Third Time the Charm for Reform in Iran?

by **Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)**

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Patrick Clawson (/experts/patrick-clawson)
Patrick Clawson is Morningstar senior fellow and director of research at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Brief Analysis

Tehran has a history of showing hints of reform to hopeful citizens and Western observers only to snatch them away in the end.

Three times in the past thirty years, a new Iranian Majlis has been greeted as a triumph for a reform-minded president, seemingly empowering him to make the changes he wants. Yet in the previous two cases -- parliamentary elections under President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in 1992 and President Mohammad Khatami in 2000 -- the results were not impressive: Tehran continued its adventurism abroad and human rights abuses at home. Will the latest elections prove any different?

PREMATURELY CELEBRATING PAST MODERATE VICTORIES

On May 10, 1992, as the runoff round of Iran's parliamentary elections came to a close, the *New York Times* declared that the results would give President Rafsanjani "enough support to counter political rivals and carry out his policies of an opening to the West and liberalizing Iran's economy." Three weeks prior, under the headline "Rafsanjani Sketches Vision of a Moderate, Modern Iran," the paper had written, "Interviews with close associates before and after [the elections] made clear that Mr. Rafsanjani's most pressing goal is to convince the world that he is a mature, reliable leader of a vital nation that is ripe for foreign investment and loans."

What Rafsanjani did with this mandate, however, was conduct assassination campaigns against Iranian dissidents in Europe, launch Iran's nuclear fuel-cycle program (including uranium enrichment), and sponsor terrorist attacks designed to torpedo the Arab-Israeli peace process. At home, the economy stalled because Iran was unable to pay the massive foreign debts it had run up, forcing an embarrassing spate of debt rescheduling and sharp cutbacks in government spending. It turned out that Rafsanjani's program for Iran was not so different from that of his predecessors, which should have come as no surprise given how important he had been in the regime's power structure even before taking office. For years he had blamed radicals in the Majlis for holding him back, but in fact

his plans were not that different from theirs.

Moreover, the Majlis elected in 1992 turned out to be deeply conservative rather than reformist. The new members, many of whom were more traditional than the revolutionaries they replaced, were just as hostile to the West as their predecessors -- their hostility just had a different flavor.

Disgusted with economic stagnation and political isolation, Iranian voters massively supported the reformer Mohammad Khatami for president in 1997. He repeatedly locked horns with the Majlis during his initial years in office, so hopes were high when reformists scored big victories in the 2000 parliamentary elections. As the *New York Times* reported, "In unusually bold language, the Clinton Administration welcomed the election results in Iran today and said it interpreted them as an unequivocal demand for greater freedom within the country and for improved relations abroad." Similarly, State Department spokesman James Rubin called the outcome "an event of historic proportions," while a *New York Times* editorial rejoiced, "The peaceful revolt against clerical repression in Iran that began three years ago with the election of Mohammad Khatami as president is gaining strength...An alliance between a reform majority in Parliament and Mr. Khatami could loosen the clergy's tight grip over Iran's political institutions and allow the president to fulfill his promises to build a society based on tolerance and the rule of law."

But neither the Majlis results nor Khatami's overwhelming reelection in 2001 changed the Islamic Republic's basic power equation. The judiciary and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), both firmly controlled by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, blocked Khatami at every turn. Indeed, within months of his reelection, Iran provided a haven for al-Qaeda leaders fleeing U.S. forces in Afghanistan and stepped up its clandestine nuclear activities in violation of its treaty commitments. The crackdown on domestic dissent accelerated as well, with the judiciary closing more than twenty publications in a ten-week period, essentially ending the limited press freedoms Khatami had inaugurated. Meanwhile, the Guardian Council barred parliament from overseeing the activities of the military, the various state-run radio and television outlets, and the judiciary's parallel system of prosecutors and prisons.

WHAT THE NEW MAJLIS MEANS

To understand whether the next legislature might change Iranian policy, it is useful to look at its new members. Thus far, the political stances of those elected offer little comfort. Few if any winning candidates proposed changing Iran's missile program, its support for the slaughter in Syria, its provision of bombs to terrorists in the Gulf states and Gaza, its imprisonment of opposition figures who contested the controversial 2009 presidential election, or its execution of prisoners at the highest per capita rate in the world. To the contrary, many of the proclaimed moderates actively endorsed some or all of those policies, and their past behavior is often even worse. For example, the main candidate list publicized as moderate -- the "List of Hope" -- included Kazem Jalali and Behrouz Nemati, who consider themselves part of the hardline "principalist" faction and have long records of strongly criticizing those who protested the 2009 election.

Another factor inhibiting change is that much of the Majlis will likely be the same as before. A great deal of attention has been devoted to the thirty seats selected in Tehran's main district, but the country's other 260 seats will actually dominate the Majlis. To be sure, final results for these seats are not in, with sixty-eight requiring runoff elections. Clearly, though, quite a few will go to returning members or candidates with similar inclinations. And while some of the worst hardliners are gone -- a true cause for celebration -- those who are more effective at advancing the revolutionary agenda remain in place. For instance, few if any of the victors openly opposed the nuclear deal, which is hardly surprising given the public's mindset and the potential political repercussions of explicit opposition. Instead they took a more nuanced stance, with many insisting that Iran should be ready to walk away from the deal if, as they strongly suspected would be the case, the West did not live up to its obligations.

Even if the Rouhani government receives full support from the Majlis -- which seems doubtful -- the real center of

power will remain with revolutionary institutions. Khamenei's office, known as his *bayt* (house), is deeply involved in the details of government decisions, making ample use of his powers to override unfavorable government actions and determine who will fill the most important appointed positions. Similarly, the IRGC is the constitutionally mandated "defender of the revolution," so it has long assumed a leading role in whatever sectors it deems relevant to that sweeping mission, including domestic security and economic matters.

Finally, even assuming Rouhani were able to implement his program fully, it is not clear how much change that would mean on issues the West cares most about, at least now that the nuclear deal is done. Rouhani has been a man of the system for decades. He was a member of the wartime Supreme Defense Council from 1982 to 1988, then served as secretary of the powerful Supreme National Security Council from 1989 to 2005. During the latter period, the council directed not only the regime's nuclear program, but also its sponsorship of terrorism, from massive support for Hezbollah and murderous Iraqi militias to limited cooperation with Osama bin Laden. In other words, his differences with hardliners may be less about goals than about how best to advance their common vision of expanding Iran's influence and countering the West.

The same is true at home, where Rouhani has done little to advance the reform agenda so many of his supporters hoped for in 2013. After much presidential campaign talk about attracting foreign expertise and investment in the oil industry, the new technocratic team at the Ministry of Petroleum took more than two years to present the Majlis with a draft "Iran Oil Contract," which has yet to be approved. As Rouhani has acknowledged, the battle against deeply ingrained corruption has gone slowly at best. And sociocultural policies have barely budged, despite being badly out of step with the bulk of the Iranian people.

REAL CHANGE?

Like Lucy holding the football for Charlie Brown, Iran has a history of showing hints of reform to hopeful citizens and Western observers only to snatch them away in the end. As new legislators form yet another Majlis that is supposedly ripe with the potential to help a reformist president moderate objectionable regime policies, the question is whether the third time really is the charm.

Patrick Clawson is the Morningstar Senior Fellow and director of research at The Washington Institute. ❖

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