

ELECTIONS IN IRAN: A NEW MAJLIS AND A MANDATE FOR REFORM

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A historian once observed that revolutions devour their own children. Last February in Iran, the children of the Islamic Revolution did just the reverse. After a campaign marked by bitter factional rivalries and unprecedented public liberties, Iranians went to the polls on February 18 to elect a new parliament. They handed an overwhelming victory to the advocates of reform and a humbling setback to the stalwarts of the revolution.

However, rather than ending it, this seemingly decisive outcome only intensified Iran's protracted power struggle. For while the parliamentary elections powerfully underscored the popular mandate for expanded political participation and looser social restrictions, their outcome also dramatically raised the stakes in the competition to chart the future course of the Islamic Republic. And over three ensuing months, the system appeared poised to devour itself.

Yet, despite the fierce contention revived by the February polling, the basic outlines of the electoral verdict stood intact. A second round of balloting returned another convincing win for the reformist coalition, and the results of the Tehran vote received a long-delayed confirmation in a

bold, last-minute intervention by the supreme leader. As the parliamentary session got underway in late May, one thing is certain: more than two decades after the revolution that shook the world and transformed Iran into a turbulent theocracy, the country is once again undergoing profound change. This time, a new generation of Iranians is demanding that its voice be heard, and it is generating a steady, sweeping transformation in the politics of the Islamic Republic.

CAMPAIGNING AND FIRST-ROUND BALLOTS

Politics in the Islamic Republic remains almost entirely the province of the clerical authorities who assumed control of the state after the ouster of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi in 1979. However, since the election in 1997 of a moderate president, Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, the factionalism that has long characterized politics in the Islamic Republic has assumed an increasingly popular dimension. Khatami's tenure has ushered in tentative political reforms, fitful cultural liberalization and a less antagonistic approach in the international arena. In turn, these developments have exacerbated the struggle for power, provoking a bitter and often violent reaction

from hard-line factions that seek to reassert revolutionary orthodoxy.

With the organs of power in the hands of these hard-line conservatives and the potent force of public opinion solidly behind the reformers, Iranian politics in the Khatami era became mired in stalemate and intermittent unrest. At the same time, Iran's small but significant policy changes and the popular support demonstrated again in municipal elections in 1999 drew the world's focus to the February 2000 parliamentary elections as a critical gauge of the prospects for reform. Although all legislation must pass the scrutiny of the conservative Council of Guardians before entering into law, the Majlis has nonetheless served as an enterprising forum for political competition under the Islamic system and represents a critical element of clerical rule.

The anticipation launched intense politicking long before the kick-off of the brief (one week) official campaign period, as the factions and forces centered at either end of the political spectrum in Iran jostled for position and coalesced into two main camps. Each of these in turn represented a diverse and often divided assortment of groups and political personalities, which made for a multiplicity of candidate lists and continuing contention within the umbrella coalitions. For example, the months leading up to the election witnessed a particularly vicious dispute between the moderate supporters of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and those who viewed him as an obstacle to genuine and substantial reform.

Given the perpetuation of internecine strife among the reformers, the power of the Council of Guardians to vet candidates based on their political proclivities, and the

outgoing parliament's last-minute tinkering with the electoral guidelines, most observers of Iranian politics anticipated a relatively modest result. Moreover, one of the leading lights of the reformist coalition, former Interior Minister Hojjatoleslam Abdollah Nouri, had been jailed on religious dissent charges in November 1999, depriving the movement of one of its most charismatic standard-bearers. As a result, in numerous conversations in Tehran in late January, Iranians expressed expectations that were hopeful, but only hesitantly so.

The outcome, however, bore out the careful planning of the reformist coalition (the 2nd of Khordad Front) and, in particular, its leading party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front (IIPF or Mosharekat). By recruiting thousands to register as potential candidates, they effectively precluded wholesale vetting by the Council of Guardians, which instead exhibited notable restraint, rejecting only about 11 percent of the applicants, as compared to approximately one-third in 1996. In addition, the reformist coalition fashioned a cutting-edge mode of campaigning, complete with pep rallies and press briefings, as well as an appeal to the issues that resonate with the Iranian public (including the resumption of relations with the United States) rather than a restatement of stale revolutionary orthodoxy.

The results also demonstrated just as clearly the voters' utter disaffection with the conservatives, whose campaign in style and in substance was not geared to appeal to Iran's disproportionately young population. Many interpreted their pre-election maneuvers, such as lowering the threshold of the popular vote required for first-round victory, as an attempt to prevail by splitting the reformist vote. However, if this was

the intention, it backfired spectacularly, as most of those elected on the margin hailed from the reformist camp.

In fact, the change in the election regulations, which awarded victory to those candidates who reached 25 percent of the vote (rather than the one-third margin previously required), produced a much more definitive outcome in the first round than in Iran's previous elections. More than two-thirds of the seats were filled on February 18, as opposed to approximately half in the first round of the 1996 elections.

This appeared to have left fewer possibilities for the sort of conservative vote tampering that occurred between the two rounds in previous campaigns. However, events were to prove otherwise.

The margin of the reformist victory in this first round was much greater than the modest anticipation of many of the coalition's supporters; approximately 160 seats went to the 2nd of Khordad Front, while the conservative coalition netted only 40 seats in this first round. Independent and unaffiliated candidates won another 21 places, while 65 constituencies were sent to run-off balloting because no candidate managed to secure the minimum vote.

These results are even more stunning on an individual basis. Nearly all the senior leaders of the outgoing parliament – staunch conservatives – were turned out of their seats, including deputy speaker Hassan Rowhani, former intelligence minister Ali Fallahian and influential lawmakers Mohammad Reza Bahonar and Mohammad Javad Larijani. Others, like

outgoing Speaker Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, simply chose not to run. The final tally included only a handful of clerics.

On the other side of the fence, the reformist victors include some well-known faces, as well as many unknowns. The brothers of President Khatami and of the jailed Abdollah Nouri – both medical doctors and relative political neophytes – figured among the top vote-getters in Tehran, as much in solidarity with the plights of their respective siblings as in support of both candidates' frank advocacy

of greater political and social freedom. The rest of the winning slate in Tehran reads like a register of the younger generation of left-wing theoreticians and activists, many of whom have proven instrumental allies of Khatami.

Ironically, the most stinging setback was delivered in the form of an apparent victory; the candidacy of former president Hashemi Rafsanjani morphed from what was once expected to be a runaway win and a certain shot at the Majlis speakership into a brusque comeuppance from a population weary of politics, and politicians, as usual. After the lengthy and disputed recount of the Tehran ballots, Rafsanjani placed twentieth out of the 28 individuals who secured seats (two other seats were sent to a run-off), a convenient advancement from his initial standing at the bottom of that list. While the former president won the seat, he lost the larger battle to re-establish himself as the chief parliamentary power broker, and resigned his seat under mounting public pressure days before the first session of the new Majlis.

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These results were greeted with euphoria on the streets of Tehran and with much talk of a parliamentary agenda that would tackle many of the enduring issues of popular discontent: cultural restrictions such as the press law and satellite ban, the institutional impediments to democracy in the electoral structures, and economic insecurity. Abdollah Nouri was given a few days leave from prison, and Western governments and investors poised themselves to further re-integrate the Islamic Republic into the world community.

Even among the reformers, however, the extent of the electoral margin also triggered some uneasiness over the prospects for broad consensus building among the still predominantly conservative political élite. Moreover, the bitter rupture between the IIPF and Rafsanjani threatened to push moderates and conservatives into making common cause in order to preserve their own positions.

THE BACKLASH AND THE SECOND ROUND

Even though many feared a backlash, few expected the series of events that shook Tehran over the ensuing three months. First, just three weeks after the election, came a brazen assassination bid that gravely wounded Tehran city councilor Saeed Hajjarian, a reformist editor cum political strategist and a key ally of President Khatami. Hajjarian survived, but his shooting sapped some of the exhilaration from the reformist victory and foreshadowed an even more serious reassertion of the hard-liners.

The real crackdown came in mid-April as speculation grew over the delay by the Council of Guardians in scheduling the second round of balloting, and rumors of

coup-plotting among the military leadership splashed across the front pages of Tehran's newspapers. In response, the conservative courts raised the temperature through a multi-front campaign that involved jailing writers and editors, banning 16 reformist newspapers and chipping away at the margin of the parliamentary victory through annulments. Particularly worrisome were reports from the Council of Guardians of serious irregularities in the Tehran balloting, which constitutes the most politicized competition and traditionally provides the Majlis speaker and other leaders.

The jihad against journalists extended across the board; even those newspapers managed by the president's brother, himself a leading MP-elect, and by the injured Hajjarian were officially shuttered. The heady confidence sparked by February's election was displaced by widespread foreboding, and the reports that the muzzling of the press represented a preliminary stage in a wider bid for control by hard-line Revolutionary Guards convinced many that reform in Iran was utterly derailed.

The loss of the newspapers, which serve as proxies for political parties in the Islamic Republic, was a particular blow to the reformers, especially coming just as the date for the second round of the Majlis elections was announced. The flow of information has been a powerful weapon for change; the scrappy dailies have pried open some of the darkest domestic scandals, particularly the abuses and assassinations orchestrated by the intelligence ministry.

And yet, despite all these impediments and provocations, the second round of balloting took place on May 5 in relative calm, in a testament to the proclivity of the

entire spectrum of Iranian politicians to close ranks at tense moments. In the few days available for campaigning, President Khatami issued a pointed call for his supporters to resist the temptation to take their frustration to the streets. In return, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei balanced his disparagement of the press with an explicit defense of the president and the reform process.

The results of the second round only deepened the reformers' electoral triumph, bringing in another 46 seats to the conservatives' gain of 15. This appeared to seal a nearly two-thirds majority, which would enable the reformers to undertake an aggressive legislative agenda. However, the outcome did not entirely temper remnant uncertainties about an additional backlash or the possible dismissal of the Majlis altogether, particularly given the profound ambiguities over the status of the Tehran vote.

The standoff over the Tehran results continued until literally the final moments. Tensions escalated amidst fears that these returns, which included all the reformist leadership, might be dismissed altogether. Only a week before the opening session of the parliament, Ayatollah Khamenei once again took a decisively conciliatory stand, decreeing a halt to the continuing recount and paving the way for the immediate endorsement of nearly all of Tehran's 30 seats. This confirmation, announced May 20, reportedly came over the objections of the Council of Guardians.

In doing so, Khamenei not only facilitated the convening of the parliament on schedule, but he defused, for the moment at least, a predicament that was gradually escalating toward an existential crisis for the Islamic Republic. His decision on this

issue, and on others, demonstrates a keen awareness of the inherent limitations to the conservative crackdown; the unrest that erupted so vividly in central Tehran during July 1999 appears to have convinced Khamenei of the value of stability, even at the price of a parliament overwhelmingly committed to systemic change.

THE SIXTH MAJLIS AND ITS AGENDA

The conclusion of the agonizing electoral process has not by any means capped the fundamental power struggle among the political élite of the Islamic Republic. In fact, the task of governing is likely to prove more tortuous and treacherous than ever. Even the most liberal, activist legislature will face severe resistance from the Council of Guardians and other oversight bodies that have stymied change thus far. In addition, it will be burdened with the expectations of an impatient public and the suspicions of a cornered conservative power structure.

Still, despite limitations on its ultimate authority, Iran's Majlis wields enormous political, social and economic power. From its inception, the parliament assumed a prominent role in the factional power struggle, and, over time, disputes increasingly played out via sophisticated dueling over government policies. The most significant of its discrete powers include approval (and impeachment, as in the case of Abdollah Nouri) of cabinet ministers, ratification of international agreements, and responsibility for economic policy-making through the annual government budget and the long-term planning process.

Through its legislative program, the parliament has molded the political framework through its changes to the election

laws and provincial structures, and it began the process of introducing greater transparency into the Islamic system by undertaking investigations of fraud and corruption. Through its control of the nation's purse strings, the parliament has shaped the economic climate on such key issues as foreign investment liberalization, exchange rate unification and subsidies. In addition, the parliament has dramatically affected the social life of the nation through its cultural policies, such as the 1994 satellite ban and 1998 attempts to segregate health-care facilities.

But, while the parliament is a powerful institution, the agenda of its new reformist majority remains somewhat inchoate and their leadership relatively inexperienced. Welfare, security, freedom: this was the succinct slogan

of Iran's moderate party, the Servants of the Reconstruction, and it encapsulates the multi-front challenge that the sixth Majlis will face. Only 27 percent of

the new MPs served in the previous Majlis, and it is widely understood that many of the leaders of the IIPF and the 2nd of Khordad Front are considered too provocative to serve as speaker, for reasons of both politics and social position (i.e., they are not members of the clergy). Compromise candidates will likely come from among the elder statesmen of the Islamic system, such as long-time leftist Ayatollah Mehdi Karroubi.

Political and cultural issues will emerge

at the top of the new parliament's priorities, particularly reforms to the legal framework for ensuring freedom of expression in order to return Iran's vibrant independent press to the newsstands. Legislation to facilitate reform of the country's labyrinthine judicial system, a stronghold of the right wing, is also likely to win support. Feel-good measures, such as the repeal of the ban on satellite dishes, will occupy early attention as a means of rewarding the fortitude of the electorate, although the probability of the Council of Guardians approving such bills remains uncertain.

Economic reform is desperately needed in Iran, where at least 800,000 new young people come onto the job market each year in an economy that creates less than half that number of new jobs. How-

ever, the economy does not occupy the top spot on the agenda of any political faction because of both ideological differences and institutional sclerosis.

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system whose legitimacy centers on the promise of social justice, fundamental reforms must be predicated on political stability and broad consensus, which remain elusive. As long as the price of oil remains sufficiently high, the sixth Majlis will focus its economic program on the margins, pushing forward measures to lure more foreign investment, while leaving the structural questions unaddressed.

In foreign policy, too, the high expectations generated by the dramatic election

results require a dose of realism. Iran's parliament lacks any firm authority over these policies and institutions, which remain largely the province of hard-line revolutionaries under Khamenei. As for the ever-contentious issue of relations with the United States, even a reformist parliament is unlikely to bring the estrangement between the two countries to a quick or cathartic conclusion. At the same time, the impact of the election itself should not be discounted; the frank campaign rhetoric sanctioned a new climate for public debate on all these issues, and the outcome has empowered a distinctly less radical agenda and a new slate of parliamentarians keenly attuned to the demands of a war-weary public.

THE FUTURE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The real battleground will emerge as the new parliament tackles those issues that conflict squarely with the absolutist framework of clerical leadership, the backbone of the Islamic Republic. These include changes to the electoral laws, in order to mute the influence of the Council of Guardians, and increased parliamentary oversight of the institutions currently supervised only by the supreme leader: the mammoth economic foundations (*bonyads*), the security apparatus and the state broadcasting authorities. Each of these moves, which received prominent placement in the reformists' campaign rhetoric, would progressively encroach on the domain of Khamenei's divine authority as well as on the fiefdoms of his influential supporters.

As these issues materialize on the legislative agenda, the Islamic Republic will approach a fundamental crossroads, where

the tension between the divine mandate of religious authority and the popular pressure for increased democratization can no longer be finessed. A choice looms for Iran, and the alternatives are stark: genuinely representative government or full-scale repression. To many Iranians, there is only a single option. As the outspoken (and now imprisoned) journalist Akbar Ganji has said, no one has created these reforms – and thus no one can stop them.

Still, those fearful of losing their power can certainly try. It is unlikely that the conservatives, though, having been rejected by the electorate in three national ballots since 1997, will back away quietly, nor will their agenda fade quickly. Many key conservatives retain positions in the power structure and, through their control of the armed forces, the state media and the unregulated *bonyads*, will wield ample influence over decision making. It would also be a mistake to discount Khamenei himself, despite his somewhat negligible personal charisma and dubious theological credentials. The supreme leader has proven quite a political survivor and has cultivated networks of clerics and institutions that are beholden to his financial and political support. He is likely to remain an active force in shaping the political fortunes of Iran for some time to come.

For the foreseeable future, then, the Islamic Republic will continue to be buffeted by the forces of divisiveness and unresolved questions of authority. Nonetheless, the February elections provide powerful evidence that the system is evolving in an irreversibly democratic fashion. In this balloting, modern political parties, for the first time, played a significant and substantive role in mobilizing issues and voters. The outcome effectively passed the mantle

of leadership to a savvy new generation of political entrepreneurs.

These changes reflect the relative youth of Iran's population; two-thirds of its citizenry is too young to remember the revolution itself, and through their votes, they are rapidly and dramatically shifting the center of political gravity in the Islamic Republic. Politicians such as Rafsanjani, who offer cautious gradualism to solve the country's economic woes and political frustrations, have become suddenly obsolescent. Instead, young Iranians are demanding greater freedom for themselves

and greater accountability from their government.

In his first public address upon his return from exile in 1979, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the charismatic font of the revolution and the architect of the Islamic state, told the jubilant throngs assembled to greet him that "the destiny of each generation must be in its own hands." Twenty-one years later a new generation is reaching out, this time through the ballot box, and slowly but surely seizing its own fate.