Anomalies in Iran's Assembly of Experts Election

by Patrick Schmidt (/experts/patrick-schmidt)

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Brief Analysis

Seemingly inflated vote totals and jumbled candidate lists raise questions about the transparency of the government's official election results and turnout estimates.

Following the February 26 Assembly of Experts election, Iran's Interior Ministry released full results on its website, while national and local news agencies released their own, sometimes different data. In addition to the unusual nature of the election itself (see PolicyWatch 2571, "Iran's Election Procedures" (http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/irans-election-procedures)), the reported results show some odd features.

ANOMALIES

On February 29, Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli announced a 62% nationwide participation rate on election day, declaring, "I thank God for gracing us with an additional opportunity to demonstrate the people's enthusiasm for religious democracy to the international community, especially those countries that claim to be democratic." Many Iranian officials associate electoral participation, especially above 60%, as conferring legitimacy upon the regime.

The ministry also cautioned Iranians not to rely on unofficial sources for election results. Yet such warnings are problematic because the ministry's own reportage of results has not been wholly transparent thus far. The assembly election data on the ministry's Persian website -- a major source of information for Iranians and state-run news agencies -- has quite a few anomalies. For example, it shows some candidates receiving more than 120% of the votes cast in their district, and in four provinces with a total population of 15 million, it shows 22 million ballots cast. Fars News, a semiofficial news agency, provides clearer data than that found on the ministry's website, which lacks a page summarizing assembly results for all thirty-one provinces.

Click image to view full table.

(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/Iran-ExpertsAssemblyResults-March2016.pdf)

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Assembly races are divided by province, and voters may write in the names of as many candidates as there are seats in their province. Yet many of these races were predetermined by the Guardian Council, the powerful twelve-member body that decides who can compete in elections and verifies the results, among other things. This year, the council's ideological vetting process disqualified the majority of candidates who applied to run. As a result, six provinces originally featured the same number of candidates as seats available (though in some cases extra candidates were added later on), while eight other provinces had only one more candidate than seats available.

Normally, such factors would have further deflated voter turnout for the assembly election, which is historically Iran's least popular political race. Citizens rightly view the institution as a largely ceremonial body whose main role is to select the Supreme Leader's successor, meaning it has little relevance to their daily lives. Given Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's advanced age, however, many Iranians likely assume that his successor will be selected during the assembly's next eight-year term. Moreover, the regime postponed the assembly election by almost a year-and-a-half to coincide with the more popular parliamentary elections, essentially guaranteeing turnout even in those provinces with seemingly noncompetitive assembly races.

Even so, several provinces showed significant discrepancies between the number of ballots cast and the number of votes received by winning candidates. Some provinces reported separate figures for ballots cast and ballots permitted, subtracting ballots that were illegible or otherwise disqualified; for example, East Azerbaijan had 1,790,789 ballots cast with 207,450 not permitted, while Esfahan had 1,976,061 cast and 283,024 not permitted. Yet this would not fully explain discrepancies such as the following:

- West Azerbaijan had three approved candidates running for three seats, so voters could write one, two, or three names on their ballots (a fourth candidate emerged later under uncertain circumstances, see below). According to the Interior Ministry, 1,511,652 ballots were cast in the province, yet the total combined number of votes for all three candidates was only 1,466,674; the first-place candidate received 822,027 votes, the second-place candidate 397,407, and the third-place candidate 247,240. Even if every voter wrote only one name on their ballot -- an implausible scenario -- the numbers still would not add up, with nearly 45,000 fewer votes counted than ballots reportedly cast.

- East Azerbaijan had only six approved candidates for five seats and nearly 1.8 million ballots cast. Although the total number of votes to all candidates exceeded the number of ballots as would be expected, the first-place candidate received only 743,811 votes -- an oddly low figure given that voters could write in up to five names.

- Ilam had only two approved candidates for one seat, yet out of 323,811 ballots cast, the winner received only 136,919 votes -- less than half the number of ballots cast.

- In North Khorasan, only one candidate was approved for the one available seat, yet out of 448,355 ballots cast, the winner received only 176,136 votes.

In addition to the problematic vote totals, some winning candidates were named on the Interior Ministry's approved list for more than one province, while others were not listed at all:

- Sayyed Mohsen Saiidi Golpayegani was listed for both Ilam and Razavi Khorasan provinces, while Mohammad Bagher Bagheri was listed under both Tehran and Alborz. Golpayegani was elected to represent Ilam, and Bagheri was both the leading vote-getter in Alborz and the fourth runner-up in Tehran.

- Sayyed Mohammad Husseini Shahroudi, the Supreme Leader's representative in Kurdistan province, was not listed on the Interior Ministry's approved candidates list, yet after announcing his candidacy on February 20, he won the province's second assembly seat.

- Javad Mojtahed Shabestari was not on the ministry's original candidate list, but the Qom Teachers Association supported him for election in East Azerbaijan. On February 13, however, an Interior Ministry announcement stated that he was a candidate in West Azerbaijan, without referencing any previous registration in East Azerbaijan. In the end, he won the third seat in West Azerbaijan, in a race that originally featured three candidates for three seats. Meanwhile, his father, Mohsen Mojtahed, won reelection as an incumbent in East Azerbaijan.

The Interior Ministry and Guardian Council were responsible for vetting and distributing the official list of 161 approved candidates -- published on February 10, one day before the official campaign period began -- so it is unclear how and when Shahroudi and Shabestari were approved to

run.

INCUMBENTS OUTNUMBER NEW FACES

Incumbents were reelected in 49 of the assembly's 88 seats; the tally could have been even higher, but many members in the last assembly were quite elderly and may have decided against running for that reason alone. In addition, at least four incumbents won seats in different provinces than they represented last term. Bagher Bagheri and Mohsen Kazrunbarz previously represented Tehran but are now representing Alborz. Muhammad Ali Muvahedi Kermani and Sayyed Abul al-Fazl Mir Mohammadi previously represented Kerman and Markazi, respectively, but both were elected in Tehran province for this term.

Meanwhile, five Guardian Council members also ran for seats in the Experts Assembly. Four of them won: Mohammad Momen, representing Qom; Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, representing Razavi Khorasan; Ahmad Jannati, who placed sixteenth out of sixteen winners in Tehran; and Mohsen Esmaili, also representing Tehran. The loser was Mohammad Reza Modarresi Yazdi, who chaired the previous assembly. His loss means the assembly will need to elect a new chairman, perhaps at its first meeting on May 25.

In addition to Mohammad Yazdi, at least four other assembly incumbents were unable to win reelection. Hassan Mamhoudi lost in Kermanshah, while Muhammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi and Ali Mumen Pour lost in Tehran. Gholam Ali Naim Abadi, the Friday prayer leader in Bandar Abbas and the Supreme Leader's representative in Hormozgan province, lost his bid for reelection in that province to Sayyed Ruhollah Sadr al-Saadati. Saadati was originally an approved candidate in Yazd, but the Interior Ministry announced on February 13 that he had switched to Hormozgan. Previously, on February 9, Guardian Council spokesman Siamak Rahpeyk had reaffirmed the law stating that assembly candidates had until February 11 to change which province they were competing in.

Finally, it is interesting to compare the election results with the candidate lists put out by different individuals and organizations during the campaign. For example, the "List of Hope" -- which was strongly associated with former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, as well as current president Hassan Rouhani -- endorsed sixteen candidates in Tehran, and fifteen of them won. The only Tehran winner who prevailed without its endorsement was Jannati, who came in last place. Moreover, eight winning candidates in Tehran were promoted on multiple lists: the previously mentioned Kermani and Mir Mohammadi, as well as Mohsen Qomi, Muhammad Kashani, Qorbanali Dorri Najaf Abadi, Mohammad Reishahri, Ebrahim Haj Amini Najaf Abadi, and Rouhani. These men appeared not only on the List of Hope, but also on lists published by Rouhani's office and the Qom Teachers Association, which is usually described as a very hardline organization.

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