

# The Ebb and Flow of Reform in Iran

May 1, 2000



Brief Analysis

**A**s the May 5 second-round Majlis (parliament) election approaches, questions remain as to whether the Islamic Republic's hardliners can be marginalized through the ballot box, whether reformists' voices can be muzzled, and whether change in Iran can both be rapid and nonviolent. In February, the reformist triumph in the first round of the Majlis elections generated much optimism. On February 20, State Department Spokesman James Rubin called the outcome "an event of historic proportions." But four months later, prospects for political reform in Iran look poor in the short term: the hardliners have struck back harshly. The rhetoric has changed and political discourse in Iran is now quite different. Although a reformist Majlis will convene, the hardliners can block a quorum and thereby obstruct legislation if they win one-third of the seats, thus perpetuating the uneasy power struggle for several more years.

In Search of a Quorum. The trends analyzed last week are continuing. Despite overwhelming popular support for the reformist movement in Iran, hardliners have shown they are not willing to forfeit power. The most significant reform since President Muhammad Khatami's election three years ago has been the freedom given the press. Now that may end. Between April 23 and April 27, the judiciary shut down sixteen reformist newspapers; only the relatively obscure Bayan and the less political, more cultural Hamshahri (the USA Today of the Iranian press) still publish. The latest closures targeted the two bestselling reformist papers: Mosharakat, edited by Muhammad Reza Khatami, the brother of the president and the top vote-getter in the first round Tehran elections; and Sobh-i Emruz, published by Sa'id Hajjarian, Khatami's advisor who was shot and paralyzed on March 12.

Meanwhile, the Council of Guardians has eroded the reformist victory in the Majlis elections. It voided or reversed the election of reformist candidates in twelve districts: three seats in Bandar Abbas and one seat each in Damavand-Firuzkuh, Darab, Gachsaran, Jiruft, Khalkhal, Khuy, Minab, Naqadeh-Oshnaviyeh, Sarvestan, and Urumiyeh. By flexing its muscles, the Council has reminded the reformers of its powers. The Majlis cannot meet until two-thirds (194) of the members have their elections certified, and the Council has delayed attainment of this goal. It has still not certified any of the victors for Tehran's thirty seats, even though eighteen of the winners were way ahead of the pack, with each receiving more than 35 percent of the vote compared with the 25 percent required to win a seat. The Council also delayed for two months announcing when the second-round elections would be held for the sixty-six seats (where no majority was won in the first round), until finally setting a date (May 5) allowing only ten days to campaign.

It remains uncertain whether the Sixth Majlis can begin on May 28 as scheduled. Almost certainly, a new Majlis will be seated that, even with tampering, will have a reformist majority and will begin to swing momentum back into the reformist camp. A delay of even a few days, however, would send a strong signal to the reformers that the hardliners are neither down nor out and should not be discounted. Further, the hardliners may be able to secure one-third of the seats (97), thanks to how they are rigging the rules and muzzling the press. With ninety-seven seats, they can filibuster reformist legislation since, by walking out, they can deny the Majlis a quorum under Article 65 of the Iranian constitution.

Protests. Although the Western media gave prominent, almost daily coverage to the reformist Majlis victory, it has given less attention to the reformists' protests, about both the press closures and the overturn of election results. Students protesting the newspaper bans have rallied peacefully at nine university campuses in Tehran and in the provincial cities of Ahvaz, Arak, Bandar Abbas, Hamadan, Ilam, Kashan, Kermanshah, Khuy, Mashhad, Rasht, Sanandaj, Shiraz, Urumiyeh, and Yazd. But other protests have been violent. On April 14, violence erupted in Rasht after paramilitary Basij members sought to arrest a young woman deemed improperly dressed. Citizens torched banks and government buildings and set up barricades of burning tires. The Law Enforcement Force (LEF) put down the protest and made several arrests.

There has been serious election violence as well. On February 19, police in Shush and Dasht-i Azadegan, Khuzistan province, fired on crowds protesting alleged ballot rigging; the hardline daily Kayhan reported eight killed. Although more recent protests have not resulted in deaths, the danger remains that a single death (as with both last July's riots and events in 1979) can set off a new protest cycle. Protestors from at least three different election constituencies have staged demonstrations in front of the Interior Ministry in Tehran, and there have been serious protests in the provinces: On March 11, police arrested 150 demonstrators in Ghachsaran after they chanted slogans against the hardline Council of Guardians. On April 7, riot police put down demonstrations in Khalkhal after demonstrators burned twenty cars and a religious school to protest the reversal of the election outcome awarding victory to a hardliner. On April 18, demonstrators from Sarvestan halted traffic on the Shiraz-Bandar Abbas highway, and three days later a gathering of 10,000 people turned violent in Sarvestan when protestors attacked riot police with stones and set fire to cars, although police reinforcements from the provincial capital Shiraz restored calm.

Go Slow or Else. Khamene'i's April 14 remarks endorsing "lawful" violence and the April 16 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) statement threatening to "descend like lightening" upon "duped elements and criminals" send a message to Khatami's allies that they should not push the reform envelope too far or too quickly. Rumors of an IRGC coup, however, should not be taken at face value but--as with their last occurrence following July's riots--rather reflect the hardliners' worries that reformers risk letting events spin out of control. State media now discuss the possibility of an IRGC crackdown (even if only by airing denials), as on April 25, when Expediency Council Secretary Mohsen Rezaie labeled such talk as "slanders." The discourse has changed from February when newspapers discussed the possibility of legalizing satellite dishes.

The more likely scenario will be that some hardliners, emboldened by their success at muzzling the press, will move to consolidate control over other reformist bastions and perhaps try to eviscerate reformist influence in the universities. But the fact that the press closures and date for the second round of elections were announced the same day indicates an implicit linkage: the reformists can have their parliament, but only at the expense of their voice in the press. To the reformists, however, winning an eviscerated parliament may be a Pyrrhic victory at best.

Extreme Fragility. The power struggle will continue unabated in Iran. The limited and localized character of ongoing protest contrasts with the extensive and nationwide demonstrations last July. The smaller scale of the current protests reflects change in the political climate. The hardliners have regained the initiative with a win-win strategy: if Khatami and his allies can do nothing about the press closures or future institutional shutdowns, the hardliners have scored a victory. If such closures result in even limited civil unrest, or if vigilante actions cause protests to escalate, then the hardliners will have an excuse to crack down in the name of national security. In the long term, demographics favor the reformists, but the question then remains, can reform in Iran happen nonviolently?

For long-term reform and stability, U.S. policymakers should grant Iran space. Iran's elections, both in 1997 and this year, were not about U.S.-Iran relations, but were rather centered upon domestic issues. Time is on the reformers' side, yet any attempts by Western governments to boost the reform movement risks backfire by giving hardliners a symbol around which to rally. This could, ironically, delay the reform which Iran's population, Europe, and the

United States would so very much like to see.

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Policy #459

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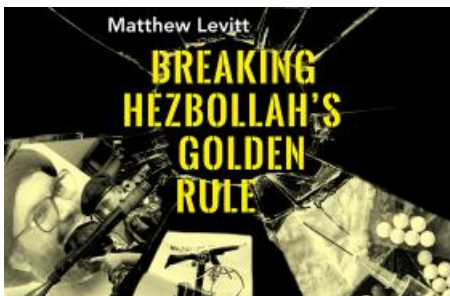
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