s Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects a tightly controlled electoral system and high levels of online censorship and propaganda. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2020*, with a score of 17 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties and **Not Free** in *Freedom on the Net 2020*, with an internet freedom score of 15 out of 100. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Iran country reports in [Freedom in the World](#) and [Freedom on the Net](#).