



Assessing Iran's Parliamentary Election

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March 15, 2012

Who were the winners and losers in this election?

The most important result of this election was the rise of a new generation of hardliners. It did not have a serious presence in parliament before the election. The new hardline faction is led by Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi. It has strong ties to the intelligence community and Revolutionary Guards (IRGC).

But the winners and losers were basically determined before the election. There were no surprises. The reformists and the candidates who supported President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad were the losers. The candidates who won were explicitly against Ahmadinejad and for Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. There are now two factions in parliament. One is the old generation of conservatives, and the other is a new generation of hardliners that has emerged in recent years.

How is this election different from previous elections?

This election was important because it was the first since the disputed 2009 election for president -- and it was free of protests or incidents. It also provided clues about the presidential election due next year. For example, the poll marked a turning point for Ahmadinejad, whose political life is over. He and his faction won't have a chance in the 2013 presidential election.

This election was important not so much because Khamenei's power was consolidated; this has happened gradually. Previous parliaments were also obedient to Khamenei. The Majles now does not have any autonomy, and there is no separation of powers in Iran. The different branches of government basically all now work as extensions of Khamenei's office.

What does Khamenei's consolidation of power mean for the future of Iranian politics?

The Majles has been weakened by Khamenei over the past 20 years. The last Majles was completely in Khamenei's hands. Despite clear disagreements with Ahmadinejad, the Majles was not able to put pressure on the president or hold him accountable because Khamenei supported Ahmadinejad. It was not initially willing to confirm eight cabinet ministers when Ahmadinejad was reelected president in 2009. But Khamenei then told parliament to confirm all the cabinet ministers. Parliament's lack of political will was obvious.

At the same time, however, Khamenei is in a very difficult position. He has destroyed Iranian political institutions that might restrain him but that also could protect him by sharing responsibility for decisions. So when Khamenei weakens institutions, he alone then faces responsibility for every government action. This makes him vulnerable.

In the place of these institutions, he has empowered the Revolutionary Guards, which can be a double-edged sword because they have become so powerful and now they own up to half the country. The IRGC has become an enormous organization. At some point, they may have different political or economic interests than Khamenei does. They may try to impose their preferences on Khamenei -- and at that point the supreme leader may not have others to turn to for support.

How is this election likely to change domestic politics and the regime's foreign policy in Iran?

The current Majles is likely to be even more loyal to Khamenei, who likes to micro-manage the details of economic and domestic policies. Obviously, he is also the decision-maker behind foreign policy and the nuclear program. So I don't expect any change in domestic or foreign policy after this election.

On the nuclear program, economic sanctions mainly target people affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. Khamenei's no-compromise policy hurts them economically, so some elements may revolt against Khamenei if the situation gets significantly worse.

Khamenei's inner circle could even face a shake-up over the next six to nine months due to economic problems from sanctions. Iranian banks currently conduct 2.2 million international transactions. The global financial service, SWIFT, on March 15 decided to cut ties with Iran. This could prove fatal for Iran's economy. SWIFT's annual report notes that 19 Iranian banks and 25 Iranian institutions use SWIFT, and that in 2010 they "sent 1,160,000 messages and received 1,105,000 messages." If these 2.2 million transactions stop completely, the Revolutionary guards will be hit the hardest, and they might pressure Khamenei to change his policy -- or even try to politely push him out of the decision-making process.

Is the consolidation of power in Khamenei's hands turning the Islamic Republic into an Islamic monarchy?

No, Iran is rather moving toward a more militarized government, not a monarchy. If Khamenei is gaining more power, it is because the Revolutionary Guards are gaining more power. So far they need each other, but the relationship may not continue under these harsh sanctions.

What is the outlook for the reformists?

It is difficult to talk about reformists in Iran now. When the reform movement started, there were 18 political groups who called themselves reformists. They had different political agendas. There was a spectrum of ideas and opinions. Some of them were loyal to the idea of Velayat-e Faqih (the rule of the jurisprudence), and others were critical of the idea. The only thing they had in common was that they supported former President Mohammed Khatami.

Especially since the 2009 election, reformists have ceased to exist politically. If there are some people who wish to reform the system, they have to redefine themselves, produce new ideas of political reform and reorganize. I don't see that happening in today's Iran. So I don't think reformists have a future. They are completely broken ideologically and organizationally, and they have no leadership.

Khatami has always taken ambivalent positions. He does not have a clear idea of reform. He wants to be part of the existing government but at the same time reform the system. Many people are also angry at him for voting in this election when other reformers called for a boycott. He was one of the main reasons for the reform movement's failure. He failed to organize, and he has lost his power base. The people who are angry at Khatami now are the people who voted for him 16 years ago. I don't think he will play an important role in Iran in the future. This is why he did not have a significant role in the Green Movement.

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