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Reformists Apply the 'Lesser Evil' Theory to Iran's Elections

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Brief Analysis

With most of their favorite candidates disqualified, the reformists embraced politicians who were little different from the hardline incumbents, raising questions about their claims of victory.

On February 28, President Hassan Rouhani tweeted that the Iranian people had "artfully created a new atmosphere" on election day. Regardless of what he may have meant by "artful," the media narrative he helped create about the results could be just as important as the elections themselves. A closer look at the winning candidates reveals glaring discrepancies between his account and Iran's political realities, shedding light on the narrative war between his supporters and opponents.

BUSINESS AS USUAL IN THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS

To support their claims of victory, Rouhani's followers assert that the "reformist" list for the Assembly of Experts election won the majority of seats in Tehran and other large cities. Yet if one understands "reformist" as a political figure who emerged during the reform movement of the late 1990s and is associated with the parties and groups created at that time, then neither the candidates on the "reformist" list nor the winners of Tehran's sixteen assembly seats can credibly be called by that name.

For example, seven of the sixteen winners in Tehran could be found not only on the reformist list, but also on a rival list put out by the conservative "principalist" movement: Mohammad Ali Movahedi Kermani, Mohammad Emami Kashani, Mohsen Qomi, Ebrahim Amini, Ghorban Ali Dorri Najaf Abadi, Mohammad Mohammadi Reishahri, and

Sayyed Abu al-Fazl Mir Mohammadi. Even more tellingly, two of the seven (Reishahri and Dorri) are former intelligence ministers and notorious human-rights violators. Reishahri is well known for ordering the execution of dozens of political figures during his time atop the military court system and Intelligence Ministry. His humiliating 1982 interrogation of the late Mohammad Kazem Shariatmadari -- during which he slapped the seventy-six-year-old ayatollah in the face for criticizing the Islamic regime and the principle of *velayat-e faqih*, which grants the Supreme Leader absolute authority -- was widely reported in the media. Similarly, the regime has admitted that the Intelligence Ministry brutally killed intellectuals and political activists during Dorri's term as minister (1997-1998). Such "serial killing" has become a motif in most reformist campaigns against conservatives since then.

Moreover, neither of the two most prominent winners on the reformist list -- Rouhani and former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani -- has ever explicitly identified himself as a reformist. Rather, they are both incumbents who have run on conservative tickets in past assembly elections. Rafsanjani has been a member of the body since its inception and served as its chairman, while Rouhani just won his third consecutive term. Both men ran against reformists as members of the Militant Clergy Association beginning in the late 1990s; prior to the reform movement, they ran against left wingers. Rafsanjani was the top vote getter in Tehran this year while running as a reformist, but his high tallies have remained fairly predictable over the years regardless of his list: 2,301,492 votes this year, 1,564,187 in 2006, 1,682,188 in 1998, 1,604,834 in 1990, and 2,675,008 in 1982.

None of the other Tehran winners has claimed to be a reformist either -- on the contrary, some of them openly stated their historical and ideological opposition to the reformists mere weeks before the election. For instance, Mahmoud Alavi is the current intelligence minister, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei appointed him as head of the military's Ideological-Political Organization from 2000 to 2009. Mohsen Ismaili is a former member of the Guardian Council, the very body responsible for disqualifying so many reformists and generally preventing the country from holding free and fair elections. The same pattern can be seen in several other big cities, where many seat winners who have expressed support for the president or the reformist list are actually prominent anti-reformist hardliners (e.g., Yusef Tabatabaiejad and Morteza Moqtadaei in Isfahan province).

Some observers have pointed out that two of the assembly's most prominent hardliners were not reelected: Muhammad Yazdi and Muhammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi. Yet several of the new members are either Mesbah-Yazdi's disciples or even more hardline than him. For instance, his follower Mohammad Bagher Bagheri, who will represent Alborz province, is an apocalyptic ideologue who believes that Iran must be entirely de-Westernized before the Mahdi (the Shiite messiah) can return. As for veteran hardliner Ahmad Jannati, his ranking seemed to drop when he placed last out of Tehran's sixteen winners, but his increase in votes (1,321,130 this year, up from 929,403 in 2006) nevertheless indicates a significant rise in popularity.

In sum, looking at individual candidates rather than their list, one can see that the assembly's makeup did not change in a tangible way -- no new prominent reformists won seats, and the proportion of hardliners remained the same. Although the incoming members may or may not play a substantive role in appointing Khamenei's successor down the road ([see PolicyWatch 2553, "Choosing Iran's Next Supreme Leader"](#)), the assembly will remain totally under his control for the time being, acting as a ceremonial institution to maintain the regime's legitimacy.

IDENTITY CRISIS IN THE MAJLIS

Khamenei's policies in recent years have done much to confuse and divide conservatives, including his drastic shift from full support of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to sharp condemnation, his use of violence against peaceful demonstrators in 2009-2010, and his ambiguous approach to the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1. In the latter case, some conservatives (e.g., Ali Larijani) knew that Khamenei was quietly supervising the negotiating team and had approved the effort to reach an agreement, so they bent toward Rouhani and helped him secure parliamentary approval for the eventual deal in the shortest time possible. Yet this approach rankled other

hardliners because Khamenei had also made many public statements criticizing the agreement. As a result, some conservatives stood behind Rouhani during the Majlis vote on the deal while others opposed him, often using the Supreme Leader's own criticisms.

These divisions affected the Majlis elections as well, with Larijani and other conservatives largely losing their traditional bond to the principalist camp. Unable to run as either a reformist or a conservative, Larijani made himself an "independent" candidate. Ali Motahhari and other figures allowed themselves to be placed on the reformist list, yet at the same time created a new conservative faction ("The People's Voice") and publicly insisted that they were not reformists. Kazem Jalali, head of the conservative faction "Principalist Followers of Velayat," was also placed on the reformist list simply because of his support for the nuclear deal. In short, the outcome was similar to the assembly election -- the "reformist" list may have won in parliamentary districts such as Tehran, but many of the individual winners from that list are not really reformists, and some openly disclaimed any attribution to the movement.

Even the reformists who won seats have an ambiguous attitude about reform. The top winner in Tehran was Mohammad Reza Aref, a vice president under Mohammad Khatami and a reformist candidate for president in 2013. When polls showed that he lacked a realistic chance of winning the election three years ago, he reluctantly withdrew under reformist pressure. In an interview with *Etemad* newspaper last month, he bitterly complained about the reformists' treatment of him in 2012-2013, noting that they had labeled him a "fake reformist" who was "promoted by the intelligence apparatus to run and fail so they could claim that reformists failed in the election."

Moreover, the success of the reformist list in Tehran was not replicated in other parliamentary districts. Hossein Marashi, spokesman for the Kargozaran Party and Rafsanjani's advisor, noted that Iran's political development could be measured by what percentage of the people in a given area adhered to the reformist candidate list in their votes: "In Tehran 100 percent, in provincial centers 50 percent, and in towns 30 percent."

THE LESSER EVIL THEORY

The reformists' ongoing claims of victory do not hold water unless one accepts their main argument during the campaign: that these elections were about choosing between "evil and lesser evil" (the broader implications of this transformation in reformist identity are discussed in [PolicyWatch 2583, "What Does It Mean To Be a Reformist in Iran?"](#)). The Guardian Council's massive disqualification of their favorite candidates helped shape this approach. On February 7, Rouhani told his followers, "We should participate in the elections no matter what the circumstances are...We know that if we participate, we gain little profit, and if we don't participate, we certainly lose. Hence, we choose between small win and big loss." Such rhetoric is obviously at odds with his glowing post-election narrative about creating "a new atmosphere" in Iran, and his conservative opponents are certainly aware of the discrepancy. As Khamenei confidant Hossein Shariatmadari put it, the president's supporters appear to suffer from a "delusion of victory."

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