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The Outcome of Iran's Parliamentary Elections

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The results of Iran's parliamentary elections held on February 26, 2016 were finalized in mid May. The elections were for the tenth parliament and the fifth Assembly of Experts (a clerical body) after the 1979 Iranian insurrection. As it appears, there is no hope that the elections' outcome obliges the ruling clergy to make any changes to secularize the Islamic regime in Iran.

Iran's Parliament, the National Consultative Assembly (Majles Shoraye Melli) was originally established in 1906, following Iran's constitutional revolution. Iran had also a Senate under the constitutional monarchy government of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi until 1979, when the Iranian uprising ended the monarchy system. The succeeding Islamic regime began a series of changes in the Iranian government which resulted in formation of a theocracy under the rule of leading clerics. The clerics began to de-secularize Iran's political system by weaving Islamic laws into various aspects of the government. The word Melli (National) on the Parliament title was changed to Eslami (meaning Islamic) and the Senate was permanently closed. An Islamic upper-house called the Guardian Council was established to monitor compliance of the Majles with Islamic laws.

Some Iranian political groups claim that the establishment of the Islamic regime in Iran was the outcome of the West's foreign policy goal and in particular the United States efforts to contain the Soviet Union. It was President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinsky in late 1970s who advocated the so-called "Islamic Green Belt" strategy to use fundamentalist Islamists for preventing the expansion of Soviet Union's influence in Iran and Afghanistan. The fallout of Brzezinsky's strategy has been de-secularization of the political system in these countries.

The Contest for Parliamentary Seats

These elections were mainly a competition between two Islamists factions: principleists (Osulgarayan) and reformists. The political parties that oppose the ruling clergy are banned and their members are disqualified to run for elections. The secular political groups generally boycotted the elections.

Principleists' faction is led by conservative clerics who have their roots in associations with land owners, the reminiscence of the feudal system. This stratum of the high ranking clergy controls Islamic endowments. The conservative clerics have influence in rural areas among more religious Iranians who regularly attend the mosque (masjed). The conservative political parties' members are predominately seminary students (Talabeh) and clergies. Their main political party is the Combatant Clergy Society (Jamea Rohaniyat-e Mobarez) which was formally established shortly after the revolution by some senior clerics.[1]

The reformists' faction is more associated with the affluent businessmen, dealers, and merchants in urban areas. The leader of this faction currently is cleric tycoon Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani. He has had various positions in the regime, including being Iran's president two terms (1989-1997). During his presidency, he implemented the World bank/IMF structural adjustment policies in Iran. He left the presidency with almost bankrupting the country. [2] The economy was in recession with high rate of inflation and had \$30 billion foreign debt.

Rafsanjani founded the Executives of Construction (Kargozaran-e Sazandegi) Party in 1996. This was not initially a political party but a family party; from its seven founders, four were from Rafsanjani family, including his daughter Faezeh and a son Mohsen. Because this party was not successful, Rafsanjani organized another party in 1999 by his second daughter Fatemeh, named Moderation and Development (Hezb-e Etedal va Toseah), which actually had remained inactive.[3] From a year before the elections in 2016 these parties became active to make preparations to occupy most of the parliament seats. Most members of Rouhani's government have close relations with the Moderation and Development party. Rouhani calls his administration Moderation Government (Doulat Etedal). President Hassan Rouhani is now pursuing to implement neo-liberal economic policies with strong backing of Washington. The conservatives call his administration a surrogate government because it does not have any support of its own but depends on outside political groups with backing of Washington to hold on to power.

In the elections, the candidates' names were not linked to any particular political party. Instead, there were two slates: "List of Hope (Omid)", a coalition of reformists led by Hashemi-

Rafsanjani and his protégé president Hassan Rouhani, and the list of “Principleists Grand Coalition” that supports the conservatives led by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Most participants voted for the lists of names without knowing the candidates and their political orientations.

The conservatives had accused Rouhani’s administration of illegal interference in conducting the elections process for gaining more seats in the parliamentary elections. The elections are conducted by the Interior Ministry. Since many had boycotted the elections, the government spread propagandas on the state televisions by showing some selected crowded-polls places that its proponents had gathered to vote. Since there is no monitoring of the elections process by private citizens, some political groups believe that the Ministry grossly inflated the figures to gain legitimacy for the regime and participation had been much lower than was reported. The following is a brief description of the results.

The Parliament (Majles)

There were a total of 290 Parliamentary seats in the contest, including the five seats allocated to the religious minorities. The elections also were held for 88 seats of the Assembly of Experts, an entirely clerical body.[4] The initial results of the votes were released by the Interior Ministry on Feb 29 that indicated 221 of the 290 Majles seats determined. The remaining 68 seats had to go to run-off elections for candidates who had less than 25% votes in the first round.[5] According to the Interior Ministry, in the first round “voter’s participation in the polls was 50% in Tehran and 60% in the entire country; about 33 million eligible voters participated in the elections.”

In the first round voting for the parliament out of 221 seats, moderates won 90 seats, conservatives 112 seats, and were 29 independents. In Tehran province, the conservatives were badly defeated as the Hope List won all 30 seats. In other cities and the rural areas the conservatives won more seats than the reformists. In Tehran, Mohammad Reza Aref, a former presidential candidate and the head of reformists’ coalition, had the largest number of votes. Haddad Adel, a former head of the parliament who is the father in-law of Khamenei’s son, became 31st and thus was not elected. Ali Larijani, the outgoing Majles Speaker who was in the Hope List became second in Ghom.

In the capital, Tehran, which has about 20% of Iran’s population, there were no run-off elections as all candidates in the Hope List won the 30 seats. In the run-off parliamentary elections for the remaining seats, Iranians voted on April 29. In the run-off, the conservatives won 19 seats, the reformists and moderate groups 33, and independents 16 seats. The winners were 64 men and 4

women in the run-off elections. Participation in the second round was 59%, 47 % of the voters were women and 53% men. There were various opinions reported in the Iranian media about the political affiliations of the elected candidates. Overall, according to the conservative newspaper Kayhan , out of 290 elected candidates for the parliament 118 had leaning towards Principleists, 96 leaning towards reformists , 20 were moderate (Rouhani supporters), and the remaining were independents and representatives of the religious minorities. The reformists' newspapers and Western media tally gave more weight to the winners in the reformists' coalition. The tenth parliament inaugurated on May 27.[6]

In the Majles election 18 women were elected, 8 of them were from Tehran province. One of the elected women, Mino Khaleghi who had been elected in the city of Esfahan, was disqualified by the Guardian Council because a picture of her surfaced with no headscarf. President Rouhani criticized her disqualification while he had himself forced women to wear headscarf in the early years of the Islamic government.

Despite efforts by Rouhani to have enough candidates in the Majles to form a majority, he was not successful. Ali Larijani became the head of Majles in initial voting by getting 173 votes versus 103 votes for his reformist rival Mohammad Reza Aref.

The Assembly of Experts (Khebregan)

The election for the 88-seats Assembly of experts (Khebregan) was very important this time because of the Leader Khamenei's old age and illness. If he dies, the assembly has to choose his successor. Not many Iranians support the clerical Assembly. For that reason, its election which is every 10 years had been postponed 1 year and 9 month to be conducted simultaneously with the Majles elections to boost voters' participation.

In Tehran, according to the Interior Ministry, 4,178,524 voted for the Assembly. The "List of Hope" won 15 out 16 clerical seats in the Assembly. Akbar Hashemi- Rafsanjani was first, Mohammad Aga Emami second, and Hassan Rouhani third in Tehran. Mohamad Yazdi, the head of out-going Assembly of Experts and Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, a highly reactionary cleric, were among the defeated candidates. The pro-conservatives' newspapers claimed the proportion of the conservatives' members elected for the Assembly was similar to the previous Assembly and has not changed. The reformists hoped to defeat the conservatives but it did not happen. Ahmad Jannati from the conservative camp who ranked sixteenth in Tehran's elections was surprisingly chosen the head of the clerical assembly.

In the 2016 elections, the number of women who were elected to the parliament was 17 which was the highest since the first Majles in 1980, while the number of elected clerics was reduced to 16, the lowest compared to prior elections. Nonetheless, not much change is expected towards secularization of the clerical regime in Tehran as a result of these elections. As it has been reported, the top clerics have secretly made agreement with Washington to sacrifice Iran's nuclear rights in exchange for survival of their repressive regime in Tehran.

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[1] Parsa Benab, Younes, Tarikh-e 100 Saleh-ye Ahzab Va Sazmanhaye Siyasi-ye Iran (A One Hundred Year History of Iranian Political Parties and Organizations) (1904-2004), Volume 2, Ravandi Publishing House, Washington DC. 2006. p. 161

[2] Parsa Benab, Younes, pp. 205-207.

[3] Parsa Benab, Younes, p.231.

[4] <http://www.moi.ir/portal/Home/Default.aspx?CategoryID=c2cf29ae-2e8e-4319-a926-1e311d44c6d1>

[5] <http://www.moi.ir/portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=News&CategoryID=4e9075e4-b895-4d0d-a28c-0fbdd3cede1b&WebPartID=052e71a9-1e91-4a95-8601-29f926b86d31&ID=acd97b41-0ca9-4e45-80bf-224e8539526f>

[6] <http://www.icana.ir/Fa/>

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