

Iran's Majlis Elections: Prospects and Implications

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Brief Analysis

On February 18, Iran will hold the first round of voting for a new Majlis (parliament). But the complex nature of Iranian parties with their different camps and factions, each with different tendencies, complicates any predictions about the election's outcome. It is by no means clear that the same trends influential in Tehran and some other large cities that receive much attention will matter as much in the rest of Iran where most Iranians live. It is not known, for instance, how important the issue of liberty--upon which the reformers have centered their campaign--is to Iranians outside the major cities.

It may take some days to determine how many candidates were elected in the first round, and there will be a second round of elections for those seats in which no candidate receives a plurality of at least 25 percent of the vote. Even after the second round of elections, many of those elected may be political unknowns whose views on the important issues will only become apparent over time. Furthermore, Iranian politics are characterized by constantly shifting loyalties, so someone's stance today may not be their stance tomorrow.

The reform movement and the conservatives each enter the elections with strengths and weaknesses. The reform movement begins with the advantage that expectations from the Islamic Revolution have been unfulfilled, meaning that many people now support pragmatic reform as the way to achieve the goals of the 1979 revolution. Furthermore, reformists have managed to focus attention on the issue of freedom, which is extremely important to their supporters. On the other hand, the reformers are fielding too many candidates, and therefore the pro-reform votes could be distributed so widely that no candidate reaches the 25 percent threshold, whereas the conservatives are better organized and may be able to concentrate their votes. At the same time, many conservative candidates are re-inventing themselves as pro-reform, which may only be a ploy to gain a seat in parliament.

Importance of the Elections

The election campaign has seen an impressive measure of public debate and controversy, far beyond what is seen in most Middle Eastern countries. Intellectuals, students, and segments of the press are debating the most fundamental issues of Iranian society. It was inconceivable a few years ago, for example, to engage in arguments about the concept of velayat-e faqih (rule of the supreme religious leader) or relations with the United States, whereas today, this happens regularly. Last year there was even a conference at Tehran University with the title, "Relations with the United States: A Taboo or a National Interest?"

These elections will not determine the fate of the revolutionary system, but they will illustrate to what degree the reform camp has gained momentum, and are another step in a larger process determining Khatami's power. The basic issues facing Iran will remain, including the need to find equilibrium between religion and state, Islam and democracy. In this regard, the Iranian government seems to be revealing a growing pragmatism; in clashes between ideology and state interest, the latter has been winning. Another major question is how to meet the growing needs of Iran's population. The fact that the economy is not a major issue in the election campaign should be of concern to

the reform movement. Young Iranians are looking for practical solutions to pressing problems such as housing, educational and health services, employment, inflation, and freedom. The sooner Khatami picks up this issue, the sooner Iranians will realize that it is the hardliners who have held back the economy.

During this election campaign, occasional references have been made to possible dialogue with the West, and neither the United States nor Israel is referred to as an impediment to Iran's progress. There are also frequent calls for Iranians to determine the future course of the Islamic Revolution, a phrase which implies that anti-Western slogans of the 1979 revolution have not been able to cure Iran's problems.

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In the 1996 parliamentary elections, many candidates were disqualified by the Council of Guardians. This year, to increase the chances that pro-reformists would clear the vetting process, thousands applied to run. In a clever move, the Council cleared nearly all--though not the most famous--applicants. As a result, approximately 6,000 candidates are running for the 290 seats in parliament. In Tehran, there are over 500 candidates for 30 seats. But in many districts, there are only a dozen or fewer candidates for one seat. In these districts, the large number of candidates claiming to be pro-reform could divide the reform vote, while there may be only one hardliner running; it is possible that the hardliner may get a plurality of the vote in such a district. To maximize the prospects for such hardline candidates, the outgoing parliament changed the election law so that the candidate with the plurality wins if he has 25 percent of the vote (compared to 50 percent previously); only in those districts in which no candidate gets 25 percent will there be a second round.

Firewalls

A reform victory in the election is no guarantee that reform policies will win. There are many centers of power in Iran that constitute significant firewalls to change. One is the Council of Guardians, appointed by the Supreme Leader. After the last parliament election in 1996, the Council of Guardians switched the victor from a reformist to a conservative candidate in three districts, and in twenty-three other districts it annulled the election; that means the Council of Guardians stopped reformers in post-election moves that affected 26 out of 270 seats. Considering the student protests of 1999, manipulations in these elections would lead to disillusionment among the youth and could trigger student protests larger than those in 1999, so it seems unlikely that hardliners will use the same techniques they employed in 1996. But they could use other techniques to prevent reformers from implementing their program even if the reformers take the Majlis--particularly given the fact that the parliament's power is distinctly limited. Several times in the history of the Islamic Republic the Majlis was overwhelmingly in support of one set of policies but was overruled by the Council of Guardians, which has to approve every law passed by parliament.

Another firewall to change in Iran is the groups who oppose change irrespective of the democratic process and who might be willing to provoke a crisis. One such group is the Ansar-e Hezbollah. Their manifesto calls for fighting against corruption, countering the Western cultural assault, fighting against capitalism, crushing liberalism and secular thought, and crushing those who support dealings with the West. This group enjoys support from important revolutionary institutions, and it has carried out frequent attacks on reformers.

In short, these parliamentary elections may well continue the process of change in Iran, but the hardliners have many instruments to slow or block progress.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Heiko Stoiber.



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