

Iran's Majlis Elections: Whoever Wins, the West Loses

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Iran's upcoming parliamentary elections, while vigorously contested, offer no hope for improving U.S.-Iranian relations.

Recently, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has speculated about changing the Iranian constitution to give parliament the power to elect the president. Such statements have seriously intensified the struggle for control over the legislature, and the March 2 elections for the ninth Majlis will be hotly contested. Yet regardless of the outcome, it would be naive to expect any serious changes in the parliament's approach to external and domestic issues.

Muzzled Reformists

Reformist candidates have little chance of winning substantial numbers of seats in the next Majlis -- the main battle will take place between rival conservative factions. The controversial 2009 presidential election and subsequent mass demonstrations led to serious limitations on the reformist movement's role in Iranian political life. The official leaders of the protest movement and their close supporters had no chance of obtaining the Guardian Council's permission to run for office next month. The regime has also done its best to limit freedom of speech, leaving no options for the opposition to influence the electoral process. Since last December, for instance, authorities have arrested numerous proreformist journalists and bloggers as well as purported Western "spies" and "agents of influence."

Rival Conservatives

By the time registration opened for those seeking to contest the upcoming elections, several influential politicians led by Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani had already merged their parties into the United Front of Conservatives (Jebhe-ye Motahed-e Osulgerayan) and prepared a joint list of candidates. Members of this coalition constitute the majority in the current Majlis, including prominent figures such as speaker of the parliament Ali Larijani, Tehran mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, and deputies Ahmad Tavakkoli and Muhammad Reza Bahonar. The faction tends to be critical of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Meanwhile, other conservatives have formed a coalition of their own: the Front of Stability of the Islamic Revolution (Jebhe-ye Paydari), headed by Ayatollah Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. Apart from a few of Ahmadinejad's former cabinet ministers and members of certain conservative political parties and parliamentary factions (e.g., Jebhe-ye Valeh and Qarargakh-e Amr), the coalition mainly consists of Khamenei's most ardent supporters and political allies among the clergy, including Sadegh Mahsouli, Mohammad-Hossein Saffar-Harandi, Hamid Resai, Ali Askar Zerai, Mehdi Kuchekzadeh, Ismail Kausari, Hojatoleslam Ruhollah Hosseinian, Gholam-Hossein Elham, Morteza Agha-Tehrani and Ayatollah Khoshvaght. It also enjoys support from certain members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and Basij, who are helping the movement establish representative offices in the provinces.

The Stability Front aims to counterbalance the United Front's expanding influence, especially in light of rumors that Ali Larijani and Qalibaf will seek the presidency in the future. Stability members do not consider either man an appropriate presidential candidate, citing the former's uncontrollability and the latter's conformity. Mesbah-Yazdi and his supporters are also reportedly dissatisfied with Mahdavi Kani's growing political weight. Currently, Mahdavi Kani heads the Assembly of Experts and the Militant Clergy Association, and his attempts to forge stronger ties with the Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers have angered Mesbah-Yazdi.

In addition, the Stability Front seeks to limit the political influence of presidential aide Esfandiar Rahim Mashai without harming Ahmadinejad himself. Members of the movement claim to be protecting the president from the intrigues of Mashai and his staff.

The President's Allies

Ahmadinejad's faction suffered major political setbacks last year. Its opponents initiated a successful propaganda campaign accusing Mashai and his supporters of being "deviators" (*monhatefin*) who had distorted the Islamic regime's principles. With the Supreme Leader's support, they engaged in massive persecution of the president's allies. By fall 2011, the deviators seemed to have lost any serious chance of winning seats in the ninth Majlis.

Since then, however, the situation has changed somewhat. Ahmadinejad has spared no effort in strengthening Mashai and his allies, particularly in the provinces. Over the past five months, the administration has been replacing the Interior Ministry's provincial representatives (*farmandars*) with officials more loyal to Ahmadinejad and Mashai. It also provided some provincial governors with lists of preferred Majlis candidates. In addition to promoting pro-Ahmadinejad candidates, governors were expected to discredit the main opponents of the president's faction. According to local media reports, government officials have asked the Friday imams of mosques in major provincial cities -- including Rasht, Isfahan, Qom, Yazd, and Kashan -- to canvass their congregations for certain candidates.

Ahmadinejad has also sought to bolster his image among the poor population of the provinces. Over the past seven years, he has been quite successful in exploiting both their patriotic feelings and their hatred of the richer classes in Tehran; such efforts could once again bear fruit.

Outlook

The outcome of the battle between rival conservatives remains unclear. On one hand, Ahmadinejad and Mashai are still relatively weak, and Khamenei does not favor either man. The political preferences of the IRGC and Basij are uncertain.

On the other hand, Khamenei has clearly demonstrated that he does not want to get rid of Ahmadinejad completely. The president's disappearance from the political scene would inevitably strengthen other factions -- an unwelcome scenario for Khamenei, whose main political principle is balance between rival forces. Under these conditions, Ahmadinejad only benefits from the struggle between the United Front and Stability Front, which prevents moderate and radical conservatives from unifying against Mashai and his supporters.

Implications for the West: Not Much

No one should expect the elections to produce tangible changes in Iran's overall posture. The Majlis has little say in foreign and security policy, which is largely in the hands of the Supreme Leader, with a limited role for the president. Moreover, all of the conservatives associate their future with that of the regime; their political struggle has nothing to do with fundamentally revising the Islamic Republic's foreign policy. The nuclear program, support for Hizballah, and assistance to the Palestinian movement are considered part of the Iranian national idea, and any attempts to stand against them are seen as political suicide. Even if Ahmadinejad's supporters do badly on March 2, as is likely, the ninth Majlis will not necessarily produce more flexible forces in Tehran. In other words, whoever wins, the West will lose.

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