

A Background to Iran's Forthcoming Majlis Elections

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Brief Analysis

Speaking about Iran at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, on January 30, U.S. secretary of state Madeleine Albright commented, "There is an attempt to probe a possibility of dialogue and we are waiting to see what happens in the Majlis [Parliament] election next month." What are the procedures for this election and what happened in the last such election?

Election Procedure in Iran. Parliamentary elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran are governed by the basic law first promulgated by the Revolutionary Council on February 6, 1980. The law is comprised of two general parts: (1) the conditions and qualifications required for candidacy, and (2) the procedure for screening candidates. An eligible candidate must be a literate Iranian citizen, at least twenty-five years of age, must have a record clean of "moral corruption," and must under article 28 show "belief in and practical commitment to Islam and the Islamic Republic system." In 1991, the precondition of absolute loyalty to the Supreme Leader and the principle of vilayat al-faqih [Guardianship of the Jurist] was added as a criterion for candidacy approval.

The screening process is now administered in three stages. First, the Elections Executive Committee (set up by the interior ministry) screens candidates in each of the voting constituencies. According to portions of the 1980 regulations that remain unchanged, the review process includes an inquiry into an aspirant's military service and employment background, and requires proof of loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Witnesses may also be required to "attest to the Islamic faith of the candidate, his revolutionary activities, and participation in all the referendums conducted by the Islamic Republic." The second stage involves the Elections Supervisory Committee, which was subordinate to the revolutionary council for the first elections, but since then has been under the twelve-member Council of Guardians. It proceeds in much the same fashion as the Elections Executive Committee.

The third stage consists of a review by the Council of Guardians, now headed by Ahmad Jannati, which has the final say on candidate approval or rejection. The Council can reject--and has rejected--candidates accepted by one or both of the committees, or it can accept candidates that either or both have rejected. According to the law, appeals to rejection must be submitted within four days and must contain a convincing challenge in order to warrant a reevaluation.

Official campaigning may only begin after the Council has issued a final list of candidates; this was nine days before both the 1996 and 1992 elections. An election will then proceed in two rounds. In the races in which no candidate attains the necessary number of votes, the remaining winners face off in a second-round run-off. Zoroastrians, Jews, and both southern and northern Armenian Christians each elect one representative to the Majlis. Assyrian and Chaldean Christians elect a joint representative.

In recent weeks, there have been extensive disputes about election procedures, more so than in the year before either of the last two elections. In January, the Majlis held stormy debates about whether to have single-stage elections. Eliminating the second round would lower the threshold needed for victory, as many candidates in a one-round election might split the reformist vote, thereby benefiting the hard-liners who field fewer candidates and therefore might enjoy larger voting percentages. At one point on January 3, thirty reformist Majlis members ended a

debate by storming out of the chamber in protest. But the conservative-dominated parliament nevertheless lowered to 25 percent the threshold needed for a candidate to achieve an absolute win and avoid a second-round run-off (candidates were previously required to attain an outright majority).

In another clash between conservatives and reformers, the voting age in Iran was returned to sixteen after having been lowered in 1996 to fifteen. Reformers viewed this latter move as an attempt to shrink the influence of a segment of their mostly younger supporters on the election's outcome. Also, in an effort increase the Council's control of the election, the Majlis adopted a law requiring serial-numbered ballots and two Council overseers at each of Iran's 36,000 voting stations. The Council, however, rejected the law, which would have been difficult to implement in such a short time period. The Council still retains the full authority over election monitoring.

The 1996 Majlis Elections. The first-round election for the fifth Majlis, which had 270 seats, was held on March 8, 1996. 'Ali Nateq-Nuri's conservative Society of Combatant Clergy endorsed 170 candidates while the Civil Servants for Construction, sympathetic to then-President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, endorsed 16 candidates for the 30 seats in Tehran. While accounts differ as to the exact number, the Council of Guardians disqualified without explanation approximately 30 percent of the 5,359 candidates who wished to run. Nevertheless, on election day, 60 percent of Iran's thirty-five million eligible voters went to the polls (roughly the same voter turnout as the fourth Majlis elections in 1992). In the first round, only 139 candidates received the majority needed to win a seat, and more than 50 percent of incumbents lost in this round. In Tehran, where 400 candidates competed for 30 seats, Nateq-Nuri and Faezeh Rafsanjani (President Rafsanjani's daughter) received the most votes.

The run-off took place on April 19, deciding another 117 seats. The remaining 14 seats were declared void by the Council of Guardians due to electoral complications, and elections for most of these seats occurred the following fall. Only 50 clerics were elected to the fifth Majlis, consistent with the steady decline of clerical representation in the body, which included 137 clerics in the first Majlis and about half that by the fourth. First-time members represented 61 percent of the new Majlis, which also consisted of 10 women.

Both conservatives and reformers claimed a 70 percent majority after the first round in the 1996 Majlis elections as both sides claimed the independents as supporters. In June, however, the hard-line Nateq-Nuri defeated Abdullah Nuri 132-105 for temporary speakership, a victory confirmed three days later by a 146-92 vote. Ten of the twelve leadership positions went to deputies from Tehran, even though the Tehran province elected just 30 of the 270 Majlis deputies. Clerics took half of the twelve leadership positions (Speaker, two Deputy Speakers, three commissioners, six secretaries), while four non-clerical hard-liners also won positions.

Campaigning for the Sixth Majlis. The current campaign has been a roller-coaster ride for many candidates, and one that will not end until voters go to the polls on February 18. All candidates who wished to register for the elections had to do so in person between December 11, 1999, and December 16, 1999. About 6,860 candidates registered for the 290 Majlis seats (up from 270 in previous elections), including 504 women--60 percent more than in 1996--and 35 non-Muslims. More than 1,273 would-be candidates registered in Tehran. On December 26, the executive committee rejected 401 candidates on the grounds that they were not sufficiently committed to Iran's ruling philosophy. The Elections Supervisory Committee reinstated 80 of these on the grounds that the initial vetting was too harsh. In the second stage of the vetting process, the Elections Supervisory Committee rejected an additional 140 candidates on the basis of inadequate academic qualifications or because they had not resigned from government posts prior to registering. On January 14, the Interior Ministry announced that a total of 758 candidates had been rejected in the first two stages. But the Council of Guardians who has final say in the screening process announced on January 29 that they had reinstated 192 candidates on appeal, rejecting 99 further candidates. All told, approximately 10 percent of those seeking to run have been rejected, among them the most prominent reformists as well as every candidate on the list of Iran's only tolerated opposition party, Ibrahim Yazdi's Iran Freedom Movement

(IFM). Some sources claim that between 30 and 50 deputies in the current Majlis have also been barred, although the number is disputed by some hard-line papers which claim that less than 10 have actually been barred. The Council of Guardians is not required to legally to publish the final candidate list until February 9, when authorized campaigning can begin.

Campaigning must end three days prior to the February 18 first-round elections. Political factions like the Militant Clerics Association and the Islamic Iran Participation Front are already beginning to publish preliminary lists of candidates, and reports out of Iran indicate that the major factions have already begun "postering blitzes." No date has yet been set for the second round, so the election outcome will not be known for some time to come--especially if any parties dispute the results or disqualify candidates after the fact, as happened in the 1998 local elections.

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