Iran's Municipal Elections:

A Turning Point for the Reform Movement?

by Ray Takeyh **(/experts/ray-takeyh)**

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Brief Analysis

On February 28, 2003, elections were held across Iran for positions on city and village councils, local political bodies that were revived in 1999. Whereas the 1999 council elections resulted in impressive gains by reformers, last Friday's electoral results demonstrated the resurgence of the right wing. Capitalizing on low voter turnout and mass alienation from the political process, the conservatives swept elections in nearly all major Iranian cities. Indeed, the elections marked the lowest turnout in twenty-four years and the first time that the reform movement has been defeated at the polls since its emergence in the mid-1990s. Beyond the issue of largely symbolic local councils, the elections reflect the changing dynamics of Iran's political landscape.

Black Friday

In 1999, the reformers' confident triumph in local council elections generated momentum for their huge victories in the parliamentary elections of 2000, fostering hope that Iran would soon begin a new age of democratic representation and accountability. Last Friday's election returns sent shock waves through the system, however. Prior to the elections, some concerns were raised regarding the small number of candidates who had registered for positions on the country's 905 city councils and 34,205 village councils. Although a last-minute rush resulted in 210,000 total candidates registering, public disillusionment with the political process became evident when only 16 million out of 41 million eligible voters bothered casting a ballot, compared to 34 million in the 2001 presidential election and 26 million in the 1999 municipal elections. In Tehran, only 12 percent of eligible voters turned out, with other key cities such as Isfahan and Mashhad showing similarly dismal rates (12 and 15 percent, respectively).

Such public apathy facilitated the resurgence of the right (particularly of the more pragmatic wing associated with former president Hashemi Rafsanjani), which captured fourteen out of fifteen Tehran city council seats. Indeed, the conservatives' triumph cannot be attributed merely to the disunity of the reform movement; it is also due to their attempts to disengage the public from the political process, a strategy that they have successfully pursued over the past five years.

Factionalism and intense disputes have been the hallmark of Iranian politics since the creation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. During the 1980s and much of the 1990s, such tensions reflected divisions within the clerical establishment, as competing groups of pragmatic and hardline clerics battled each other on issues ranging from cultural liberalization measures to land reform. The 1997 presidential election introduced a new player into Iranian

politics, however: the people. Suddenly, a populace that had been a passive observer of clerical politics attempted to infiltrate the corridors of power through the ballot box, giving new meaning to elections that had previously served merely as occasions for validating the decisions of clerical powerbrokers. Indeed, the newly elected representatives to the parliament and local councils quickly attempted to inject accountability, rule of law, and pluralism into a polity long immune to such impulses.

Since the election of reformist president Muhammad Khatami in 1997, the conservatives' strategy has been to restore the hegemony of the clerical estate by gradually reversing the trend of increased public participation in politics. First, they used the judiciary and security services to silence newspapers and imprison key reform figures as a means of intimidating the emerging popular movement. Second, they undermined the collective will by invalidating the decisions of elected institutions. Through cynical manipulation of the Guardian Council and the prerogatives of the Supreme Religious Leader, the conservatives countermanded parliamentary legislation and presidential determinations by clerical fiat. The underlying purpose of these measures was to show the populace that elections cannot alter the demarcations of power and that peaceful protest is unlikely to have a major impact on the regime's deliberations.

The latest election results illustrate the efficacy of the right's strategy. By any standard of measure, an election that is boycotted by 60 percent of the voting populace (or 25 million voters) would be seen as a national disaster. Yet, the conservatives celebrated such results, with the reactionary Kayhan newspaper leading the chorus of acclamation for the elections as a "resounding victory for the fundamentalists"—an accurate assessment, since low turnout and mass public disengagement from conventional politics was the hardliners' goal. Indeed, the conservatives' pre-election rhetoric testified to their narrow conception of permissible participation; according to them, the election was designed to "safeguard the achievements of the Islamic Revolution" and to "prevent materialistic people, groups, and parties from influencing the process of decisionmaking."

Whither Reform?

The council elections portend potentially dramatic changes for the reform movement. Since Khatami's reelection in 2000, the movement has fractured along two broad conceptual lines. One faction, led by the president and various parliamentarians, continues to insist that the Islamic Republic can be reformed through its existing institutions and constitutional provisions. As such, they have pressed for passage of further legislation, including bills submitted by Khatami in summer 2002 designed to curb the power of the Guardian Council and the judiciary. Yet, last week's election debacle served as a rebuke to those who maintain that gradualism can still produce important democratic gains.

Another camp has emerged within the reform movement over the last few years, calling for more rapid change and robust tactics. This faction features younger politicians (particularly those associated with the Islamic Participation Front and student activist groups) who insist on the need for more confrontational politics, including active street protest and disengagement from the Islamic Republic's institutions, including parliamentary resignations. In July 2002, Muhammad Reza Khatami—the head of the Islamic Participation Front and brother to the president—insisted that "if the conservatives do not heed the public demands, we will withdraw the reformist presence from the regime, leaving a power that lacks a sufficient base of legitimacy." Shortly after Friday's elections, the Office for Consolidating Unity, the leading student group, issued a statement declaring that it was withdrawing its support for the mainstream reform camp, insisting that the "process of reform needs to enter a new stage and in deeper levels." In many ways, this wing of the reform movement was validated by the election results; its claim that change will come only through more confrontational strategies seems to be gaining popular ground.

Conclusion

Last week's elections were about both the symbols and substance of power in Iran. On the one hand, the largely symbolic local councils are unlikely to shift the balance of power in Iran, given their limited prerogatives. On the other hand, the elections fully crystallized the conservatives' strategy of subverting the democratic process by emasculating the country's elected institutions. If the reform movement is to remain a viable agent of change, it must embrace the tactics of the more impatient and youthful reformers who have long deprecated Khatami's strategy of incremental change via negotiation with the right. At a time when the Middle East stands at the brink of another war, Iran is about to enter a period of dramatic change.

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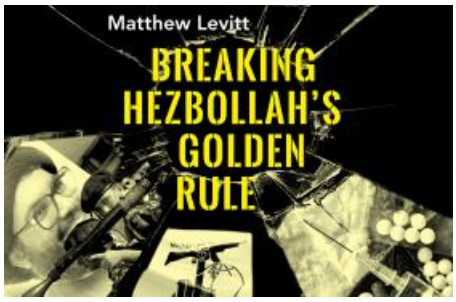

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