



How to cite this article:

Sargazi, A., Jalalian, A., & Sadeghi, S. H. (2026). Pathology of the Approbatory Supervision System over Elections in Iran with Emphasis on the Indicators and Principles Enshrined in the General Election Policies. *Journal of Historical Research, Law and Policy*, 4(3), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.61838/jhrp.156>



Article history:
Original Research

Dates:

Submission Date: 05 October 2025

Revision Date: 27 December 2025

Acceptance Date: 04 January 2026

Publication Date: 01 May 2026

Pathology of the Approbatory Supervision System over Elections in Iran with Emphasis on the Indicators and Principles Enshrined in the General Election Policies

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ABSTRACT

Electoral supervision constitutes one of the most fundamental pillars for realizing healthy, free, and fair elections. Using a descriptive-analytical method and drawing on the General Election Policies (promulgated by the Supreme Leader in 2016), the present study examines the criteria, principles, and mechanisms governing the Guardian Council's approbatory supervision. The principal findings of the study are as follows: (a) the identification of five key supervisory criteria, including transparency and appropriate timing, the presence of candidates at all stages of the process, written accountability in cases of election annulment and candidate disqualification, and effective confront with violations; (b) the extraction of eight governing principles of supervision, namely impartiality, transparency, professionalism, accountability, accuracy and precision, independence, comprehensiveness, and service orientation; and (c) an analysis of the fundamental principles articulated in the General Election Policies, including ensuring the integrity and freedom of elections, maximizing public participation, safeguarding the rights of candidates and voters, and full observance of impartiality. The results indicate that, despite the general alignment of the existing legal framework with the General Election Policies, there are serious shortcomings in areas such as the timing of candidate qualification reviews, transparency of campaign finance sources, written accountability regarding the reasons for candidate disqualification and election annulment, effective enforcement mechanisms against violations, and transparency in the composition of executive electoral boards. The study concludes by proposing legislative and executive recommendations aimed at addressing these gaps and enhancing the effectiveness of the approbatory supervision system.

Keywords: *approbatory supervision; Guardian Council; General Election Policies; transparency; impartiality; accountability*

Introduction

Elections, as one of the most significant manifestations of religious democracy within the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, have consistently required effective mechanisms to ensure their integrity, freedom, and fairness. Electoral supervision—particularly the approbatory supervision exercised by the Guardian Council—occupies a pivotal position as a fundamental instrument for safeguarding the popular vote and ensuring conformity of the electoral process with the Constitution and Islamic law. Article 99 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran explicitly entrusts the supervision of elections for the Assembly of Experts, the Presidency, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and referenda to the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council's interpretive opinion issued



in 1991 and subsequently endorsed by the Expediency Discernment Council in 2000 defined the nature of this supervision as “approbatory,” meaning that the Council’s oversight is effective, decisive, and continuous throughout all stages of the electoral process and entails the authority to issue final approval or rejection (1).

Despite this firm legal foundation, the performance of the supervisory system has faced extensive criticism in recent decades. These criticisms include ambiguity in the criteria for candidate disqualification, temporal constraints in the qualification review process, lack of transparency in announcing the reasons for disqualification or election annulment, weaknesses in supervising campaign finance sources, and the ineffectiveness of enforcement guarantees against electoral violations. Such challenges, particularly evident in various parliamentary elections, have contributed to declining public trust and reduced electoral participation (2). In this context, the promulgation of the General Election Policies by the Supreme Leader on 15 October 2016 marked a critical turning point in efforts to reform and enhance Iran’s electoral system. This strategic document, articulated in eighteen clauses, while reaffirming core principles such as the guardianship of the jurist and religious democracy, delineates key indicators, criteria, and fundamental principles for conducting healthy and vibrant elections. Clauses 11 and 15, in particular, emphasize the definition and public announcement of transparent supervisory criteria, the protection of candidates’ and voters’ rights, written accountability, effective confront with violations, and full observance of impartiality, thereby providing a renewed framework for evaluating the Guardian Council’s performance (3).

The present study adopts a descriptive–analytical approach with the aim of diagnosing the approbatory supervision system of the Guardian Council in light of the General Election Policies. The central research question is: to what extent do the legal framework and practical procedures of approbatory supervision conform to the criteria and principles set forth in the General Election Policies, and what gaps or deficiencies exist in this regard? To address this question, the study first extracts and explicates the supervisory criteria and principles articulated in the General Election Policies. It then compares these standards with the mechanisms embedded in the Law on Elections of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (enacted in 1999 with subsequent amendments) and with the established practices of the Guardian Council. Finally, the study proposes legislative and executive recommendations aimed at remedying identified shortcomings.

The significance of this research lies in its status as the first comprehensive study conducted after the promulgation of the General Election Policies that specifically addresses approbatory supervision with an emphasis on Clauses 11 and 15 of this overarching document. By systematically illustrating the gap between the “existing situation” and the “desired situation” envisioned in the higher-order policy framework, the findings of this study can serve as a foundation for reforming electoral legislation, drafting executive bylaws for the Guardian Council, and ultimately strengthening public trust in electoral processes.

Criteria, Objectives, and Governing Principles of Electoral Supervision

Indicators and Criteria of Electoral Supervision

In addition to the general principles governing electoral supervision, a set of criteria may be identified that provide concrete, objective, and operational indicators regarding how supervision should be exercised. These criteria enable the legal system governing electoral supervision and the related laws to draw upon principled benchmarks, thereby facilitating the reform and improvement of supervisory regulations. On this basis, the most significant criteria

relevant to the Guardian Council's supervisory competence are those articulated in Clauses 11 and 15 of the General Election Policies, each of which is examined below.

1. Establishing transparent, time-bound, and confidence-building mechanisms

The first criterion that the Guardian Council's supervisory mechanisms must embody is transparency. In clarifying the meaning of transparency, reference may be made to Clause 18 of the General Administrative System Policies, which defines transparency as informing the public of their mutual rights and obligations vis-à-vis the administrative system, with an emphasis on regulated and easy access to accurate information (approved on 20 April 2010). Accordingly, transparency in electoral supervision should be understood as the awareness of, and access by, relevant stakeholders to information and procedures governing the exercise of supervision. Another essential criterion is appropriate time management, meaning that the Guardian Council's supervisory process can achieve its intended objectives only if conducted within a legally sufficient and proportionate timeframe. Excessive temporal constraints in the supervisory process may lead to violations of individual rights and compromise electoral justice, thereby calling into question the principle of safeguarding candidates' and voters' rights as a core supervisory principle. Confidence-building constitutes an additional indicator of the Guardian Council's supervisory mechanisms, referring to the assurance of candidates' and citizens' rights and the realization of the objectives prescribed for the supervisory process.

2. Ensuring candidates' presence throughout all stages of the election

The presence of candidates in review procedures encompasses both physical presence and access to, as well as awareness of, all stages of the electoral process, including qualification review, participation at polling stations, vote counting, and the adjudication of complaints. The realization of this criterion can facilitate the achievement of transparency, insofar as it seeks to involve and inform electoral actors, thereby advancing the objectives of electoral supervision—such as ensuring integrity and transparency—and ultimately promoting maximum public participation (4).

3. The requirement of written accountability regarding the reasons for election annulment

Another criterion imposed on the Guardian Council is written accountability concerning the reasons for election annulment upon the voluntary request of candidates. The primary factor prompting the consideration of electoral complaints and the confirmation or annulment of elections is the occurrence of unlawful conduct by electoral actors. When such unlawful behavior becomes sufficiently widespread to distort the voting process and undermine the integrity and validity of election results, the supervisory authority may suspend or annul the election in the relevant constituency. In such cases, the supervisory body is obligated to present the reasons for annulment on the basis of valid evidence, documentation, and proofs, and to communicate these reasons in written form to candidates upon request.

4. The Requirement of Written Accountability Regarding the Reasons for Candidate Disqualification

Another supervisory rule is the requirement of written accountability concerning the reasons for candidate disqualification upon their request. In explaining this criterion, it should be noted that the authority responsible for reviewing candidates' qualifications is obliged, if requested by the candidate, not only to state the grounds for disqualification by citing the relevant legal provisions and supporting evidence, but also to concretely specify the instances and documentary proof demonstrating noncompliance with the prescribed conditions, rather than confining itself to general statements. For example, where a candidate is disqualified on the ground of "lack of practical commitment to Islam and the system of the Islamic Republic of Iran," the reviewing authority should not

merely invoke this general label or broadly rely on the general clauses of Article 28 of the Law on Elections of the Islamic Consultative Assembly. Instead, it must present documented, reasoned, and written instances evidencing the alleged lack of commitment. Although in assessing qualitative conditions, legal documents and evidence are as influential as quantitative criteria, a decisive role is often played by the human element, which may evaluate the available evidence through discretionary judgment and reach a final decision.

It should be emphasized, however, that a prerequisite for such action by the supervisory authority is that the ordinary legislator articulate the qualitative conditions enumerated in Article 28—such as the requirement of “practical commitment to Islam and the sacred system of the Islamic Republic of Iran”—in more specific and concrete terms, thereby minimizing the role of subjective discretion in the evaluation and verification of qualifications. The initial common understanding of a phrase such as “practical belief in Islam” among the general public typically refers to performing obligatory religious duties and abstaining from prohibited acts. Nevertheless, the Guardian Council, in its assessments, may identify serious deficiencies in certain candidates’ qualifications. Due to the lack of explicitness and transparency in the law and the failure to enumerate such instances independently, it may rely on broadly framed clauses, which can in turn become subject to criticism. By way of illustration, instances such as the lack of economic integrity—manifested in various forms including misuse of public property, rent-seeking, and similar practices—may prompt the Guardian Council to invoke Clause 1 of Article 28 of the parliamentary election law and regard the qualifications of such individuals as problematic (5).

In this regard, a noteworthy question arises as to whether references to matters such as lack of good moral reputation or deficiencies in economic integrity can legitimately be considered manifestations of Article 28, and whether the Guardian Council may rely on such grounds to disqualify candidates and prevent their entry into the sensitive and impactful sphere of public representation. It is evident that if these instances were clearly enumerated in the election law, the supervisory authority could evaluate and identify them with greater precision, while candidates would also be informed of the reasons for their disqualification without ambiguity (5).

By way of example, instances of lack of practical commitment to Islam may include: deliberate neglect of obligatory religious duties; commission of acts contrary to Islamic law; failure to adhere to Islamic ethical principles and values such as trustworthiness and respect for the rights of others; economic corruption, misuse of public funds, and acquisition of illicit income; and moral corruption, including illicit relationships. It should be noted that Clause 10(1) of the General Election Policies also refers to the quantitative conditions of electoral candidates and explicitly emphasizes the need to systematize candidates’ eligibility requirements through the precise definition of criteria and indicators.

5. The Requirement of Effective Measures Against Electoral Offenders

Electoral offenders encompass a wide range of actors, including election administrators, supervisors, inspectors, candidates, representatives of their supporters, and ordinary citizens. Throughout electoral competition, various unlawful acts may be committed at different stages and processes of the election by diverse actors, thereby threatening the integrity and soundness of the electoral process. Accordingly, certain unlawful behaviors associated with each stage of the electoral process have been anticipated along with appropriate enforcement mechanisms. However, the existing rules and regulations, first, do not encompass all dimensions of electoral irregularities and unlawful conduct, and second, for some crimes and violations either no enforcement guarantees have been provided or, where provided, they lack sufficient effectiveness. On the basis of these gaps and deficiencies, Clause

15 of the General Election Policies mandates “effective confront with electoral offenders” as a means of safeguarding the people’s votes (6).

It should be added that a prerequisite for achieving effective measures against offenders is, first, the severity and seriousness of the response to violations, and second, the timely and expedited handling of electoral crimes and violations. In this regard, while the Guardian Council should make use of the enforcement guarantees available to the supervisory authority, it should also demand accelerated judicial proceedings from the Judiciary (5).

Principles Governing the Supervision of Electoral Integrity and Soundness

Ensuring the integrity and soundness of elections is a vital and necessary matter, as legitimacy constitutes the very essence of elections. If those responsible for elections fail to assure the public of electoral legitimacy, society will bear a heavy cost—namely, public distrust toward those who assume power through electoral processes. The governing principles are as follows:

a. The Principle of Impartiality

Under this principle, supervisors must be selected from among non-partisan and non-biased individuals committed to the realization of justice and fairness. What is essential for supervisors in the performance of their duties is that election management administers the electoral process in accordance with laws, regulations, and value-based principles, striving for proper enforcement of the law without regard to the outcome of the election or the identity of the winner. Various dimensions may contribute to ensuring supervisory impartiality. Accordingly, supervisors should act in a fully impartial manner, free from any bias toward state officials, election management bodies, political parties, candidates, voters, mass media, or the press; refrain from any act that indicates partisan support for a candidate, party, supporters, or a particular political orientation, even in appearance; disclose any relationship with officials or specific organizations that may lead to conflicts of interest or contradict their supervisory duties; refuse any gifts or assistance from individuals, organizations, or political parties with a stake in the election; abstain from participation in activities demonstrating support for a specific party or candidate; avoid expressing opinions on matters likely to create disputes or conflicts during elections; maintain no special supportive relationships with voters; and refrain from using symbols or attire that signify support for a particular political orientation.

b. The Principle of Transparency

Supervisory methods must be grounded in law and consistent with established supervisory principles and procedures. In preparing their reports, supervisors should attach relevant documents and evidence to facilitate fair evaluation, thereby enhancing the transparency and credibility of their reports. Accordingly, supervisors should clearly specify the objectives of their supervision at both the outset of the election and during the reporting stage; collect information using documented evidence and scientific methods; be prepared to present an overall and final assessment of the supervisory process to election management; inform election management of existing deficiencies in the electoral process when necessary and appropriate; and publicly announce the results of supervision in each constituency (7).

c. The Principle of Professionalism

Given the sensitivity and complexity of electoral supervision, supervisors must undergo appropriate training and possess adequate expertise, experience, and knowledge in political, legal, managerial, administrative, supervisory,

and electoral matters. The professionalism of the supervisory institution is as important as its independence and impartiality, since the optimal fulfillment of this duty depends on institutional specialization and efficiency (8).

d. The Principle of Accountability

Supervisors must justify their actions, activities, and decisions in their reports and be accountable for questions, ambiguities, and challenges related to the manner in which they perform their duties, responding to executive and supervisory officials, the public, and other competent individuals and institutions (9).

e. The Principle of Accuracy and Precision

This principle derives from the necessity of transparency. Since participants must have access to the information forming the basis of decision-making, such information must be precise and specific. Accordingly, authorities must observe standards of accuracy, ensure that information is collected, categorized, and disseminated in a clear, systematic, and unambiguous manner, and guarantee that the information provided has a factual and genuine basis. Supervisors must exercise the utmost diligence in performing their duties, given the risk of violations and crimes throughout the electoral process, and must therefore document their observations in a well-reasoned and substantiated written form.

f. The Principle of Independence

In light of political and undue interference—particularly by competitors seeking electoral victory—the supervisory body must be structurally and operationally independent from the three branches of government and specific institutions, enabling it to perform its duties impartially and freely, in accordance with reality. In a multiparty system, a supervisory body will gain the trust of all parties only when its independence from any party, group, or incumbent government is evident and unequivocal. The structure of this institution must be such that it can effectively resist external pressures.

g. The Principle of Comprehensiveness

Supervisors must oversee the entire electoral process and all factors influencing the course of elections, including political freedoms, respect for electoral rights, the performance of all governmental authorities and institutions, political and cultural developments within society, and the conduct of media and political parties.

h. The Principle of Respect for the Law

Success in elections depends on the degree to which their legitimacy is accepted and respected by participants. Electoral policies must be formulated within the framework of the law so as to be understandable to participants. If election administration does not adhere to the law, lacks respect for legal requirements, or if the decisions of responsible authorities lack a legal basis, the process becomes ambiguous and incomprehensible to participants, thereby diminishing public support and reducing electoral participation.

i. The Principle of Service Provision

Election stakeholders—particularly supervisors—must act in a manner that enables citizens to exercise their rights freely, knowingly, and without ambiguity or legal pressure. Their performance should therefore facilitate the maximum possible participation of eligible citizens in elections.

Principles Governing Electoral Supervision

The principles governing electoral supervision refer to the fundamental requirements and core frameworks of elections that legal institutions—particularly the supervisory authority, in overseeing all stages of the electoral process—must take into account in order to create the conditions for healthy and fair elections.

1. The Principle of Ensuring Electoral Integrity and Freedom

One of the principles governing the supervisory process is the principle of ensuring the integrity and freedom of elections, which is explicitly emphasized in Clauses 11 and 15 of the General Election Policies. Electoral integrity is a key factor in safeguarding electoral freedom and impartiality, as well as enabling the participation of candidates, stakeholder groups, and voters; without integrity, there is no guarantee that voters' preferences will be accurately reflected in the election results. The purpose of electoral competition is the attainment of public office and political power, and in such competition no actor wishes to lose. Accordingly, there is always a risk that some may resort to unethical and unlawful means to undermine electoral integrity and secure victory (10). On this basis, electoral supervisors are obliged, through close and comprehensive oversight of all electoral procedures, to prevent the occurrence of electoral violations and crimes.

2. The Principle of Maximizing Public Participation

Another principle of electoral supervision is the creation of conditions that facilitate enthusiastic and maximum public participation in elections, as identified in Clause 11 of the General Election Policies. Maximum participation reflects popular alignment with the governing system and contributes to the public display of the system's authority, thereby strengthening security and resilience while fostering the discouragement of adversaries.

3. The Principle of Safeguarding the Rights of Candidates and Voters

Eligible participants in elections—namely candidates and voters—constitute two core groups of electoral actors, and the preservation of their electoral rights is of substantial importance. Clause 11 of the General Election Policies also underscores the protection of these rights as a supervisory principle. Under this principle, the supervisory authority is obliged to secure candidates' rights, including accurate, correct, and impartial qualification review, oversight of appropriate protection of polling stations, and impartial and prompt adjudication of electoral complaints. It must likewise secure voters' rights, including the right to vote, protection of ballots, prevention of threats or coercion against voters, and related safeguards, through transparent and precise supervision. For example, respect for candidates' rights requires that, in the qualification verification process, the supervisory authority—through careful and comprehensive oversight—approve those who possess the required eligibility for political contestation and, conversely, disqualify those who lack the necessary qualifications through rigorous review (4).

4. The Principle of Full Observance of Impartiality

The principle of full observance of impartiality is another principle governing electoral supervision referenced in Clause 15 of the General Election Policies. One implication of this principle is that, for the supervisory authority, ensuring the conformity of election administrators' actions with laws and regulations should take priority, and the authority should pursue proper enforcement without any preferential inclination toward particular individuals, parties, or political orientations (3). Other legal consequences of impartiality in the conduct and behavior of supervisors include prohibiting any activity—such as speeches or the use of attire and symbols associated with a particular candidate's campaign—that indicates partisan support by the supervisory authority for a candidate or specific political currents; prohibiting the acceptance of gifts or assistance from actors with a stake in the election; and criminalizing such conduct (11).

The Electoral Process and the Structure of the Supervisory System in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Electoral supervision comprises four general axes: (1) supervision of the process of verification, approval, and disqualification of candidates; (2) supervision of electoral campaigning; (3) supervision of voting, vote counting, and

the announcement of results; and (4) supervision and adjudication of electoral complaints. Among these electoral processes, and in view of the need to delimit the topic due to the article's scope and length constraints, the discussion here focuses only on the Guardian Council's supervisory competence across three axes: candidate qualification verification, electoral campaigning, and adjudication of electoral complaints.

1. Supervision of Candidate Qualification Verification

Although election-related activities within the Ministry of Interior and the Guardian Council begin several months prior to voting day, the registration of candidates and the review of their qualifications constitute the first stage of elections, in which the Guardian Council's supervisory role becomes particularly prominent and clearly observable in the qualification verification domain. In this respect, the parliamentary election law contains deficiencies. Based on the principles and indicators outlined above, the shortcomings relating to qualification review are examined and reform proposals are presented.

a. The Timeframe for Reviewing Candidate Qualifications

One issue concerning the process of reviewing candidates' qualifications is the determination of the timeframe for finalizing candidates' status. In this regard, pursuant to Article 50 of the parliamentary election law, the executive boards of constituency centers are required—taking into account local inquiries and the results announced by the Ministry of Interior—to examine candidates' eligibility in relation to the statutory requirements within a maximum of ten days after the end of the registration period and to report the overall result to the supervisory boards. As an illustration, allocating a ten-day period for the executive board to express an opinion on candidates' qualifications is not a reasonable or proportionate timeframe; given the high volume of registrants, a ten-day window—of which, in practice, five days are legally consumed by obtaining statutory inquiries—deprives administrators of the opportunity for thorough review (5). To remedy this deficiency, Clause 10(3) of the General Election Policies emphasizes the necessity of thorough review and verification of candidates' eligibility conditions by providing sufficient time within the framework of each election law. On this basis, to address temporal constraints in eligibility review, it may be proposed, first, that the review period be extended and the timeframe for review and reconsideration be increased, and second, that the obligation to provide certain documents evidencing eligibility be placed on the candidate. For example, requirements such as verification of academic credentials and confirmation of the absence of a criminal record are among eligibility conditions, and submission of such documents could be made a prerequisite for candidate registration.

b. Authorities Involved in Reviewing Candidate Qualifications

In the process of reviewing and verifying candidates' qualifications, multiple authorities operate in parallel. Under Article 50 of the parliamentary election law, the executive boards of constituency centers must, within a maximum of ten days following the registration deadline, examine candidates' qualifications—based on local inquiries and on the results announced by the Ministry of Interior—and submit their findings to the supervisory boards. The provincial supervisory board also communicates its view on the qualifications of other candidates to the Central Supervisory Board. Pursuant to Note 1 of Article 52, after obtaining the view of the Central Supervisory Board, the provincial supervisory board is required to announce the approval or disqualification of all candidates with legal justification. Where the Central Supervisory Board disqualifies candidates whose qualifications were approved by the constituency executive board, those candidates may submit their objection to the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council, in turn, must communicate its final and definitive decision on candidate approval or disqualification to the Ministry of Interior within twenty days after the Central Supervisory Board issues its opinion (12).

It should also be noted that, although the legislator has assigned this task to an executive board whose members are, in the majority, local trusted individuals (and, more precisely, members of the public rather than government officials), in practice the selection of nine members (the majority) from among thirty local trusted individuals has not resolved the challenge. This is because, while the legislator's premise has been that executive board members would be drawn from public trusted persons, in reality the public does not determine the composition of executive boards, and the executive board is, in practice, formed largely by governmental managers and employees as well as persons affiliated with the government.

c. Supervision of Electoral Campaigning

Electoral campaigning is one of the electoral processes for which supervision appears necessary. For this reason, the legislator has established restrictions in this area; however, these prescriptions and prohibitions do not cover all aspects of electoral campaigning. In view of the deficiencies in campaigning regulations, the General Election Policies articulate important policy directions that should be taken into account both in legislative drafting and in supervising campaign activities. In addition, the parliamentary election law does not designate a specific institution for supervising the campaign process. On this basis, the scope of the Guardian Council's supervisory functions is examined across the axes of equitable distribution of resources and facilities, transparency of financial resources and adjudication of financial violations, supervision of campaign violations, and adjudication of supportive violations.

d. Equal and Fair Allocation of Resources and Facilities

Clause 3 of the General Election Policies anticipates the fair distribution of campaign resources and facilities. In Article 59, the legislator explicitly prohibits any campaign activity by candidates for parliamentary representation on the national broadcaster (IRIB) prior to the official announcement of final candidates and deems violations criminal. On the other hand, while this policy clause emphasizes equal and fair use of IRIB and cyberspace, it also enumerates diverse campaign tools that, as far as possible and proportionate to the requirements of each election, should be employed. Therefore, equal allocation of IRIB airtime cannot be uniformly prescribed for all elections, particularly parliamentary elections, because given the large number of representatives, equal IRIB access is not practically feasible. As anticipated in the policies, it is necessary for the legislator to recognize alternative channels—other media and cyberspace—in a regulated and supervision-capable manner, for example under the oversight of the Guardian Council and, additionally, by drawing on the capacity of the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, both for parliamentary elections and for other elections.

2. The Necessity of Transparency in Financial Resources and the Adjudication of Financial Violations

One of the axes related to the electoral campaigning process concerns the transparency of election funding sources, the expenditures incurred, the adjudication of financial violations, and corresponding oversight. Nevertheless, electoral laws do not contain clear and explicit statutory rules or regulations in this regard. Oversight of campaign finance sources is conceivable and enforceable only if, first, the necessary legal rules for financial-source transparency in all its dimensions are identified, and second, an obligation is established for submitting reports and documentation demonstrating compliance with legal requirements to the Guardian Council, as the supervisory authority for campaigning. On this basis, the proposed approach is that the supervisory authority should, first, determine thresholds for campaign expenditures; second, require electoral candidates to submit documentary evidence regarding how campaign-related financial resources were obtained; third, obligate all candidates to deposit all campaign expenditures into, and withdraw them solely from, a single dedicated bank account established

for electoral purposes; fourth, require candidates to submit, within a specified timeframe, a report of all election-related expenditures—including advertising and the holding of electoral gatherings—to the supervisory authority; and fifth, provide a legal enforcement mechanism for breaches of these duties and for the submission of inaccurate information (13).

3. Oversight of Violations Contrary to Electoral Ethics

Clauses 5 and 6 of the General Election Policies refer to a set of axes that may be described as the prohibition of violations contrary to electoral ethics, and electoral candidates should regard themselves as bound to comply with them in their campaign activities. Some of these axes are minimally supported in various electoral laws; however, certain axes still lack clear definitions, enforcement guarantees, and a specified supervisory mechanism and therefore require attention by the electoral legislator (4).

4. Prohibition of Defamation, Threats, Bribery/Inducement, and Deception

Regarding the prohibition of “threats” and “bribery/inducement” in electoral campaigning, it should be noted that this matter is prohibited in general terms by the text of the General Election Policies and is also prohibited and criminalized—using similarly broad wording—in Clause 3 of Article 66 of the parliamentary election law. However, the legislator has provided no definition of these concepts and has not clearly articulated the material, mental, and legal elements of inducement and threats, so that the intended meaning and scope of these terms would be ascertainable and, on that basis, instances of inducement or threats could be identified within the electoral process. Accordingly, given the different interpretations that may arise from such open-ended phrasing, it may be proposed that the legislator provide both conceptual and illustrative (non-exhaustive) definitions of the components of “threat” and “inducement,” such as threats to life, property, reputation, rights, housing, employment, family, and the like, as well as financial, positional, and similar forms of inducement, in order to prevent divergent readings. It is also noteworthy that Article 65 (repeated), Note appended 24 May 2016, recognizes “the prohibition of deceiving and misleading the public through misuse of the endorsement statement or photograph of the figures and officials referenced in Article 29 of this law” and prescribes a sixth-degree punishment for perpetrators. Yet, in that provision as well, only some instances of deception and misleading conduct are mentioned, and the legislator should first determine the concept of deception and its material and mental elements so that the meaning and scope of the concept is clear and, accordingly, the identification of deceptive instances becomes feasible (4).

5. Prohibition of Promises Beyond Legal Competence

Among the limits of legal competence that electoral candidates must observe when making campaign promises are: the necessity of respecting higher-order policy documents when articulating promises; attention to the scope of authority and competencies of the political office sought; consideration of the time horizon, such that no promise is made whose realization would require a timeframe beyond the term of office; and avoiding promises that are overly general and ensuring that they are realistically attainable. In the electoral system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, no mechanism has been provided for the realization and follow-up of electoral promises. In this respect, several proposals may be advanced: (1) the candidate should be required to submit, at the time of registration, a written and detailed version of their plans and promises; (2) the Guardian Council should be required to declare whether candidates’ promises and plans are consistent or inconsistent with the Constitution and the General Policies; moreover, as the body responsible for determining candidates’ qualifications, it could treat the fact that a candidate previously won an election by relying on false promises as a factor in its eligibility assessments and take it into account in approving or disqualifying candidates; (3) a mechanism should be established requiring a successful

candidate, after a substantial period—e.g., two years of service—to provide a report on the quality and quantity of promise fulfillment; and (4) the Guardian Council should be designated as the supervisory body for monitoring the fulfillment of promises and programs, and appropriate enforcement guarantees should be provided for failure to fulfill such promises.

6. Prohibition of Any Action Contrary to National Security, Such as Ethnic and Religious Division in Electoral Campaigning

One of the matters prohibited in Clause 5 of the General Election Policies is any action contrary to national security, among which the ethnic and religious divisions specified in that clause are regarded as examples. However, by reviewing the parliamentary election law, one does not find regulations addressing this issue. Accordingly, it is necessary to prohibit, in electoral campaigning, any act that—by instrumentalizing religious beliefs or ethnic, religious, regional, or racial orientations—either seeks to attract votes or causes voters to refrain from casting ballots, and to prescribe penalties for perpetrators. As noted, ethnic and religious divisions mentioned in the policies are illustrative rather than exhaustive and thus cover multiple potential instances. On this basis, it is necessary for the legislator to identify other actions that may be deemed contrary to national security within the context of electoral campaigning.

7. Prohibition of Using Foreign Support and Facilities

Another matter in the campaigning process that requires supervision and enforcement concerns reliance on foreign support and facilities. Foreign interference and support generally take two forms: media/propaganda support and financial support. The most significant foreign interference in elections occurs through media support, which may operate to the benefit or detriment of one side. In the General Election Policies, reliance on foreign propaganda support is prohibited where an individual, party, or political current—motivated by various reasons—seeks to obtain the backing of foreign media. Another type of support addressed in the policies concerns the prohibition of using foreign financial support, which may occur in different forms, including direct or indirect financing. Neither dimension of these prohibitions is explicitly anticipated in electoral laws. Accordingly, given this legal gap, it is necessary for the legislator, first, to establish a clear legal prohibition against using foreign support and interference in its various forms and dimensions, and second, to provide an effective legal enforcement mechanism commensurate with the importance and sensitivity of this issue, which can facilitate avenues of foreign influence/penetration into the country.

8. Jurisdiction over Electoral Complaints

During elections, all actors involved may have complaints regarding the implementation of electoral laws and regulations. Accordingly, the Guardian Council bears responsibility for adjudicating electoral complaints and assessing their impact on the electoral process; if it observes violations in this regard, it may invoke legal enforcement mechanisms. In fulfilling this duty, one of the key instruments is the reports submitted by the Council's observers on election day. Depending on their subject matter, number, and evidentiary reliability, reports reaching the Central Supervisory Board and ultimately the Guardian Council may lead to annulment of the votes of a ballot box, an electoral constituency, or the votes of an offending candidate. In this context, Clause 11(2) of the General Election Policies identifies, as one of the Guardian Council's supervisory indicators, the requirement of "written accountability regarding the reasons for election annulment upon candidates' request." A similar requirement is referenced in the Note to Article 74 of the parliamentary election law, which states that suspension or annulment of elections must be based on law and accompanied by valid documentation and evidence. However, as the statutory

text indicates, the legislator has not adopted a maximal approach to confidence-building and to providing a written-accountability mechanism; rather, it has confined itself to requiring that the Guardian Council's supervisory action be reasoned and documented. In light of Clause 11(2) of the General Election Policies, this matter requires amendment of ordinary legislation. Alongside the foregoing indicator, "the necessity of effective confront with electoral offenders" constitutes another criterion, and it is necessary that the Guardian Council also demand expedited judicial handling of the matter from the Judiciary and, moreover, adopt certain supervisory measures or decisions aimed at reducing the effects of violations or preventing recurrence of similar cases. For confronting perpetrators of electoral crimes and violations, enforcement guarantees—depending on the nature of the act and the status of electoral actors—are set out in Articles 75 to 87 of the parliamentary election law (14).

By way of illustration, at the stage of registration and qualification review, one may refer to instances such as "registering with forged documentation," "disturbing public opinion against the Guardian Council after the completion of the legal qualification-review process," "registration of persons lacking statutory conditions," "insufficient distribution of ballot papers at polling stations in proportion to (or exceeding) the number of participants," "failure to deliver ballot papers to polling stations in a timely manner," "suspending the voting process without a legal basis," "disrupting voting due to the stoppage or slowdown of identity verification devices," "failure to observe impartiality when publicizing candidates' names," "failure to conduct voting for eligible persons during legal hours," "issuing incorrect notices regarding ballots in the ballot box or altering vote results," and "announcing inaccurate provisional or final results."

How Supervision Is Exercised

In the various stages of elections, activity is not confined to a single day; rather, elections constitute a multi-stage process, and all stages are chain-linked, interconnected, and mutually influential. For this reason, effective oversight must be applied to all stages so that the cycle proceeds along the correct path and in conformity with the law.

The Pre-Election Stage

Before voting begins, part of the electoral process is organized by the election management body, and decisions in this phase have a substantial impact on whether subsequent stages proceed fairly and freely. Accordingly, this phase requires specific forms of oversight by supervisory agents. In principle, all decisions and measures at this stage are subject to oversight by supervisory boards and agents and may be monitored and controlled through the election dispute-resolution framework and mechanisms for adjudicating objections and complaints.

a. Election Management

In any free and fair election, independent and impartial management of the electoral process is essential. Countries in transition toward democracy have repeatedly suffered from a lack of trust among political actors and stakeholders. For an election to be democratic, all major parties must accept the electoral process and submit to its outcomes. Experience indicates that public confidence in elections is achievable only when the electoral "apparatus and mechanisms" are impartial and are perceived as such. Typically—especially in institutionalized democracies—election management is entrusted to national and local government officials, and disputes are resolved by ordinary courts that operate in a fair and impartial manner. For this reason, such elections tend to enjoy public trust.

b. Civic Education and Voter Information

Civic education and voter information, in practice, constitute a core element of the democratic cycle in most established democracies, typically beginning in schooling. In general, the establishment of any pluralistic order requires the presence of fair elections, free media, party pluralism, and an environment in which democratic values are understood and practiced by the general public. Such an environment does not emerge easily; it is the outcome and achievement of collective action under determining conditions. The state can play a significant role in encouraging and mobilizing citizens through universal and impartial education programs—programs that elevate democratic values among adults and hold an important place within general education. Beyond the state, political parties, civil society organizations, and the media also bear a serious responsibility in this domain.

c. Candidate Registration

Upon the Minister of Interior issuing the instruction to commence elections, candidate registration begins. Under the Law on Elections of the Islamic Consultative Assembly, candidates must, within seven days of the issuance of this instruction, apply to governorate centers or other designated offices for registration and complete the registration process. The time, place, procedures, and required documents should be communicated to the public through the media (public announcement).

d. Registration of Parties and Candidates

Another fundamental right raised at this stage is the “right to stand for election and equal access to public services.” Authoritarian systems that claim to be democratic often attempt, in various ways, to exclude rival parties and groups by invoking different justifications and by relying on personal interpretations of the law, thereby effectively presenting only their preferred candidates and parties to the public for selection. Such activities constitute an evident violation of the aforementioned right and of citizens’ right to choose, because their preferred options are removed at this stage and, in practice, they no longer have genuine choice (4).

e. Electoral Activity and Competition

What is particularly important at this stage is the availability of appropriate opportunities for candidates and parties to engage in fair and healthy competition under equal conditions, and for all of them to benefit from their political freedoms and electoral legal rights in articulating their programs, slogans, and objectives. This is directly related to citizens’ right of access to information, which requires that voters have accurate information about the programs and goals of each candidate and party so that they can make a real and informed choice. Because all groups and parties—especially the ruling party—may make significant efforts to shape public opinion in order to win, they may, in some cases, violate electoral principles, standards, and rights. Therefore, preventing violations and safeguarding equal competitive conditions is necessary.

f. Codes of Conduct for Parties and Candidates in Electoral Competition

The electoral competition period, due to efforts to mobilize supporters and to persuade voters to support particular candidates, is often marked by tension. Therefore, creating a conducive environment for healthy competition—while observing laws and regulations—requires attention by candidates and parties to conduct norms such as: mutual respect for one another’s rights and freedoms in expressing programs and conducting campaign activities; respect for the rights of voters and the supporters of other parties and groups; respect for press freedom; avoiding harassment of media representatives attending meetings and activities; refraining from disrupting or sabotaging one another’s campaign activities; not creating obstacles to others’ advertising activities; not using

others' campaign spaces; not using prohibited locations and not damaging public property; and observing civility and respect during elections.

g. Provisioning Electoral Materials and Facilities

The availability of facilities, equipment, and trained and professional personnel plays a substantial role in conducting authentic and credible elections. Accordingly, prior to the start of voting, all necessary facilities and equipment should be distributed and installed within electoral districts and polling locations. Any negligence or deficiency in preparing and supplying voting materials and requirements will entail a violation of electoral rights and may undermine the credibility and legitimacy of elections. On this basis, effective oversight should be exercised over the preparation and provision of voting facilities and materials—especially on the day preceding voting—so that each electoral district and polling location has complete facilities and appropriate resources to conduct efficient and fair elections.

The Election-Day Stage

The voting process begins some time before polling stations open and continues until they close. In effect, all measures and arrangements made prior to voting day are intended to enable voters, with full freedom of will, to make an authentic selection reflecting their preferences. Achieving this objective requires efficient executive management and precise and orderly supervision of all voting stages. Election-day supervision should be organized as follows.

a. Opening the Polling Station

Among the primary duties of the polling station manager is verifying and controlling all facilities, equipment, and readiness of both infrastructure and personnel for the start of voting, and opening the station at the designated time. Full readiness of the polling station prior to voting is a prerequisite for effective organization and proper regulation of the voting process. To ensure that the station is prepared to begin voting, oversight is necessary. Accordingly, activities that should be reviewed prior to opening may include: ensuring the presence of all facilities and equipment; timely arrival of staff; restricting presence to authorized persons only; proper layout of the polling area for correct deployment of staff—especially the designated space for observers—as well as the arrangement of voter entry and exit routes, the placement of voting booths and the ballot box; sealing the ballot box and ensuring its security and emptiness; ensuring complete security of the polling site; checking all computer systems; verifying ballots, documents, and records; posting the list of candidates and parties; ensuring the absence of any electoral campaigning at the site; ensuring the presence and arrangements for media at the polling location; preparing a complete supervisory report for this stage; and recording all events, decisions, measures, and activities of polling management, as well as all deficiencies, negligence, and violations occurring at this stage.

b. Voting Hours

Voting hours extend from the official instruction to open the polling station until the instruction to end voting and the casting of the last vote. Supervisory activities during these hours may be divided into two phases.

1) Validity of Voting Procedures

Voting must be conducted strictly in accordance with the instructions and requirements established by law, without omissions, and without discretionary deviations. To ensure the validity of the voting process, multiple dimensions must be supervised, including: observance of impartiality and equal treatment by staff toward all; functionality of facilities and equipment; existence of a safe environment for all persons present; control of all

violations, fraud, and breaches of law; freedom of voter choice—including security, impartiality, absence of intimidation and threats, appropriate treatment, availability of voting facilities, secrecy of the ballot, and freedom in selection; quality and accuracy of voter lists; verification of voters' identities; checking the authenticity of identification documents and voter cards; preventing repeat voting; correct issuance and distribution procedures and operation of computerized systems; security of voting booths and ballot boxes; safeguarding voting equipment; supervision of voting assistance for individuals needing help; and the manner of activity by party and candidate representatives and by the media.

2) Service Provision to Voters

Maintaining order and security in the voting process is a necessary condition for a free and authentic choice. Accordingly, appropriate measures must be adopted to ensure order and calm at the polling site so that the manner of voting is organized systematically. In this regard, various activities should be supervised, including: guiding voters along a defined route for voting; installing signs indicating routes and the multi-stage voting process; polite and accurate responses by staff to voters to enable a real choice; monitoring staff performance quality and capability—especially in cases of disputes or problems—and efforts to resolve them; controlling voter queues at different stages; availability of posters and guide booklets; and the quality of welfare and hygiene facilities (e.g., water, chairs, seating, pens, heating and cooling devices, restrooms, medical facilities, and similar provisions), particularly for persons with disabilities, the elderly, patients, and persons with impairments.

c. Closing the Vote

Voting ends at the designated time upon the instruction of the polling station chair, and the entrance is closed. However, arrangements must be made regarding persons inside the polling station. After the last vote is cast, voting concludes. Activities and measures subject to supervision at this stage include: official announcement of the close of voting; warning voters outside the station a few minutes before closing; closing at the designated time; collecting votes from voters present in the station; ensuring the security of documents and records, such as sealing ballot boxes; collecting ballot envelopes and voting equipment and unused or spoiled ballots with preliminary counts and stubs; packing equipment not needed for counting; and controlling and supervising the transfer of ballot boxes.

The Post-Election Stage

The post-election stage consists of the phases following the casting of ballots and the period after the election itself.

a. Phases Following the Casting of Ballots

1) Vote Counting

A complex and sensitive stage of elections is vote counting. The degree of its complexity depends on the type of electoral system, the method of seat allocation in parliament, the delimitation of electoral districts, and the formula and level of technology employed. In any event, observers must exercise the utmost care, knowledge, and skill in conducting full supervision of this stage, because the greatest likelihood and opportunity for fraud exists here.

First: Accuracy in Counting Ballot Papers

The counting of ballot papers must be supervised from the beginning to the end of the voting process in order to eliminate any possibility of misuse. Accordingly, there must be proportionality between the number of ballot papers issued and the initial count.

Second: Accuracy in Tabulating and Extracting the Vote Count

At this stage, activities that must be supervised include: the method of opening ballot boxes; matching the serial number of the box with the initial record; ensuring that seals remain intact; examining the authenticity of ballot papers in terms of signatures, seals, and ballot-paper characteristics; packaging and sealing instruments and equipment; careful separation of ballot papers; and accompanying the ballot boxes throughout the relevant transfers.

Third: Announcement of Results

During the reading of votes and the counting of ballot papers, observers must devote their full attention to ensuring that valid votes are correctly allocated to the relevant candidate or party. Accordingly, various activities at this stage must be supervised, such as: matching the oral reading of votes with recorded entries; monitoring election officials during the allocation of votes to each candidate or party; ensuring accurate reading of ballot contents; assessing the quality of the technology used for counting; ensuring precision in tabulation and aggregation of votes; ensuring that only authorized persons are present during counting; announcing provisional and final results; matching announced results with the counting copies prepared at the polling station; supervising the posting of one copy of preliminary results at the polling location; adjudicating complaints and objections; and recording all events during the count (4).

b. The Post-Election Phase

1) Requirements for Observers

Effective and efficient supervision is supervision carried out by specialized and experienced observers who are well-versed in electoral laws, regulations, and practices, thereby enabling the realization of an authentic and credible election. Supervisory boards must also have access to appropriate tools, resources, and facilities to perform their duties. These may include: guidance manuals specifying duties, powers, and required actions; supervisory identification and documentation (e.g., identification card, supervision card, etc.); checklists and official reporting forms in which electoral events are recorded systematically and precisely; means of transportation; adequate compensation and benefits; accident insurance; accommodation arrangements; maps of electoral districts and polling locations; special attire; communications and telecommunications capabilities; a list of essential phone numbers; and a copy of the laws and regulations compendium.

2) Preparation and Submission of Reports

The core task of observers is to observe electoral events, record them in designated official forms, and report them to senior and competent authorities. Therefore, observers do not have the right to interfere in the duties of staff or election administrators, to conduct electoral activities themselves, or to provide executive assistance to election administrators. Only after collecting and evaluating all reports is it possible to determine the degree to which the election possesses authenticity, freedom, fairness, competitiveness, and legitimacy.

First: Contents of the Report

Observers' reports should include information on various matters, such as findings, results, and recommendations; a summary of the election background; the laws and regulations applied and the method by which supervision was carried out; and documentary evidence supporting the report's conclusions.

Second: Recipients of the Report

Typically, the recipients of reports are senior supervisory and managerial authorities and institutions. However, for the purposes of transparency, accountability, and correcting unlawful conduct, disorder, and errors, a copy may

also be made available—more generally—to media outlets and oversight organizations so that the public becomes informed.

Third: Structure of the Report

In preparing a report, in addition to events occurring during voting, many other considerations that directly or indirectly affect the voting process should also be taken into account by observers. Accordingly, the report structure should include multiple components:

a. Introduction: description of the scope, objectives, and supervisory framework, and the methods of collecting evidence and information.

b. Context: a brief description of political, psychological, demographic, and electoral-environment factors.

c. Election Management: conformity of polling management performance and actions with laws and regulations; conformity of voting procedures with laws, practices, and codes of conduct; and the manner of behavior toward electoral actors.

d. Performance of party and candidate representatives, media, competent authorities, and security forces.

e. Qualitative and quantitative level of facilities, equipment, and welfare arrangements.

f. Evaluation of the voting process: the principal section of the report, comprising an assessment of voting conditions and the ability to record them, the freedom of electoral contestation and media coverage, and related considerations.

After collecting and evaluating all reports, it becomes possible to determine the degree to which the election possesses authenticity, freedom, fairness, competitiveness, and legitimacy (4).

g. Supporting Documentation

Documents that formed the basis of the report should be appended to the report.

3) Codes of Conduct for Electoral Observers

The formulation of such codes by competent electoral institutions assists observers in observing principles of impartiality, independence, non-partisanship, fairness, and expertise in the performance of their duties. Various codes of conduct are presented as follows:

Observers should always maintain their impartiality and independence and never openly or explicitly advocate for, or support, a particular orientation, and should merely record their observations. If any violation or unlawful conduct is observed, they should issue warnings, raise objections and complaints, and prepare the relevant reports. Observers should not, in performing their duty, be influenced by any institution or official. They should be present on time and continuously until the conclusion of the electoral process at the designated locations. They should prepare reports in a documented manner and on the basis of their own observations. They should refrain from providing detailed and sensitive information to the media, limiting disclosures to general information for the purpose of electoral transparency. They should not interfere in the duties of election administrators or provide any assistance in executive management tasks. They should observe respect toward all staff and managers, voters, observers, and all competent persons present at the polling location. They should not use any symbols, emblems, or signs associated with a particular political orientation. They should wear the special observers' attire and display their identification card. They should have a copy of the election law available to perform their duties more effectively, as well as the dedicated observers' handbook.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted demonstrates that the Guardian Council's approbatory supervision system, as the principal institution responsible for safeguarding the integrity and validity of elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran, possesses a substantial capacity to align with the General Election Policies adopted in 2016. However, the full realization of the objectives set forth in these policies is contingent upon addressing the existing shortcomings within ordinary electoral legislation. The most significant deficiencies include the severe temporal constraints imposed on qualification review processes, ambiguity in the qualitative criteria for candidate disqualification and the absence of a binding requirement for written and reasoned accountability, lack of transparency in the financial resources of electoral campaigning, the weakness of deterrent enforcement mechanisms against electoral violations, and the influence of political considerations in the composition of executive electoral boards. Remedying these deficiencies through extending review timeframes, mandating the submission of concrete and documented reasons for disqualification and election annulment, enhancing transparency in candidates' financial resources, comprehensively criminalizing electoral violations, strengthening the independence of executive boards, and providing for effective electoral disciplinary sanctions would not only enhance public trust in electoral processes, but also facilitate maximum participation, safeguard the rights of candidates and voters, and ensure the full realization of the principles of electoral integrity, freedom, and justice. The implementation of such reforms would transform approbatory supervision from a predominantly negative and exclusionary mechanism into an effective, transparent, and accountable institution that contributes to the strengthening of religious democracy.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our appreciation and gratitude to all those who helped us carrying out this study.

Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

Funding

This research was carried out independently with personal funding and without the financial support of any governmental or private institution or organization.

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