

THE SIXTH MAJLIS ELECTIONS IN IRAN: WHAT HAPPENED AND WHAT CAN WE EXPECT

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It did not take long after the May 1997 landslide victory that put Mohammad Khatami in the top executive post in Iran, that attention was quickly shifted to the 2000 Majlis elections. Analysts argued that without the legislative branch's support, the reform movement faces a serious handicap.

As the 18 February 2000 election day approached, the big question was over whether or not the people continue to support the reform movement, or has disillusionment or disappointment taken over given the tough economic times. The verdict is in, and the results are a clear reaffirmation of the people's desire to continue along the difficult path of reform. In the following, the main questions surrounding the latest victory are addressed:

What do we know about the voting patterns of the people?

1. The turn out was extremely high, but *not* unprecedented. Close to 27 million people showed up at the voting booths on 18 February. In absolute numbers, that is historic for parliamentary elections. However, when we account for demographic factors, and take a look at things in terms of percentage of eligible voters, we see that 69% of those who could vote showed up at the booths, which is in fact *lower* than what we saw during the 5th Majlis elections in 1996. There have been no proper academic studies to offer a "scientific" explanation for this trend, but a number of factors offer partial explanation, including shorter voting hours, and more rigid conditions than the past for voters in military barracks, hospitals and jails.
2. Of the 290 seats in the 6th Majlis, 225 were determined in the first round, which is unprecedented. Part of this phenomenon can be accounted for by the fact that shortly before the elections, the bar for entering the parliament directly from the first round was lowered from 33% of the votes to 25%. Given the large number of reformist candidates and the possibility of dispersed votes, the conservatives had hoped that they could secure more seats by doing so.

3. While it is clear that the reformist coalition – which includes many political groupings, parties and factions – won the lion’s share or the next parliament’s seats, we do not know the *exact* number of seats they have at this point. The Participation Front itself claims that the reformists have secured some 169 seats, which corresponds with the 170 figure I often see quoted in the Western press. The same source allocates some 40 seats to the conservatives, while claiming that the remaining 16 seats belong to independents. These numbers are all debatable. A look at the provincial seats in particular shows that some of the candidates claimed by the reformists appear on nearly all lists. This tends to imply that some of the candidates that the reformists are claiming are local celebrities, who should really be thought of as independents. In all, we should think of the above numbers as the upper limit of the reformist seats secured during the first round, with possible room for reinterpreting close to 20 seats.
4. Only 27% of the 5th Majlis parliamentarians found their way into the 6th Majlis. This is again unprecedented and a reflection of just how unpopular the conservative forces have become.
5. In a continuation of the trend witnessed since the second Majlis elections, the number of clerics voted into parliament has dropped. There are less than a dozen clerics in the 6th Majlis. Along the same lines, we see a continuation in the rise of MPs with a Masters degree and above.
6. It is also very clear that most of the voters elected their representatives by using one of the factions’ lists, or an altered version of it. This means that individual sway played a much lesser role than in the past, particularly in large urban areas. The trend also hurt the chances of independent candidates. More than anything else, this phenomenon reflects the need for proper political parties in Iran at this point. While the liberal press carried some of this burden, helping inform the people about the candidates, it was not enough to remove the confusion created by the large numbers of candidates to choose from and the fact that certain individuals appeared on multiple lists. Having said that, the most successful lists belonged to the Participation Front of Islamic Iran, followed closely by the list proposed by the “Reformist Newspapers”. In Tehran, for example, the least amount of votes received by a candidate on the Participation Front list was over 600 thousand, which is well over double the figure the conservative’s main

list could claim. The Executive of Construction's list did the worse, by far.

Perhaps the best way to predict what can be expected of this new "reformist" parliament in Iran is by taking a look at the main characteristics of the majority of those who gained seats in the 6th Majlis. Thus, the next question should be:

What are the main characteristics of the majority?

We know the following generalities about these people:

1. They have proven in deed that they care about public opinion;
2. They have been critical of the regime's conduct;
3. They have been actively associated with President Khatami's reform process;
4. They are expert in their own field (which is not necessarily politically-oriented);
5. Many of the provincial candidates are successful and known celebrities.

What can we expect from this Majlis first?

No doubt the new Majlis, which is dominated by persons that fit the above description, will help President Khatami and the reform movement; mainly by putting into law what had to be done through executive orders before. The question is, however, what kind of laws will the 6th Majlis focus on after it takes over the parliament this June? Many analysts believe that the new Majlis will concentrate on domestic politics, at least in the beginning. This could include:

1. Easing requirements for the formation of political parties;
2. Revision of the press law;
3. Legalizing satellite dishes;
4. Reviewing the elections laws; or even
5. Attempting to reduce the GC's vetting powers

There are several reasons for the reformists to concentrate on such issues:

1. The group that we refer to as “reformists” in Iranian politics is actually the coalition of close to twenty factions and parties with extremely different stands on some issues, particularly economic matters. Keeping in mind that coalitions tend to be stronger when in “opposition” and as they move towards “position,” differences arise; it only makes sense for the leaders to build on common ground issues and those that are less contentious. It is appropriate to mention here that the left and right of Iranian’s political spectrum are delineated based on *economic* issues.
2. We should also keep in mind that the real power base of the reformists is their popularity among the masses. Losing the trust and confidence of the people would be tantamount to losing political power. The reformists would be particularly unwise to take on economic reforms, which certainly require some tough action in the short-run, before the 2001 presidential elections.

What about economic issues?

While there is a lot of difference in the economic policies of the various factions that make up the reform camp, it is clear that economic issues will have to be tackled. The real question is how to go about such a formidable task. The answer, unsurprisingly, is through the use of astute maneuvering and creative politics. The main issue for a lot of the leftist groups in the reform camp is adhering to their slogans and not losing face. New drafts dealing with economic issues will have to come as a package that includes elements that can be accepted by all of the sub-factions that make up the reform movement.

Let’s use a hypothetical example to see how this could work by taking a look at the large subsidies that the Iranian government can really not afford to maintain. How are a group of leftists going to deal with this issue? Chances are, the Majlis would not introduce a bill labeled as such. Instead, we could expect the introduction of a bill on Poverty Alleviation. This bill would underline the urgent need to reduce national poverty. It would then call for the elimination of general subsidies, which are being extended to the rich as much as the poor, and to replace them with targeted subsidies focused on the poor instead. The rhetoric of social justice remains in tact in this scenario, and the leftists need not lose face. In short, expect that the tougher economic items on the agenda would get dealt with in a sugarcoated fashion, but they will be dealt with. In the meantime, the

country would continue to use and expand the backdoor option by strengthening the role of free trade zones, special economic zones, and the like. Furthermore, despite the fact that many differences exist among the reformist ranks when it comes to economic issues, we cannot ignore the “positive energy” factor that has come about as a result of the latest elections – among both, Iranians and foreigners involved in the Iranian economy. The reaffirmation of the people’s vote to the reformists has increased confidence in Iran in general, a process that strengthened the economy. This process is seen best in the fact that the Rial gained against the dollar immediately after the election results began to be known.

What is the impact of the new Majlis on foreign policy?

- 1-- The Iranian Majlis is not the hotbed of foreign policymaking in the Islamic Republic. The main institutions with that responsibility are the Expediency Council and the Supreme National Security Council. Despite the above, we can expect the recent elections to have a positive impact on Iran’s foreign policy. Keep in mind the following items:
- 2-- The elections showed just how important public opinion is, and just what could happen if politicians fail to adhere to what the public wants – and the public has made no secret of its desires in the foreign policy arena.
- 3-- While the Majlis has not been the center for foreign policy decisions, the new parliament, dominated by a group that puts “national interest” as the supreme guide to its international policies, could very well break many taboos by initiating discussions on tough topics. Moreover, maverick politicians in other power centers should be emboldened by the election results. At the very least, taking a radical stand on foreign policy will no longer entail a high risk of impeachment.

Will the loser’s react violently?

Since Khatami’s ascend to power, two *minority* groups within the conservative camp have been trying to sway the *majority*: One group has been pushing all along to resort to violence to reverse the reform movement (the chain killings, the Tehran university dorm incident, etc.). The other group has been warning the majority that it is time to change colors and become more in tune with today’s realities, or risk being swept aside. While some incidences of violence should still be expected, the

evidence points to the fact that the majority of the conservatives are swaying towards the advice of the second group. The recent comments of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, hard-line conservative Habibollah Asgarowladi, and others, confirm that the message send on 18th of February – and all other major elections from 1997 onwards – is being heard and we can expect the formation of more democratic nuclei within the conservative camp. It should not be forgotten that the other minority group's method has been tested and failed miserably. The fact is that every major campaign of violence backfired in a big way, and often led to the hard-liners losing one of their power bases. Thus, some analysts are now arguing that the tense atmosphere of the past few months has ended and that there will be a period of relative calm in Iranian politics. It is further said that now will be the time for a number of processes that were put on hold until the Majlis elections came and went to be addressed. In support of that argument, the following examples are used: In the investigation of the serial murders of November 1998, the file was moved from the judicial branch of the Armed Forces to the Deputy Head of Judiciary in order to create the authority to finalize this long investigation; The eight months imprisonment sentence against Mr. Naqdi, the former head of Tehran's law enforcement units – in the case involving torture of Tehran's former deputy mayors – was confirmed by the Appeals Court, putting an end to one of the key cases against conservative violence; The court case against the law enforcement officers involved in the attack on the Tehran University dormitory opened on 29th February, serving as yet another symbolic move by the judiciary to respond to the people's expectations.

Who will be the next speaker?

The issue of the next speaker is still an ongoing debate subject to political bargaining. But if the question is whether or not Rafsanjani still has a chance, the answer is yes. The important point is to realize that should Rafsanjani be elected speaker, we can almost be sure that the event happened as part of a greater bargain between the reformists and conservatives. Hypothetical examples could include the removal of Ayatollah Yazdi and Jannati from the Guardian Council, or, the end of Grand Ayatollah Montazeri's houses arrest, or the like. Keep in mind that the speaker of parliament is actually elected for a 1-year term only. This gives the reformists an insurance policy should any bargain not be met. It also opens the option to giving Rafsanjani the top Majlis seat after some of

the anti-Rafsanjani sentiments have died down. Still, Rafsanjani is by no means a shoe-in. Other figures that are front-runners for the post include:

- Hadi Khamenei, brother of the Supreme Leader who is actually a leftist figure in Iranian politics;
- Behzad Nabavi, the main non-cleric considered for the seat, and another prominent leftist figure. Nabavi has himself said that he will not seek the post, thus it is unlikely that he will be the next speaker;
- Majid Ansari, who is the leader of the minority faction in the 5th Majlis; and
- Former leftist speaker Ahmad Karroubi

Again, it is important to stress that a decision has not been made at this point, and that the process of behind the scenes bargaining and negotiations is continuing. We should also keep in mind that there are some external factors, which could greatly influence this process. For example, rumour has it that President Khatami has asked his reformist brother and top vote-getter Mohammad Reza Khatami not to seek the post of speaker. Moreover, there could be a letter from the Leader Khamenei asking the MPs to vote a certain way. In fact, this is exactly what happened back in 1997, when shortly after Khatami's landslide presidential victory, it was time for the Majlis to either re-elect or change its speaker, a post held by Khatami's defeated rival Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, for another 1-year term. At that point, Abdollah Nouri, who was at that point an MP, stood a fairly good chance for getting the top parliamentary seat. However, the Supreme Leader wrote the parliament asking that Nateq-Nouri be reaffirmed. At that point, Abdollah Nouri himself stepped out of the race, and Nateq-Nouri was re-elected without equivocation.

What can we expect from the outgoing Majlis?

As predicted in the previous issue of *Iran Focus*, the outgoing Majlis – which still holds power until 31st May - will be inclined to pass some new laws in order to lay claim to significant developments, which now seem inevitable. The fact that the 5th Majlis is trying to amend the labour law, introducing an exception to firms with five employees and less, and also passing a new law on oil contracts in the Caspian (see oil and gas section) is telling in this regards. Along the same lines, it is still

possible that a number of other bills that have been tabled - such as the new foreign investment bill, taxation bill, etc. - could actually be addressed by the outgoing parliament.

Concluding remarks

Today, the results of the 18 February elections are in, reaffirming the reform movement with another landslide vote. In the words of Iran's reformists themselves, "29th of Bahman was another 2nd of Khordad," referring to the Persian calendar dates of the latest parliamentary and presidential elections, respectively. But the votes cast on 18 February did more than that. They showed just how unpopular the ways of the conservatives have become; and, more importantly, in today's political realities of Iran, those who pay no attention to the public will, can expect to find themselves marginalized from power. A key question remains to be answered in time, however: will the reform movement be able to keep up the pace with the demands of the people, or will we see Khatami outpaced by his constituents in much the same way that Rafsanjani was? The verdict on that question is not out yet, but one could bet that the reformist camp's leadership is losing sleep trying to think just how it will meet the expectations of the people, particularly now that these expectations have soared since the people gave the reformists the legislative branch of government as well.

Election Results.

Note: the factional breakdown of the seats is arguable, and these are figures provided by the Participation Front of Islamic Iran.

Total Seats	290
Total filled in 1st Rd	225
Run-offs	65
Reformists	169
Conservatives	40
Independent	16

Women	
Registered (up 20%)	513
Elected in 1st Rd	9
In Run-offs	5
(Less Women in 6th vs. 5th Majlis)	

Total in Race	5075
Registered	6853
Vetted	569
Quit Race	1209

Majles Elections			
Year	Eligible to Vote (millions)	Participants (millions)	% of Participants to Eligible Pop.
1980	20.8	10.8	51.90%
1984	25.7	16.7	65.00%
1988	28.5	16.7	58.60%
1992	31.9	18.8	58.90%
1996	35	24.9	71.10%
2000	38.8	26.8	69.00%