

The Significance of Iran's December Elections

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Brief Analysis

On December 15, 2006, Iran's third municipal election and fourth election of the Assembly of Experts for the Leadership will take place simultaneously. Some observers are expecting a return of the reformists who lost much influence and standing in the most recent elections. However, the election process has, as yet, been incapable of creating any significant change in the Iranian political structure.

Assembly of Experts: A Disabled Institution

According to the Iranian constitution, the Assembly of Experts is a pivotal institution within the country's political structure. Its main mission is to elect the Supreme Leader -- the highest political position, endowed with unlimited authority. The assembly is also empowered to supervise the Supreme Leader and to dismiss him if he is considered incapable of carrying out his responsibilities or is found to be violating the law. In other words, the assembly is the only body empowered to hold the Supreme Leader accountable.

However, historical experience shows that the assembly is not a powerful body. Indeed, its only achievement to date was the 1989 appointment of Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader following the death of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic. It is also important to note that this appointment was made under illegal conditions. The constitution at the time stipulated that the Supreme Leader be a high-ranking religious leader (marja). Since Khamenei lacked this status, he could only be appointed after the constitution was revised and approved by popular referendum. Ayatollah Khomeini died during the revision process, before the revisions were approved, so Khamenei was appointed by a law that was ratified after he was already in office.

The three previous elections for the Assembly of Experts drew fewer voters than any other Iranian elections since 1979. That is, Iranian voters do not expect much from this institution, regarding it as a hollow body whose decisions have no bearing on political realities.

The Guardian Council has the right and responsibility to qualify and disqualify candidates for election in Iran. But the council's six key jury members are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader. Therefore, the Assembly of Experts election, like any other election in Iran, is under the full control of the Supreme Leader. The situation is exacerbated in this case because the assembly is supposed to provide democratic legitimacy to the Supreme Leader's political position. However, its objectivity and independence is obviously undermined when the Supreme

Leader controls the levers of power that limit the selection of the candidates for the voting body. In effect, assembly members are unable to check his powers or have any oversight or control over his activities.

The Failure of an Emerging Faction

When Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad was declared the winner of the 2005 presidential election, he was supported by a clerical minority group led by Muhammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a hardliner fundamentalist. Mesbah has been the major contributor to President Ahmadinezhad's political ideology and intolerant, literal interpretation of Islamic texts. His influence on the Ahmadinezhad administration can be seen in the president's aggressive strategies in both domestic and diplomatic policy.

Mesbah's ambitious agenda has not been confined to the president. Just after Ahmadinezhad's victory, Mesbah began to campaign on behalf of those of his followers seeking election to the Assembly of Experts. Critics claim that his efforts are an attempt to gain majority support in the assembly, and that he is planning to be the next Supreme Leader, either after Khamenei's death or through Khamenei's dismissal from office. At the very least, one can plausibly argue that if Mesbah's attempts to secure a majority in the assembly are realized, he would gain a great deal of power and influence. Perhaps he could even exert control over the Supreme Leader, with representatives in the assembly who would advance his radical political agenda.

Last year Mesbah tarnished his reputation by explicitly supporting Ahmadinezhad, claiming the divine nature of the Islamic Republic, and denying the public's role in the decisionmaking process. Mesbah further elaborated on these stances by stating that authority comes from God's will as interpreted by the clerics, not from elections, and that Islam and democracy are incompatible. After he revealed his political convictions and intentions, critics from different factions inside the regime unified against him.

Khamenei supported Mesbah before the presidential election, describing him as one of Iran's most credible ideologues. However, the Supreme Leader has recently been concerned about Mesbah's political ambitions. He showed these concerns through the Guardian Council's decision to disqualify several of Mesbah's candidates for the Assembly of Experts, including his son, Ali Mesbah Yazdi. In doing so, Khamenei conveyed a clear message to the president and to Mesbah himself that they cannot bypass the Supreme Leader.

The council also disqualified, without explanation, many reformist candidates, including Majid Ansari, a current member of the assembly. In an open letter to assembly speaker Ali Meshkini, former parliament speaker Mehdi Karrubi protested the disqualification of reformists, especially those who were already assembly members. He also harshly criticized the mechanism behind the assembly election, saying that candidates' qualification process should be the responsibility of the religious authorities and seminaries. Finally, as head of the National Confidence Party, he refused to propose a list of favored candidates and implicitly discouraged people from participating in the election.

Through the process of qualifying the 160 candidates for the 87 assembly seats, the Supreme Leader has maintained the balance in his favor. The political composition of the assembly will likely remain untouched. Khamenei showed that his control is more extensive than ever, and neither reformists nor hardliners can challenge the core of the political system, as composed by Khamenei and his cohorts. Essentially, the election results are already fixed and will only serve to consolidate more power in the hands of the current leadership.

The Assembly Election and the Nature of the Regime

Given the flawed process for choosing the Assembly of Experts, there is little substance to the regime's claim that the Supreme Leader is selected by the people. This is not to say that the regime is based on clericalism or theocracy. According to the revised constitution, the Supreme Leader is not necessarily the highest religious figure; it is sufficient for him to be a middle-ranking jurist. But Khamenei has effectively seized complete control over the seminaries via the doctrine of the "absolute rule of the jurist" (*velayat-e motlaqeh-e faqih*), which states that the

Supreme Leader is above all high-ranking jurists and retains the right to overrule Islamic law according to his judgment and in order to safeguard the interests of the political system.

After he came to power, Khamenei established a new mechanism allowing the government to determine who is a Shiite jurist and who is not, a procedure that traditionally took place at the seminary without government intervention. In addition, Khamenei became the exclusive head of the seminary and its administration. The traditional hierarchy of the Shiite clerical establishment has therefore atrophied in its current configuration. The role of religious authorities in the system is basically limited to private religious ritual. Hence, the Islamic Republic today is neither a democracy nor a theocracy, but rather a religious autocracy.

Municipal Elections and the Repetition of Failure

The municipal elections are slated to take place on the same day as the Assembly of Experts election. Initially, they were not scheduled to take place simultaneously, but the schedule was changed in order to reduce the administrative costs of the election process, according to the official explanation. Holding them together might also offset the low rate of citizen participation in assembly elections. Reformists who lost the 2003 municipal elections -- which led to the empowerment of the radical Revolutionary Guard faction headed by Ahmadinezhad, who was elected mayor of Tehran -- are trying to defy radicals by forming a coalition with old conservatives, including Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential head of the Expediency Council.

The reformists seem to be in a paradoxical position, however. Normally, it is in the nature of any political party to use elections as a tool for gaining influence, but the situation is more complicated in Iran. In recent years, following the regime's intervention in the electoral process in cooperation with the Guardian Council, reformists publicly criticized the electoral mechanisms and accused the Supreme Leader and military organizations under him (such as the Revolutionary Guard and Basij militia) of undermining the law. However, reformists' tireless attempts to use the same "illegitimate" mechanism for gaining power have made their stand seem contradictory, which has hurt their popularity. If politicians such as Muhammad Khatami and Rafsanjani, two former presidents, are successful in getting through the Guardian Council's electoral filter and are ultimately victorious, they would naturally call the election free and fair. However, when the same candidates lose the election or get into trouble for running, they criticize and discredit the electoral mechanism. To many, this appears hypocritical, suggesting that these reformists support elections only when it is in their interests to do so, and that their real goal is power, not democracy.

Moreover, the reformists who were victorious in previous municipal elections did not exercise their power efficiently. Specifically, reformist winners of the 1999 municipal elections failed to advance their progressive agenda for urban development, confirming their impotence by bowing to conservative sabotage. In fact, urban experts believe that the first municipal councils, which were controlled by reformists, failed to effectively do their job especially in the sprawling metropolis of Tehran. These experts consider the first municipal councils as the preeminent malfunction in the short history of reformist management. Consequently, the outcome of the upcoming municipal elections seems relatively insignificant: regardless of whether or not the reformists emerge victorious, urban management will remain under the influence of radicals.

But it is worth mentioning that the new conservative faction -- which won the second municipal and the most recent parliamentary and presidential elections -- is nonetheless concerned about its prospects in the upcoming elections. If faction members lose this time, it would mean that their popularity has begun to diminish. Their chances of success in Tehran have been hurt by a bitter dispute between Ahmadinezhad's supporters and Muhammad Baqir Qalibaf, the current mayor of Tehran. Qalibaf, a former national police chief, was a prominent hardliner candidate for president in 2005 but lost to Ahmadinezhad. In one of the few cases of the president reaching out to his former opponents, Ahmadinezhad's party appointed Qalibaf to the vacant mayoral post -- though reportedly under pressure from Khamenei. Eventually, fundamentalists ("Usulgerayan," as they call themselves) consisting of a new generation

of conservatives with mostly military backgrounds split into two factions, headed by Ahmadinezhad and Qalibaf. They have failed to join together for the municipal elections, which will weaken their integrity. One can predict that hardliner fundamentalists will have added difficulties in forming an effective coalition in the next parliamentary and presidential elections.

Conclusion

Iran's two upcoming elections are significant because of the light they shed on the power of the Supreme Leader. His autocratic position allows him to lawfully control any election in his own favor. As a result, the electoral process does not lead to any dramatic change in the political regime as long as it acquires its legitimacy through a mechanism that is controlled by the Supreme Leader. Thus far, Khamenei has shown an impressive ability to manage the conflict of various factions' interests in his favor.

Mehdi Khalaji, a Next Generation fellow at The Washington Institute, is author of [The Last Marja: Sistani and the End of Traditional Religious Authority in Shiism](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250) (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=250>) (2006). ❖

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