

The Nuclear Agreement and Contemporary Iranian Domestic Politics

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Articles & Testimony

During nuclear negotiations with the West, the behavior of various Iranian state institutions demonstrated the success of Iranian coalition efforts, notably the “House of the Leader” and the Revolutionary Guards institutions, to reengineer the internal political scene in preparation for the negotiations. This alliance demonstrated its influence through tight control over the behavior of a multiplicity of institutions and political movements in a way that served the higher interests of the state. Thus, those institutions more revolutionary than the regime, such as some commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, Mesbah-Yazdi’s fundamentalist movement, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s supporters, were not allowed to disrupt or impede the negotiations. On the other hand, pragmatists, reformists, and liberals keen on opening up to the West were not allowed to influence the negotiating team for concessions that crossed the regime’s red line.

Consequently, the negotiators, head of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Ali Akbar Salehi and Minister of Foreign Affairs Mohammad Javad Zarif were able to manage the negotiation process on the regime’s terms with the backing of the state’s power structures. Moreover, this cohesion allowed the majority fundamentalist Ninth Consultative Assembly to quickly approve the agreement.

Yet centralization of efforts to create a nuclear deal to regime satisfaction has had repercussions, first visible during the most recent legislative elections and likely to continue impacting Iran’s domestic scene in the short and medium terms. Weakened political competition, eroding of boundaries between political entities, as well as continued economic troubles and shifting social makeup of the past year can often be traced in one way or another to the regime’s centralization efforts.

Merging of Political Parties

While reengineering the domestic scene was intended to ensure the signing of the nuclear agreement, the recent election results have shown that the nuclear deal has in fact begun to reengineer Iran’s internal political scene. It could be argued that the real competition in the February 26 elections took place at the popular level between those who supported the nuclear deal and rapprochement with the West and those who opposed the deal and supported preserving the values of the revolution.

This competition manifested most clearly in Tehran. Voters in the Consultative Assembly elections voted for relative

unknowns to exclude those politicians believed to support emptying the nuclear deal of its content by obstructing its implementation. Notably, Tehran's thirty seats in the Consultative Assembly went to the new reformist-centrist "List of Hope" in the first round, with each candidate receiving over a million votes.

However, the elections suggested that three distinct and competing major currents—the fundamentalist, reformist, and moderate-pragmatic currents—have lost much of their individual definition. This muddling first appeared during the 2013 presidential elections, when the reformist movement was forced to ally with moderate Presidential candidate Hassan Rouhani. In this year's legislative elections, the Guardian Council of the Constitution decided to reject the eligibility of most reformist and moderate candidates running for the Consultative Assembly, leaving only 172 candidates; where all reformist candidates running for the Assembly of Experts further contributed to the erosion of distinct parties.

Thus, those remaining eligible reformist and moderate candidates allied with supporters of Speaker of the Parliament Ali Larijani and moderate fundamentalist figures such as MP Ali Motahari for a competitive candidacy. Furthermore, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani entered into a coalition with several fundamentalist candidates, which meant that several candidates appeared on more than one competing list during the elections. For example, Ali Motahari and Kazem Jalali—who have often exhibited hard-line fundamentalist tendencies—ended up on the reformist list after they had been in full opposition to the reformist movement during the seventh Consultative Assembly elections.

Sources close to the reformist movement indicate that fundamentalists did not want an independent list for reformists headed by a reformist, and had instead hoped to incorporate reformists into a moderate fundamentalist list with a fundamentalist candidate at its head. However, Rouhani, Khatami, and Hashemi Rafsanjani made it possible to form the "List of Hope," headed by Mohammad Reza Aref, Khatami's former vice president.

Voters also demonstrated extreme interest in the Assembly of Experts elections, a change from the previous four assembly elections. The winning candidate to the Assembly of Experts, Hashemi Rafsanjani, held approximately 2.3 million votes, while Mohammad Reza Aref won about 1.6 million votes in the Consultative Assembly elections. Six candidates for the Assembly of Experts won more than 2 million votes. Furthermore, Mohsen Esmaili became the first candidate who is not a cleric to be elected to the Assembly of Experts. The sheer number of votes clearly indicates that Khamenei's potential succession has influenced voters. When one also considers the hardline fundamentalist icons who failed to gain seats, it seems that the majority of Iranian voters are looking for a successor to Khamenei who comes from outside the hardline fundamentalist movement.

The nuclear deal and the legislative elections that followed highlighted President Rouhani's pragmatism, alongside his advantages as a security and policy expert. Rouhani demonstrated flexibility with his domestic and foreign opponents, while conceding many of his campaign promises to reach a nuclear agreement. His closeness to Rafsanjani—the man who ingrained the idea of the "suffering" of the moderate and reformist movements into the consciousness of Iranian voters—increased, even as he remained silent about the accusations, abuse, and harassment that he had suffered in the past. This to improved Rafsanjani's image with voters; he won 2.3 million votes, a major jump from in the 750,000 votes he received during the sixth Consultative Assembly elections.

Political Convergence in a Shifting Iranian Society

These changes also demonstrate shifts in larger Iranian society reflected in the choices of Iranian voters. Since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran's economy has remained the most important priority for the Iranian voter. Yet security risks to the revolution have consistently governed the Iranian political system's responses to this challenge. After the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, these risks began to gradually decline. The nuclear agreement, signaling that America and the West had formally abandoned the idea of overthrowing the Iranian

regime, appeared to be a turning point for the Iranian economy.

Meanwhile, the previous decades' economic sanctions built the economic challenge into an existential threat for the regime and the state. Despite the Supreme Leader Khamenei's calls to adopt a resistance economy as an alternative to opening up economically to the West were negotiations to fail, President Hassan Rouhani's government ingrained the saying that economic reform is dependent on signing the nuclear agreement. This created great popular momentum in support of signing the agreement and showing flexibility in negotiations with the West.

Momentum for economic reform continued during the recent elections. Various lists competed in putting forward economic slogans, as voters showed a strong desire to change the current economic situation. Voters appeared to hope that the tenth Consultative Assembly would follow the road map of the nuclear deal and support economic development. Given this focus, it will be difficult for the regime to provide a compelling excuse to the people if it does not succeed in improving the economic and living conditions in the near future.

The legislative elections also demonstrated the Iranian people's ability to make the best use of the narrow margins of freedom granted to them by the regime and their general interest in gradual, peaceful change. Nor have any of the competing political currents shown any desire to escalate after the events following the 2009 elections. In this recent election, voter turnout was about 50 percent in Tehran and 62 percent in other regions of Iran, despite the Guardian Council of the Constitution's unprecedented increase in decisions to reject the eligibility of candidates. It has become clear that there is no room in Iran's new equation of power for the return of Islamic leftist movements, such as Mujahidin of the Islamic Revolution Organization or the Participation Front.

Many analysts in Iran also credit the success of the "List of Hope" in Tehran to the role of alternative media and social networking platforms. Use of these platforms is widespread in Tehran, especially in comparison to the rest of the provinces. This generally means the Iranian regime and the various political movements now face the necessity of adapting to a new reality: of the method of filtering and blocking information from the public is becoming increasingly unviable.

Ultimately, the recent elections highlight the cultural and social disparities between the capital Tehran—where the remnants of the monarchy-era middle class and the new middle class are concentrated—and the rest of the Iranian provinces. While the residents of the capital hailed the icons of the moderate-reformist alliance after gaining all of the city's seats on the Consultative Assembly, some fundamentalist icons accused Tehran of surrendering to the English, likening the city's residents to the people of Kufa—a metaphor for having failed the revolution.

Both the nuclear deal and the subsequent legislative elections have demonstrated a convergence between "Revolutionary Pragmatism" and "Revolutionary Realism" at the expense of "revolutionary idealism." On a broader scale, attempts to weaken both the reformist movement and former President Ahmadinejad's supporters has led to the erosion of internal debate and, consequently, a weakening of the dynamics that produced a range of viewpoints and ideas. Coupled with Iran's brain drain, sycophancy, hypocrisy, a reduction of serious and constructive political criticism has begun to characterize the system. It appears that this has begun to hinder the state's ability to function effectively. The recent legislative elections and its relatively unknown candidates, who most part failed to adopt any new attitudes and opinions that dissented from the current Iranian political norms, which does not bode well for Iran's political, economic, and social situation, confirmed this stagnation.

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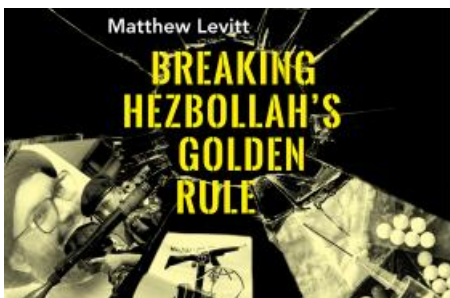
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