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Iran Has Critical Parliamentary Elections Ahead

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Iran's parliamentary and Assembly of Experts elections will be held on February 26, 2016. This is the tenth parliament (Majles) elections since the Iranian revolution in 1979 and the fifth round for the Assembly of Experts, the clerical body that chooses Iran's future Supreme Leader. In these elections, the US and its allies wish the Islamic regime sways from the controlling hands of the more conservative clerics to the hands of the so-called "moderate" clerics who have more friendly relations with the West.

The Coming Elections

These elections are typically symbolic because major political parties in Iran that oppose the ruling clerics are banned and their members are disqualified to run for elections. The supreme religious Leader's authority, as is defined by the Islamic Republic constitution (Article 110), supersedes the authorities of the major organs of the government. Hence, democratic principles such as separation of powers between three branches of the government do not effectively exist. Moreover, political rights such as freedom of speech, assembly, and opportunity to fully participate in the political process are not honored. Applicants who want to run for election ought to believe in Islamic system of government under the rule of Velayat-e Faghih (Guardianship of the Jurist). The regime selects the applicants who would serve its own ideological interests. The screening of applicants is based on the regime's ideological requirements, which clearly contradict fundamental norms of democracy. Applicants who do not express allegiance to such ideology are disqualified. Some secular political groups have indicated that they would boycott the elections. Despite the boycotts, the rival factions within the regime plan to have noticeable presence in the elections. The Supreme Leader Ali

Khamenei has urged Iranians to vote, saying “even if you oppose me you should vote to support Islamic Iran”. However, in reality, those who do not support the regime ideology do not have anyone on the ballot to vote for.

The Parliament

For the legislative Majles 290 seats, 12123 applicants registered in January 2016, which was the highest since the revolution. Initially 4700 applicants or about 40% passed screening by the Central Elections Supervising Committee, the rest were rejected because of their “criminal” records or lack of required documentations. Yet, several more were disqualified by the vetting body, the Guardian Council. However, after consideration of some applicants’ complaints, the Guardian council reversed 1500 of the applications, resulting in 6300 or 55% that is about an average of 22 candidates per seat and that includes 586 women. The candidates’ names were announced on February 4, just three weeks before the election day. The campaign time is between February 18 to 24 that is (29 Bahman to 5 Esfand) only 8 days before the election day on Feb 26, which is very short time for the candidates to introduce themselves to the voters. A new requirement for the applicants for the Majles in this election is to have at least a master’s degree. In the previous Majles elections in 2012, 5200 applicants had registered from which one-third were rejected, 3400 or 12 candidate per seats were approved to run.[1] There are currently only 9 women in the Majles.

The Assembly of Experts

Another simultaneous election that has been historically less visible is the election of 88 clerics for the Assembly of Experts. This is an entirely clerical body that has the authority to choose, supervise, or dismiss the Leader of Islamic Republic, and to appoint a new leader in case of death or resignation of the present Leader, Ali Khamenei. The assembly meets twice each year for at least two days. The Assembly does not have any other noticeable function. The word “Expert” is a misnomer because the clerics are not experts in any fields other than Islamic Shia theology. They are “elected” every 8 years. The candidates are required to have extensive knowledge of Islamic jurisprudence and “current social affairs” and have to take a written Ejtihad (means independent reasoning in Islamic law) exam. Only those applicants who have seminary education are qualified to participate in the exam administrated by the Guardian Council. The exam measures the level of Shia theological Knowledge. The incumbents and those who previously have passed the theology exams are not required to take the exam. All

the current members are male clerics (mojtahed). The exam for this election was given on January 5, (15th of Dey), with 400 applicants, including 12 women taking the test. From the 795 applicants who registered for the Assembly, 161 or 20% male clerics were approved to run, which is less than 2 persons per each seat.

The current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei who opposes the Western influence in Iran, is 76 years old and there have been rumors about him suffering from prostate cancer. Reformists hope to promote a cleric in their own group to succeed him after he passes away. For months, it had been reported that Saied Hassan Khomeini, a grandson of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, would be a candidate for the Assembly of Experts' elections. The younger Khomeini who has ties to reformists could be prepared to become a possible replacement for Khamenei in the future. By using Khomeini's name, reformists could extract votes from some of the lower strata who are Ayatollah Khomeini's devotees. The conservatives believe the young Khomeini was drawn into a plot by the former president Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani for seizing control of the Assembly of experts. The plot appeared to have been originated from London and Paris. In mid January 2016, it was reported that the French ambassador to Iran Burno Foucher had a secret meeting with the younger Khomeini and Mohammad Khatami in Kashanak district in Tehran.[1] After all, Hassan Khomeni did not take the required Ejtihad qualification exam, possibly due to fear of failing the test that is administrated by the conservative clerics. As a result, the plot failed as he was disqualified to run because he did not take the exam.

Efforts to Transmute the Regime

At present, there is a power struggle between the cleric tycoon, Hashemi-Rafsanjani who leads the wealthy class and the more conservative clerics who rely on support from the impoverished class. Rafsanjani's family and their cronies have accumulated tremendous wealth using their influence in the regime.[2] Rafsanjani's sons have been involved in some major financial corruption cases; one of them Mehdi was sentenced to ten years imprisonment for receiving millions of dollars bribe from the Western oil companies.

The conservative clerics currently have control over most important organs of the Islamic government except the executive branch. In these elections, a faction within the regime that labels itself as "reformist" is trying to subdue the conservative faction from power. Reformists are backed by the former presidents Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami, and have tacit support of the current president Hassan Rouhani. They want to occupy most of the seats in

these elections and then force the other faction led by Khamenei out of power.

The clerics who have more friendly relations with the West are referred to as “moderates”. For some time, Washington and its allies have been backing the moderates versus the conservatives to transmute the Islamic regime in their favor. The Western backed Persian language media outlets and NGOs have been actively promoting the reformists.[3] The West’s effort to influence these elections is continuation of the failed Green Movement in 2009 which intended to transmute the regime.

The Conservatives claims that the attempts by three cleric presidents, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Rouhani to establish closer relations with the US have not served Iran’s national interest. Also, the Revolutionary Guards are against establishing closer relations with the US. They claim the US and its allies are striving to change the Islamic regime from within. The Conservatives have influence to mobilize the populous poor against the West.

The Western elites have eyed Mohammad Khatami to come back to the scene since 2005. They invited him to attend the Bilderberg Group Annual meeting in 2006. George Soros, the financier of color revolutions, has had meetings with him twice outside of Iran. [4] The conservatives have accused Khatami of being a promoter of Soros’ Foundation plot for a velvet coup in Iran. Both Rafsanjani and Khatami were the key clerics behind the so-called Green movement in the post election riots of 2009. The revolt had been planned well ahead of the elections by them along with Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi who have been since under house arrest.

In 2013, the regime transmutation partly succeeded when a former reactionary cleric, Hassan Fereidon Sorkhei, who had been the chief nuclear negotiator a decade before, was promoted to become Iran’s president. Previously, he had changed his last name to Rouhani (meaning cleric) and a British university had awarded him a phony doctorate degree. In the run up to the 2013 presidential elections, Rouhani became the darling of the US and British financed Persian language media outlets that were boosting his campaign.[5] After a surprise announcement that Rouhani was Iran’s president elect, the Western powers were delighted. Upon coming to the office, to please the West, Rouhani hastily made an agreement to dismantle Iran’s nuclear infrastructure. The agreement was finalized in July 2015 and consequently some of the sanctions against Iran were suspended, effective January 16, 2016. The next Rouhani’s task is to transmute the regime by putting his affiliated candidates in the Parliament and the Assembly

of Experts in these elections. Rouhani and Rafsanjani are both the current members of the Assembly, and Mohammad Yazdi, a conservative cleric, is its present head. Ali Larijani, the present Majles' head has turned away from the conservatives' camp to help Rouhani succeed in transmutation of the regime. Yazdi, Rouhani, and Larijani are candidates for re-election.

In the meantime, three US Congressmen have written an unusual letter to the Leader Khamenei and head of the Revolutionary Guards to observe the elections on February 26 and to visit Iran's nuclear facilities.[6] Moreover, the Persian BBC has actively promoted the reformist faction in these elections and even has broadcast commentaries implying Iranians should not vote for the conservative Ayatollahs such as Mohammad Yazdi, Taghi Membah-Yazdi, and Ahmad Janati who are the key supporters of the Leader Khamenei. Similar commentaries have been heard for the Persian broadcasts associated with the Voice of America.

On the whole, Iranians do not have any good option in these elections. If they vote for the conservative faction, it would prolong Islamic fundamentalism in Iran. If they vote for the reformist faction, the compradors will control the government and the country will become heavily dominated by the West. Consequently, some political groups plan to boycott the elections which seem to be the best choice under the circumstances.

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[2] Forbes Magazine , http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2003/0721/056_2.html

[3] http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2149_B.htm

[4] <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/1703272/posts>

[5] Akbar Torbat, The Unexpected Results of Presidential Elections in Iran, July 02, 2013, <http://original.antiwar.com/akbar-e-torbat/2013/07/01/the-unexpected-results-of-presidential-elections-in-iran/>

[6] <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/three-us-congressmen-ask-visit-iran-monitor-upcoming-elections-1376121508>

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