

Let Iran Change on Its Own

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Brief Analysis

The parliamentary elections in Iran produced a massive pro-reform vote. The obvious question is what can the United States expect and how should it respond. Paradoxically, the answers are, expect little change soon on the issues of most concern, and do little so as not to be counterproductive.

Background. The hardliners made all the right moves. They disarmed the reformers' main complaint about past elections by allowing more than 90 percent of applicants to run as candidates. They changed the rules in a way they thought would benefit them (with so many reformers running, the hardliners hoped the reformist vote would be split, allowing hardliners to slip in with only 25 percent of the vote). They presented themselves in the campaign as being in favor of reformist President Muhammad Khatami. They raised issues, like economics, on which the reformers are divided and ineffective. They had a lock on the television and radio, which barely mentioned the reformers. Meanwhile, the reformers ran a bad campaign. They were not able to agree on a single slate; indeed, they spent most of their energies fighting each other (those in favor of broad reforms criticized the technocrats, whose political hero is former president 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani). They ran a one-note campaign, talking only about freedom while ignoring the country's pressing economic problems.

But the pro-reform sentiment was so overwhelming, none of this mattered. Within the reform coalition, those wanting the broadest reforms did best. Muhammad Reza Khatami, the president's brother, led in Tehran with 68 percent of the vote, while Rafsanjani, who was on both the moderate reform and the hardline lists, will be lucky to eke out enough votes to gain a seat. Based on first-round results, which decided about 80 percent of the seats, nearly half the new parliament consists of those who want broad reforms; 20 percent to 25 percent, those who want modest reforms; and only 15 percent true hardliners. The rest are independents who care mostly about local issues rather than national politics. In the outgoing parliament, no more than 30 percent of the members were reformers of any kind and at least 40 percent were committed hardliners.

Changes in Foreign Policy Not First on the Agenda. At its first meeting in May, the new parliament will face many issues: first and foremost, easing the chafing social restrictions, but also fixing chronic economic problems and Iran's disorganized mess of a government (Iran is riddled with quasi-official revolutionary institutions that pay little attention to the central government; even some ministries are only loosely controlled by the president and the parliament). The reformers are badly divided on many of these issues, most especially on economic matters. The

reform umbrella organization the Second of Khordad coalition, named for the date of Khatami's presidential victory according to the Persian calendar, has eighteen member groups, some of which detest each other. Meanwhile, the hardliners still control many levers of power in Iran's checks-and-balances system of government. Most important, supreme religious leader 'Ali Khamene'i is a strong supporter of the hard-line cause. He has the power to overturn any law, and he alone appoints the six Islamic jurists in the Council of Guardians, which must approve every law (the Council also has six legal experts, who along with the six Islamic jurists pass judgment on the constitutionality of every law). Moreover, hard-line vigilantes still exist; in the past they have been used effectively to intimidate or kill pro-reformers.

In other words, the reformers have a full agenda, with many difficult tasks. In this environment, it seems unlikely that they will make foreign policy their priority. It is not the issue their voters care most about, it is not the issue on which their coalition is united, and it is not an issue the president and parliament can do much about (Khamene'i is commander in chief and has set the lines of foreign policy). On the other hand, it is an issue about which the reformers' hard-line opponents care intensely. So do not expect much change soon.

Whether change comes later on depends on whether the reformers continue to advance. It is quite possible that over the next few years the hardliners will retreat quietly into the night with the fortunes they have stolen through corruption. After all, the hardliners know they have lost the support of the great majority of the clerics (including nearly all the most respected senior ayatollahs), who think religion is suffering from its close association with the unpopular government. And if the reformers consolidate control over the government--including the law enforcement forces--they will disarm the vigilantes. At that point, the hardliners would have great difficulty cracking down even if they wanted to: the elite units that cracked student heads in last summer's riots could face hostility from the great majority of the rank and file in the army and the Revolutionary Guard who support reform.

If the reformers do gain full control, then at some point they will turn to issues of lower priority for them, like foreign policy. At that point--probably several years off--there is good reason to be optimistic that Iran will dramatically scale back its support for terrorist violence--arms, money, and training for Hizballah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad--that undermines the Middle East peace process. Only radical anti-Western Islamists care about violently undermining the peace process; although many of the reformers oppose the peace process and want no relations with Israel, ever, they are not prepared to use violence if that means European disapproval, U.S. sanctions, and potential Israeli retaliation.

Furthermore, talking to the U.S. government is not an issue for the reformers, so the state-to-state relations that Washington has long wanted could resume. Whereas the United States and Iran could have normal relations, they are less likely to have good relations until a way can be found around a big stumbling block: weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the missiles to deliver them. The reformers are proud nationalists who want a strong Iran. They will not readily agree to give up WMD.

The nationalism of the reformers should not be underestimated. Election leaflets from the most radical reformers bore the picture of Mohammed Mossadeq, whose name is often chanted by student demonstrators. Mossadeq, the Iranian prime minister who nationalized the oil industry in 1951, was not a Soviet stooge as the United States feared when the CIA organized his overthrow in 1953, but he was a proud and prickly nationalist. Even if Khamene'i and other hardliners are sidetracked, dealing with a reformist-run Iranian government will at best be like dealing with former French president Charles de Gaulle on his most anti-American days.

The Great Risk: An Overeager United States. Although the reformers are no great allies of the United States, their victory is in U.S. interests, if for no other reason than that the hardliners have defined themselves by bitter opposition to the United States. It behooves the United States to do what it can to help the reformers, and the most important step Washington can take is to stay away from a death hug. The reformers' cause could be seriously hurt if

the hardliners perceived them as acting at America's behest; that could provoke a hardline crackdown. To date, the reform cause has been accepted by the hardliners for what it is--namely, a genuine Iranian movement rather than one sponsored from abroad. It is in Washington's interest that the hardliners continue to hold that view.

Sanctions on Iran have been effective at depriving the Iranian government of the resources it would otherwise channel into military modernization, including the missile and nuclear programs. The sanctions are a powerful way to point out to Iranians how much the United States cares about this issue as well as about Iran's undermining of the peace process. It would be inappropriate to change the sanctions much until such time as Iran moves on these issues.

At the same time, the United States needs to reach out to the broad majority of Iranians to show that U.S. hostility is to the hardliners rather than to Iran. The best way to achieve that is through the kind of statements that President Bill Clinton has made so effectively in the last year. Although little noticed in the United States, Clinton has referred to the respect he has for Iran as a great civilization and to the bad treatment Iran has at times received in the past; these comments had an enormous effect in Iran. More statements of the same sort would be well received and an appropriate signal.

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