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## Iran Parliamentary Election: The Third Consecutive Victory for the Reformists

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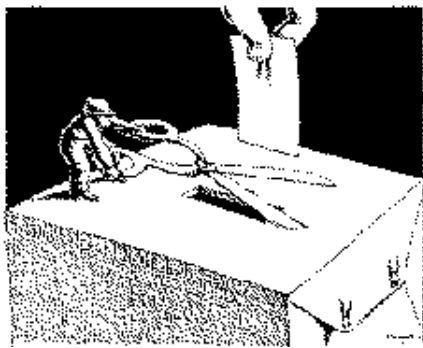
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Middle East

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On 18 February 2000, Iran held its 6<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections after the 1979 revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). The elections were yet another challenge to cleric rule. Despite provisional measures, the dominant hard-line conservative faction of the government suffered its third embarrassing defeat of the past three years, the first being the surprise presidential victory of Sayyed Mohammad Khatami on 22 May 1997. Secondly, in the municipal elections of 26 April 1999, reform candidates won a majority of the 200,000 seats in city and village councils across the country. Thirdly, in the recent parliamentary elections, the pro-Khatami reform candidates had a landslide victory. These consecutive triumphs indicate a strong desire among the people for structural change, democracy and secularization in Iran.

The Conservative Guardian Council nullified hundreds of ballot boxes to change the election results.



In the recent elections, almost 70% (26.8 million) of 38.7 million eligible voters cast ballots. More than 6,000 candidates, including 504 women and 35 non-Muslims, competed for 290 seats of the Majlis-e Shura-ye Islami, or parliament. (Five seats are reserved for non-Muslim religious minorities)<sup>1</sup> Despite efforts of the Guardian Council (whose principal responsibility is to ensure that all the sanctioned laws and regulations of the parliament conform to the Islamic standards and constitutional laws) to prevent reform candidates from entering in the race, the hard-line conservative candidates lost their 20-year-long majority hold in the Majlis to pro-Khatami reformists who unified their policies under reform slogans in 18 political parties and fronts. In the final months before elections, the Guardian Council (GC), along with conservative members of the 5<sup>th</sup> parliament, passed various laws in a rush move – mainly concerning the free press – aiming to block the change. In doing so, the GC extended its supervision of the elections to supervision of the candidates. These tactics, however, were to no avail.

#### Elections 'Iranian style'

Approximately 10% of the candidates (571 individuals) – the most outspoken critics of the Islamic regime and popular figures – were rejected by the GC as 'unqualified' or not sufficiently religious to sit in Majlis. Of course, the reasons were political. The GC considered critics as 'outsiders'. Having foreseen this, reformists had many substitutes among the 6,000 candidates. Despite counteractive measures by the conservatives, the primary poll indicates that in the first round some 150 seats were won by reformists (mostly from the Islamic Iran Participation Front), 40 by conservatives, and 35 by independent candidates whose political identities have yet to be determined. Sixty-six seats were left to be filled in the run-off elections.

Of the 225 candidates who obtained the minimum requirement of 25% of the votes, the GC disapproved the election of 11 reformists and changed 2 in favour of conservatives in various cities. But the main difficulty was found in Tehran, where 29 out of 30 seats were won by reformists. The GC placed an unprecedented 3-month hold on the election results. During this period, the conservatives launched a new set of oppressive measures

to offset the overwhelming victory of pro-reform candidates: 1) Saeed Hajarian, the leading architect of reform and a key figure for the success of three past elections for president, city council and the Majlis, was shot and seriously wounded by right wing zealots. 2) Seventeen reformist daily and weekly publications were shut down following a speech by the supreme leader and upon conservative judiciary orders. 3) Several reformist and prominent liberal writers and journalists, including two women, (Mehrangiz Kar, an attorney and author of several books, and Shala Lahiji, writer and publisher) were arrested. 4) A plot to assassinate President Khatami was discovered.<sup>2</sup>

After three months and just days prior to the opening of the new Majlis, the GC labelled the elections fraudulent and officially disapproved them, leaving the final decision to Ayatollah Khamenei. Khamenei, realizing the extent of tension surrounding the situation, however, demanded that the election results be respected. The GC did indeed announce the results, but with a few changes, including the cancellation of 534 boxes containing 726,366 votes. It was due to this that Rafsanjani was moved from 30<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> place; Alireza Rajaei, a liberal reformist elected in 28<sup>th</sup> place, was eliminated; and Golamali Haddad Adel, a conservative who was ranked in 33<sup>rd</sup> place, was moved to 27<sup>th</sup> place. Rafsanjani, in a surprise move, gave up his seat under the pressure of public opinion. As a powerful figure in the IRI, he is assumed to be responsible for all actions taken against the reformists.

Rafsanjani, a two-term speaker of the House and two-term president of Iran, currently holding the powerful position of Expediency Council Chairman, had entered the race perceiving it an easy victory. He wanted to regain his position as speaker of the parliament while holding his current job, so as to have control over legislation. He wanted to keep it from going beyond the 'redline' – as some, including himself, may dare to question the IRI leaders of doing – in terms of abuse of power during 20 years of rule. Conservatives dominant in the Majlis passed a law exclusively for Rafsanjani, allowing him to stay in his governmental position while running for the parliament. These IRI leaders wish to continue to rule society as the 'godfathers' of the revolution. Rafsanjani and a group of intellectuals and technocrats surrounding him, collectively known as the Executives of Construction Party (ECP), perceive the reform movement as 'bargaining chips' for negotiating with their rival groups in the government, rather than believing in a genuine political democracy.<sup>3</sup>

Rafsanjani finished with a humiliating 30<sup>th</sup> place among 30 elected members of parliament in the district of Tehran.<sup>4</sup> Even his 30<sup>th</sup> place was questioned as many believe that there was some 'miscounting' in his favour. Consequently, a recount was ordered. However, the Guardian Council decided to put an end to this, for after 50% of the votes were

tallied, it was clear that the candidate placing 31<sup>st</sup>, Ali Akbar Rahmani, had approximately 6000 more votes than in the initial count. Nonetheless, Rafsanjani's tactics to wrestle political power through illegitimate means have been overshadowed by the people's desire for genuine political development.

#### Run-off elections

The final tally on run-offs took place on 19 May 2000 for the 66 remaining seats. Reformists won 44 and the rest were evenly divided amongst conservatives and independent candidates. Similar to the first round, the GC did not approve all elected candidates. On 27 May 2000, when the new parliament was convened, there were 22 elected reformists still waiting for official GC approval. The Majlis opened with only 257 of its 290 members. As was expected, the most conservative cleric of the pro-reform groups, Mehdi Karubi, was elected the provisional speaker of Majlis. His victory was the result of a compromise between conservatives and reformists. Karubi was the speaker in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Majlis for a period of three years. As many argue, he does not fully represent the reform movement.<sup>5</sup>

#### Secularists

Thus far, the reform movement has created opportunities for pro-reform factions of the IRI and their associates to compete with ruling conservatives for power. A third group (secularists) that completely opposes the 'religious-state' was not allowed to enter the race due to being considered an 'outsider' group.

One may ask why the hard-line monopolist conservatives are willing to allow the 'in-group' of reformists to enter the circle of power? The answer is simple. The IRI has lost its legitimacy that was once based on a traditional and charismatic leadership. Now, in the absence of such leadership, the IRI needs legal recognition. However, the ruling conservatives were not able to win more than 15 to 20% of the popular vote. Therefore, in order to govern they mainly rely upon the military forces' capacity to maintain a constant tension within the society. Moreover, the economy is in a deep crisis from which the youth suffer the most. The conservatives may risk the entire regime if they continue to exclude 80% of the population. Participation of reformists in the government could potentially reduce the tension between the state and society. Also, it may allow space for the secularists to respond to some of the civil and political demands currently not being met.

A comparative analysis of election results of the past three years for president, Assembly of Experts, city council and the parliament, testify to the following distribution of people's support for each political group in Iran: Conservative groups enjoy between 15 to 20%; The pro-Khatami reformists that partially hold power in the government receive between 35 to 40%; All independent groups (collectively referred to above as the 'third

group', or secularists) constitute 40 to 45%. During the 20 years of Islamic rule, this group has not been allowed to enter any local or national race. Its members are encouraged, rather, to vote for 'in-group' candidates. Therefore, regarding the policy of choosing between 'the lesser of two evils', the third group, at least partially, has expressly sided with the reformists in all of the past three elections.<sup>6</sup> The reformist slogans of 'Iran for all Iranians' and 'rule of law' have served to contrast the Islamic policy of dividing society into 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' and have encouraged secularists to participate in the elections.

#### The trend of democracy continues

The 1997 presidential election in Iran constituted a watershed marking a clear break with the past. It signified the failure of Islamic ideology to govern a society by force and marked the end of violence as a means of achieving power by opposition. Furthermore, it opened an indirect political dialogue between the opposition and the government (or part of the government). The elections brought repressed popular sentiments to the fore, which led to public empowerment. The outcome of the presidential, city council, and now more obviously, parliamentary elections thus undermined the position of the conservative religious leaders. Pushing Iranian society to the point of violence is their way to justify a repressive policy in defense of Islam and national security. Elections, however, are now accepted as a means of change for the opposition. The dominant view among the reformers is that reforms can be realized within the current system, rather than through the painful, risky processes of revolution and civil war.

Revolution does not guarantee democracy, and repressive policies may continue regardless of the replacement of an old regime by a revolutionary one. Today, in Iran, the public attitude has become predominantly supportive of reforms, hence shifting the catalyst of change from the state to the level of society itself. This grassroots phenomenon may just make the difference necessary for genuine change. ◆

#### Notes

1. Samii, A.W. (2000), 'Iran's Sixth Parliamentary Election', *Middle East Review of International Affairs* (MERIA) 4 (1).
2. *Bahar Daily News*, 30 May 2000, p. 2.
3. See my article, 'The Impasse of Power and the Failure of Strategy of Violence in Iran', *Mehregan: An Iranian Journal of Culture and Politics* 8 (2/4), Summer/Fall 1999.
4. In Tehran, voters had to choose 30 people from a list of 861 candidates.
5. Saeed Laylaz, *Iran Daily News*, 28 May 2000.
6. For details see my article, *ibid*.

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