

Iran's Parliamentary Elections: Assured Victory for the Supreme Leader

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Brief Analysis

As Iran's March 14 parliamentary elections approach, the prospects for the reformist/technocratic coalition are predictably bleak. Yet, President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad is expected to lose ground as well. Although his conservative critics are likely to pick up a significant number of seats, the big winner will be Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, whose role as arbiter and decisionmaker will be reinforced even more.

Doomed Reformists

The executive committee of the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council -- the two bodies that vet parliamentary candidates in a two-stage process -- have disqualified more than two thousand mostly reformist candidates. As a result, reformists can only compete for around 30 of the 290 seats in the Majlis (parliament).

Although candidate vetting is a common practice in Iran, this recent round of disqualifications was so extensive that even some conservatives felt compelled to complain publicly. In a January 28 editorial, the generally conservative Jomhoori-e Eslami newspaper described excessive disqualifications as a process that harms the regime. On February 10, Ahmad Tavakkoli, a leading conservative member of the Majlis and director of its Strategic Research Center, wrote an open letter to the Guardian Council urging it to revise its earlier decisions and broaden the circle of qualified candidates. He ended his letter by stating, "A pagan government may last, but an unjust government will not."

On January 27, three leading figures in the reformist/technocratic coalition -- former Majlis speaker Mehdi Karrubi, former president Muhammad Khatami, and, most prominently, Akbar Rafsanjani (former president and now head of both the Expediency Council and Assembly of Experts) -- asked Khamenei in an off-the-record meeting to urge the Guardian Council to be more tolerant with nonconservative candidates. Apparently Khamenei dismissed their recommendations. In a public speech on February 8, he called Iranian elections some "of the most accurate . . . in the world." Addressing critics of the electoral process, he said nobody has the right to "bypass the law." "Everybody," he concluded, "has to participate in the election and should not seek a pretext for not participating."

This was a clear threat to the reformists, who are now unsure whether they will take part on March 14. Rafsanjani, aware of the extent to which the Guardian Council would disqualify his followers, did not allow the two parties close

to him to register any candidates.

Despite Khatami's description of the disqualifications as "catastrophic," the reformists lack the social power base required to take advantage of electoral opportunities in the first place. Political ambivalence and voter apathy led to the failure of reformist candidates in the most recent presidential and municipal elections because the Iranian people have lost faith in their ability to change the system and make real reforms. Indeed, the current disqualifications have provoked little popular reaction, even among the traditional student constituency. Similarly, the lack of middle-class support has led many political analysts to conclude that even without the Guardian Council decision, the reformists would not have done well in the elections.

Battling Conservatives

On the conservative side, the situation is much more dynamic. After Ahmadinezhad became president in 2005, the differences between conservatives became more apparent. Ahmadinezhad's own political faction -- called "The Scent of Service," a name as strange to Iranian ears as to Western -- has performed poorly in the past two elections for municipal offices and membership in the Experts Assembly. Currently, it is attempting to reach a consensus with other conservative factions in order to prevent another explicit defeat that would expose its weakness and lack of political base. But this has proven to be a difficult task; other factions -- led by figures with presidential ambitions such as Tehran mayor Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, former Revolutionary Guards commander-in-chief Mohsen Rezai, and former secretary of the Supreme Council for National Security Ali Larijani -- have criticized Ahmadinezhad's nuclear, political, and economic policies.

Consequently, the conservatives have failed to unite. Larijani could not attract the necessary conservative consent in Tehran, so he decided to run for a parliamentary seat in Qom. Some in Iranian political circles say that he wants to be the next Speaker of the Majlis, replacing Qolam Ali Haddad Adel, who heads the main conservative slate in Tehran. In any case, given that other conservative groups are larger in number and have a stronger social power base, Ahmadinezhad's faction is likely to win only a small minority in the next Majlis and become marginalized.

Khamenei Deploys His Forces

The Guardian Council and the military have been working under Khamenei's direct supervision to paralyze and manipulate the upcoming elections, all in an effort to make Khamenei the undisputed winner. The council has until now been the Supreme Leader's main instrument for controlling electoral outcomes. In recent years, however, the military has increased its role in the voting process tremendously. The Interior Ministry, which administers the elections, is in the hands of military and intelligence officers. The interior minister himself, Mostafa Poor-Muhammdai, was deputy minister of intelligence under Rafsanjani and is widely thought to have had a role in killing dozens of intellectuals and political activists. He appointed Alireza Afshar, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guard's Basij militia, as his political deputy -- a position that directly controls the ballot boxes.

On January 31, Revolutionary Guards commander-in-chief Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari made it clear that the Basij will control the electoral process in order to protect the "principalist" position. "Principalism" is a new term used by Iranian conservatives who believe they are adhering to the principles of the Islamic Revolution. Jafari also referred to Iran's government as "the Islamic government" rather than its formal title, the "Islamic Republic." On February 7, Mostafa Tajzadeh, former political deputy in the Interior Ministry and a leading reformist figure, warned that this change in nomenclature was significant, stating that "an Islamic government is a regime that has no free elections, free political parties, freedom of speech, or freedom of the press. . . . A garrison thought creates a garrison society."

Khamenei Wins through Force, Not Popularity

Khamenei has long followed the model of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the Islamic Republic, in eliminating political rivals. Khomeini came to power with the help of communist, nationalist, leftist, and Islamist

activists and groups, but from 1979 to 1981, he eliminated his political rivals -- including some of those who had helped him -- and monopolized power in the hands of those who did not challenge his leadership.

In his eighteen years as Supreme Leader, Khamenei has gradually excluded the old-guard politicians and veterans of the Islamic Republic and created a new generation of politicians who are indebted and devoted to him. This new political generation has a background mostly in the military and intelligence services, and much less in the seminary. The basic difference between Khomeini and Khamenei is charisma: while the founder could achieve his goals by using his charisma to engender massive public support, his successor can only establish his authority through military and intelligence institutions. On March 14, these methods will result in further consolidation of his power.

Mehdi Khalaji is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the role of politics in contemporary Shiite clericalism in Iran and Iraq. ❖

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