

# Implications of the Seventh Majlis Elections in Iran

By Christopher Boucek | March 25, 2004

On February 20th Iran elected its seventh Majlis (parliament) in an election that has been widely criticized by many Iranian and international observers for the heavy-handed manner in which the regime had interfered in the electoral process. The conservative Council of Guardians disqualified an estimated 2,500 candidates from standing for election—by some counts nearly four times the number of barred candidates in the 2000 Majlis elections. As a result, Iran's conservative factions recaptured control of the Majlis at the expense of the reformist movement associated with President Mohammad Khatami. The political discourse within Iranian domestic politics has thus been re-centered within the conservative camp.

Among those initially disqualified were several leading figures within the reformist movement, many currently serving in the Majlis and among the largest vote earners in the previous elections four years ago. In all, over 80 currently serving MPs were barred from participating. First Deputy Speaker Mohammad Reza Khatami—the president's brother and leader of the Participation Front—as well as Behzad Nabavi, Mohsen Mirdamadi, and Mohsen Armin, among many others, were disqualified by the hard-line Guardian Council. These moderate MPs served on some of the most important Majlis committees, including Foreign Affairs, National Security, and Judicial Affairs, and their disqualification marks a significant setback for the moderate elements in Iranian politics. With the reformists removed from the Majlis—and President Khatami's authority weakened as a result of the showdown—many observers have argued that Iranian politics have taken a decisive shift to the right, however this proves to be a very cursory analysis, and neglects to consider the extremely Byzantine nature of the emerging political order in Teheran.

In the seven years since Khatami's presidential victory, Iran's reformers appeared to many to have seized control of Iran's future, and set the Islamic Republic on the course of moderation. However the tenure of the reformists has produced few benefits for the people. The powerful, hard-line conservatives within the regime—unelected and deeply rooted in the system, especially within the judiciary and the Guardian Council—have repeatedly blocked any implementation of the moderates' agenda. Khatami's presidency has been marred by numerous press closures and confrontations over the limits of free expression, repeated legal tribulations for many leading reformists, and the extremely violent 1999 student democracy uprisings.

## A Vote of "No Confidence"

Thus, heading into February's elections many segments of the Iranian electorate felt betrayed by the reformists and their failures to enact their platforms. Many Iranian

voters felt resigned to a conservative victory. As a result, relatively few voters actually turned out to participate in the Majlis elections. This widespread voter apathy was not just an admission of an unfair election, but rather a way for the electorate to vote "no confidence" in the system.

The evening before the elections, Iranian state television—controlled by the hardliners—broadcast numerous programs geared at mobilizing the electorate. It aired archival footage from Iran's first referendum held to establish the Islamic Republic, which featured representatives from all segments of Iranian society queuing to voice their support for Imam Khomeini's egalitarian government. Men and women, in both western dress and covered, queued with workers, soldiers, farmers, and professionals to vote in favor of the 1979 decision to establish the world's first Shi'a theocracy. Interspersed with footage from Khomeini's triumphant return from Paris after the abdication of the Shah and scenes of Iranian martyrs defending the Islamic Republic from the Iraqi army, the message was clear: mass participation was both a duty and obligation to preserve the Revolution.

Polling places at mosques and schools in Teheran remained open up to four hours past the close of voting in order to boost the participation levels. Prior to Election Day, rumors were circulating in the capital that the hardliners had secretly printed an additional two million identification documents that would allow conservative activists to vote multiple times. Such salacious stories—often the grist of Iranian politics—were dismissed out of hand by moderates and conservatives alike, yet serve to illustrate the contentious nature of this election.

Despite these measures, voter turnout on February 20th was the worst in the history of the Islamic Republic, and a tremendous drop from the 2000 Majlis elections and Khatami's 1997 presidential victory which saw approximately 70% participation. The Interior Ministry—responsible for the mechanics of the elections—has claimed that 50% of all

## Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



---

eligible voters participated. Western sources peg the figure at around 30%, while some Iranian observers assert that it is actually closer to 15% in the capital. This does not include the 5%-10% fraud alleged by some Iran watchers. Unlike what has been widely reported, it was not the predetermined outcome and electoral fatalism that drove down the figures, but rather a conscious choice not to choose.

The Guardian Council's draconian action to influence the outcome of the elections has actually led to anger and resentment by many of the hard-line candidates such steps were intended to help. Many conservative Majlis candidates resented the measures taken to assure their victory because it gave the impression that they could not win on their own merits. A significant number of hardliners felt this election would be a replay of the 2002 regional elections, when conservative candidates easily defeated their rivals. As a result, there is a feeling that while they could have won on the strengths of their platforms, the Guardian Council's favoritism has weakened their victory, and diminished their standing in the eyes of the Iranian public.

## An Opening, But No Revolution

Iran is not on the verge of an abrupt change in government. While there were student-led demonstrations in the lead-up to the Majlis elections, revolution is not in the air—much to the consternation of many in Washington. Iranians are among the most pro-American people in the region, and they do not need to be sold on the virtues of freedom and liberty. They have tired of the regime, and are keen to seek a change. The moderates' seven-year rule has however cracked the strict limitations that characterize the Islamic Republic. Satellite television, DVDs, internet access, and increasingly western culture are reaching a wider audience almost daily. For these changes, the moderates deserve praise; the door has been opened ever so slightly. This subtle relaxation is here to stay, and even the hard-line conservative factions would find it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to stifle.

Yet the effective non-participation of much of the electorate is in fact the only way many voters can convey to the clerical regime that things must change. Voters opted not to legitimize

a contest that had little bearing on their own affairs, and quite honestly for many, it matters little who sits in the Majlis, conservative or moderate. By withholding their vote, they have sent a message to the conservatives that this is not simply business as usual. In the course of this latest parliamentary election, Iran has moved from being a semi-democracy—the envy of several of its neighbors—to being even closer identified as a regime ruled by an increasingly diminishing minority out of step with the people.

Iranian domestic politics are now set for a showdown for supremacy within the conservative camp; as with any political grouping, Iran's conservatives do not represent one unified block. The two main wings of the conservative movement, represented by the pragmatic, educated, professional—“*moderate realists*”—technocrats identified with former president and chairman of the Expediency Council Hashemi Rafsanjani, versus the absolutist, fundamentalist ideologues and strict social conservatives intent on living in the shadow of the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

This struggle will determine the future of the Islamic Republic and its policies. Teheran's nuclear program, Iran's role in the region, its Afghan and Iraq policies, its relations with the west and the United States will ultimately be decided as a result of this struggle. The Rafsanjani-style pragmatists have clear advantages in this contest. Under his tutelage, the Expediency Council has taken on significant strategic policy planning in addition to its legislative oversight duties. It is important to recognize how Rafsanjani and his coterie have both kept an ear to the realities of the international system while simultaneously being dutiful servants of the Revolution. What remains to be seen is whether this conservative faction will face the same obstructions that it did during Rafsanjani's presidency when several of his pragmatic policies fell victim to battles with the hard-line *hezbollahi* ideologues.

---

*(Christopher Boucek is the editor of the Homeland Security & Resilience Monitor at the Royal United Services Institute in London. He has just returned from his second trip to Iran in as many months. He wrote this for Foreign Policy in Focus (www.fpif.org).)*

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

## Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Recommended citation:

Christopher Boucek, “Implications of the Seventh Majlis Elections in Iran,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, March 25, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0403iran.html>

**p. 2**

---

**www.fpif.org**

A Think Tank Without Walls

