

# Iran's Domestic Infighting Worsens

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## Brief Analysis

**T**omorrow's municipal elections, the first ever in Iran, have been the occasion for the latest round in the infighting between Iranian hardliners and moderates. That infighting has gotten progressively worse since President Muhammad Khatami took office in August 1997, and it has stymied progress on pressing economic problems and on relations with the United States.

Municipal Elections. Associated with his major theme of the rule of law, Khatami insisted on holding municipal elections, which are called for in the 1980 constitution but have never been held. Khatami went to extremes in this exercise in local democracy, creating 200,000 council positions, or one for every 300 Iranians (by comparison, counties, townships, and municipalities in the United States have 320,000 elected officials, or one for every 900 residents). In rural areas and villages, there is to be one council member for every 60 Iranians. Not surprisingly, most of these posts have little competition. The real battle is in the major cities -- especially Tehran, where 4,000 candidates are running.

As usual in Iran, the issue is who will be allowed on the ballot, as experience indicates that the most radical reformers will win in any open election. The hardliners' strategy is to keep reformers off the ballot, which by discouraging most people (especially the young) from voting allows hardline candidates to do relatively well. The maneuvering over the municipal elections has been particularly sharp. After a dispute between Khatami and the Majlis (parliament), it was decided to split responsibility for the elections between the Khatami-controlled interior ministry and the Majlis-appointed Central Supervisory Board (dominated by hardliners).

The two camps spent most of January fighting. After the supervisory board disqualified 432 candidates in Tehran -- including Khatami's top men -- a five-member arbitration committee was created with Vice President Hassan Habibi, who was acceptable to both sides, as its head. It effectively annulled the Supervisory Board's disqualification of pro-Khatami candidates. Last week, the Supervisory Board hit again, disqualifying another 11 Khatami men, including Vice President 'Abdollah Nuri, whose photo was on placards plastered all over Tehran for the reformist "Great Coalition" list. The arbitration committee rejected the board's action, but yesterday the board's head, 'Ali Movahedi-Savoji, stuck to his guns, threatening that the board would exercise its authority to annul the elections entirely if the interior ministry counted the votes for the 11.

As can be expected with local politics, the election is not a straightforward contest of reformers versus hardliners.

Even in Tehran, there are four main lists, with some candidates included on more than one list: the reformist pro-Khatami Great Coalition list, the technocratic pro-Rafsanjani Servants of Construction list, the conservative Clerics-Moatalefeh list (said to be the best organized), and the hardline Ithargaran list. In other cities, the contests tend to be more personality-driven and less affected by national politics.

Once the local councils take office, there is sure to be a continuing battle over their powers -- a point on which the constitution is vague. Although Khatami has said the councils will elect mayors, Article 103 makes clear the central government appoints "city governors," giving the Khatami-controlled Interior Ministry leverage against hardline councils. But Article 105 says the councils "must not contradict the criteria of Islam," giving an opening to hardline-run clerical institutions like the Council of Guardians to crack down on reformist councils.

Meanwhile, Repression of Intellectuals Continues. Yesterday, the Majlis confirmed a new information (meaning, intelligence) minister, 'Ali Yunesi. Western commentators had regarded his predecessor, Qorban 'Ali Dori Najafabadi, as the most hopeful element in Khatami's 1997 cabinet: Dori Najafabadi had been strongly backed by the technocratic group (the Servants of Construction) when he won his parliament seat in 1996, he had no past ties to the intelligence apparatus, and he was replacing the thug who had ordered the killings of Kurdish dissidents in the Mykonos Restaurant in Berlin, which a German court had said was the responsibility of the highest officials of the Islamic Republic.

Yet, Dori Najafabadi was unable to control the ministry, whose operatives brought their terror campaigns to the streets of Tehran. Their confidence was so great that they assassinated a leading liberal, Dariush Farouhar, in his home even though they knew that the Khatami-controlled Interior Ministry had a camera trained on Farouhar's door. Indeed, there are credible reports that Khatami encountered strong resistance in forcing the acknowledgment of the Intelligence Ministry's role in the murder and the arrest of the agents directly responsible. Certainly the affair did little to assuage the worries of intellectuals and liberals, who have been terrorized by a rash of murders.

The Farouhar assassination led to Dori Najafabadi's resignation. Some of the same Western commentators who so greeted Dori Najafabadi's 1997 appointment as a victory for moderation were quick to call his resignation another victory for moderation. In fact, the maneuverings that led to his resignation are not at all clear. What is certain is that the new intelligence minister is a sinister figure. He was trained in terrorism in the 1970s by Palestinians at camps in Lebanon and was one of the founders of the Islamic Republic's intelligence apparatus, under the guidance of its long-time eminence grise, Muhammad Muhammadi Reyshahri.

And the Economy Continues its Slide. Neither hardliners nor moderates have a clear plan for resolving Iran's desperate economic situation, which continues to worsen owing to the slide in oil exports from \$19 billion in 1996-1997 to \$9 billion in 1998-1999. Khatami proposed raising Iran's highly subsidized energy prices, which are encouraging so much consumption that his government estimates Iran will become an energy importer within twelve years. After the Majlis objected, gasoline prices were raised somewhat (from 200 rials per liter to 350 rials per liter), but only enough to offset the decline in the value of the rial over the last year (down from 4,700 rials per dollar a year ago to 7,500 now); at the new price, gasoline is a mere 19 cents a gallon. The budget for the new fiscal year starting March 21 will have a massive deficit be financed by printing more money, thus exacerbating inflation.

Poor Prospects for Changed Relations with the United States. One issue that has received little attention in recent months is any effort to improve relations with the United States. Although many Iranian officials acknowledge publicly that poor political relations with the United States are impeding the oil investments essential to Iran's economic growth, there is little interest in any change. On January 13 at the Asia Society, former Secretary of State Cyrus Vance expressed the hope for "diplomatic relations, not necessarily friendly relations," but it seems implausible that Iran will be interested soon: the hardliners are too opposed and the reformers are unwilling or unable to challenge them on this issue. Even on people-to-people relations, the record is mixed: there has been little

if any increase in scholarly and journalistic exchanges, though there are advanced negotiations about an Iran-U.S. soccer game at Washington's RFK Stadium in June. In this atmosphere, it is not surprising that Washington's 1998 enthusiasm about the potential for better relations with Iran has faded.

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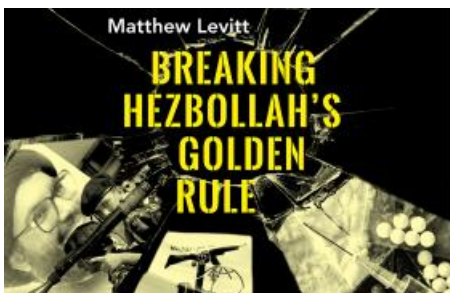
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