



AFTER IRAN'S ELECTIONS

March 2016

A portrait of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, wearing a white turban and glasses, with a white beard. The background is dark with a grid pattern. A red vertical bar is on the left side of the image.

INTRODUCTION

On February 26, 2016, over 33 million Iranian voters (62 percent of the eligible electorate) participated in the tenth elections for the Iranian parliament (Majlis) and the Assembly of Experts. Ultimate power in Iran lies not with the Majlis or even the President, but with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, especially on issues concerning national security and foreign policy. Nevertheless, recent elections have aroused much interest, mainly as the first litmus test for President Rouhani since his election in summer 2013 and the nuclear deal signed between Iran and the West last year.

Out of 12,000 candidates who registered to participate, 6,200 candidates were approved by the Guardian Council. Almost all candidates identified with the reformist camp were disqualified. Thus, President Rouhani's centrist followers formed a coalition with the remaining reformist candidates supported by former President Mohammad Khatami and moderate conservatives led by Majlis Speaker Ali Larijani. Rouhani's hardliner opponents presented their own lists of candidates.

The elections for the Assembly of Experts, a body of 88 clerics and scholars tasked with overseeing and appointing the Supreme Leader, became the focus of special interest due to the high probability that the next Assembly (elected for eight years) may determine the next Supreme Leader, considering Khamenei's old age and poor health. 160 candidates were considered qualified to run for the Assembly of Experts.

The main struggle here was between the moderate conservative faction supported by President Rouhani and the head of Iran's Expediency Council, Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and the ultraconservative faction led by hardline clerics like Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, Mohammad Yazdi and Ahmad Jannati.

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INSIGHTS

1. Iran's politics are moving to the center.

While most analysts presented the elections as a political struggle between “reformists”/“moderates” and “conservatives”/“hardliners”, the actual race was between the government's supporters (both within the moderate and conservative factions) and its rivals among the conservative right. Furthermore, while moderate conservatives (e.g., prominent MP Ali Motahari) seem to have adopted a pro-reform agenda, centrist reformers have abandoned their previous calls for boycotting the elections as well as their demands for far-reaching political and civilian reforms.

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2. Turnout was relatively high.

The relatively high turnout does not necessarily indicate overall support for the regime. It can serve, however, as an indication for growing public readiness to accept the rules which the regime has set, as well as a preference for economic improvement and political stability over upheaval.

3. Pragmatists gained in the Majlis elections, but did not see total victory.

The election results mean Rouhani supporters will see a significant increase in seats (from less than 30 to more than 100). Final results for Tehran Province – considered the most significant due to its size and political centrality – showed a sweeping victory for moderate-backed candidates, who won all 30 seats. Conservative-backed candidates did better in other provinces, partly due to mass disqualification of reformists, which significantly limited their ability to nominate enough candidates to run for all the seats.

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4. Representation of women is on the rise.

While the number of women elected to the Majlis still depends on the final results following the second round in late April, 14 women have already ensured their seats. With a few more expected to win a place in the Majlis, the number of female representatives is likely to reach a record high since the 1979 Revolution.

5. Traditional conservatives still hold firm control in the Assembly of Experts.

Relative moderates saw two major achievements. Rafsanjani himself took first place in Tehran, while two leading hardline clerics (Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi and Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi) lost their seats. Conservatives' hold over the Assembly, however, is expected to continue.

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6. Social media had a large impact on the elections.

One of the most prominent characteristics of the parliamentary elections was the role played by social media, particularly the “Telegram” instant messaging application. Social networks not only proved their impact in disseminating information and raising public awareness, but also turned out to be highly effective in attracting voters' participation and laying the foundation for electoral campaigns. The use of social media mainly benefited moderate candidates suffering from limited exposure on traditional media, which is mostly controlled by the regime.

IMPLICATIONS

1. Rouhani will see a more favorable Parliament.

Although the moderate faction is not expected to constitute a firm majority in the Majlis, President Rouhani is likely to enjoy increased parliamentary support based on a coalition of moderate, centrist and independent MPs. With some of his hardliner rivals failing to win a seat, the President will see an easing of the vocal criticism and pressure he has encountered so far in his term. The new Majlis could offer Rouhani a better opportunity to promote his agenda, especially concerning economic issues.

2. Rouhani's political power will be boosted, but it may result in a backlash from the Supreme Leader.

These elections have demonstrated public support for the President and his policies. This support may enable him to promote his agenda vis-à-vis his political rivals, but could also raise concerns within the conservative establishment led by the Supreme Leader. While publicly backing Rouhani, especially during the nuclear talks, Khamenei has always made sure to curb the power of his presidents. Recent implicit criticism made by Khamenei over Rouhani's domestic and foreign policy might indicate that the Supreme Leader is determined to constrain him if need be.

3. No change is expected in foreign policy.

While hardline criticism against the President's foreign policy is likely to diminish, Iranian foreign policy and national security strategy lies with the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards. The Majlis has little influence on strategic policymaking in Iran and elections are therefore unlikely to bring substantial foreign policy change.

4. No change in civil reform is expected.

The increase in moderate representation could lead to efforts to promote limited civilian reforms, such as removing discriminatory legislation against women, expanding freedom of the press, reducing certain limitations on social media and so forth. Given (a) the fierce opposition of the religious conservative establishment to any initiative considered a threat to revolutionary ideals, (b) the government's priority of tackling economic issues first, and (c) the centrist orientation of most Majlis members, significant pro-reform initiatives are very unlikely.

5. Moderates on the next Assembly of Experts will have limited influence on the next succession struggle.

The results of the Assembly of Experts election may increase the political power of Rafsanjani and his supporters. Conservative domination over the council, however, is not expected to change. Thus, Rafsanjani's ability to influence a future succession struggle remains limited even if Khamenei passes away in the near future. In any event, a transition of power in Iran will probably be affected first and foremost by the political circumstances and internal political balance within the regime once the current leader finally dies.

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STRATEGIC TAKEAWAYS

1. Gains by moderates do not necessarily mean a failure for the regime.

While election results could be considered a victory for the moderates, they also indicate the regime's ability to gain back at least some of the legitimacy it lost following the 2009 crisis. The relatively high turnout and the reformists' call for mass participation indicate that the majority of the Iranian public is ready to take part in politics despite the severe restrictions on participation.

2. The President has seen a boost, but the real battle is still ahead.

The new Majlis could provide the President with more power to promote his economic plans. However, the Iranian economy continues to suffer from significant structural problems – chief among them being corruption, lack of transparency, weakness of the private sector, and control exercised by powerful semi-governmental institutions like the Revolutionary Guards. The new Majlis might assist Rouhani's efforts in carrying out certain economic reforms, but substantial economic improvement relies heavily on solving major structural defects. Such an uptick therefore remains doubtful.

3. The public may be moderate, but the regime remains hardline.

The results could indicate that given a real choice between hardliners and moderates, the Iranian public is more likely to choose moderation. Nevertheless, most power centers in Iran are not elected by the general public and are still controlled by hardliners. These include the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards, the judiciary and the Law Enforcement Force. As long as this control prevails, a strategic change in Iran's domestic or foreign policy is unlikely.



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