

BULLETIN

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Results of the Parliamentary Elections in Iran

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The recent parliamentary elections in Iran have revealed persistent factional divisions in the government of the theocratic state. The weakness of politicians in the new parliament who are associated with the current president and the strengthening of ultra-conservative forces promises a further deterioration in the internal situation in Iran, especially in its economy. Public apathy during these elections does not exclude a possible increase in tensions within Iran. The election results do not have any impact on the highest priority issue for the West, i.e., stopping Iran's nuclearisation progress.

Elections and Factional Divisions. Elections to the Iranian parliament (Majlis) were held on 2 March 2012, with turnout at more than 64% of the 48 million eligible voters. These elections should be seen mainly in a domestic context. It would be a mistake to assign a powerful role to republican institutions in Iran and forget about the real importance of theocratic ones (the Supreme Spiritual Leader and Shiite clergy) as well as the security structures (the Revolutionary Guards and the Ministry of Security and Intelligence). This common error stems mainly from the complex nature of the regime: the president and parliamentarians in Iran often and emphatically speak on international issues, while Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his aides only rarely present comments on strategic issues, for which their decisions are critical.

The results of the elections and the political scene in Iran cannot be understood without monitoring the divisions in the elite of the country. In Iran, there are no political parties with their own programs and local structures. The political forces in Iran are operating through loosely formalized factions, rooted in two main streams of the revolution, i.e., the Islamic left and right. These factions are all committed to the theocracy but are divided by their approaches to the economy. In recent years, there have been essentially four factions, and they were admitted to the most recent elections: (1) conservative Principlists, which are hostile to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and associated with the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards; (2) conservatives connected to radical Ayatollah Mezbah Yazdi, regarded as a spiritual mentor of Ahmadinejad, (3) conservatives–pragmatists, who support former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and the “Chinese model” in politics and the economy; and (4) reformers from the former Islamic left, who are supporters of former President Mohammad Khatami and the leaders of the so-called “green movement” (authorities allowed the registration of their two small lists in Tehran in the last elections).

In comparing the recent elections for the Majlis with previous parliamentary and presidential elections, it seems the majority of the population is apathetic. The latest and limited campaign was dominated by a conflict between the two factions of the Islamic right. Their campaigns were less of an ideological struggle than one marked by conflicts between supporters of the Supreme Leader and the president. The existing constitutional arrangements allowed for manipulation of the election by the Council of Guardians and the Ministry of Internal Affairs during the registration stage for candidates. Before the election of the 290 parliamentary seats in the Majlis, there were reports of about 5,395 candidates, but the Council registered only 3,454 people. Knowledge about this manipulation was widespread in Iran and resulted in a high number of boycotts of the elections in Iran's large cities. The balance of the factions in the Majlis was *de facto* determined by the Council of Guardians and a high turnout achieved by the mobilization of rural residents, who traditionally support the Islamic right.

The Stability and Legitimacy of the Regime. Social apathy and the weakness of the opposition does not mean the Iranian regime is fully stable and secure for the future. After the revolts of the “Arab Spring”, the Iranian authorities are even more disconnected from their own society. For the past three decades, Iran has prided itself on having relative pluralism in its internal politics, contrasting it with the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979) and the autocracy in the Arab countries. However, Iran is now in a state of deepening economic crisis and growing international isolation because of its nuclear program. Both of these trends, in addition to Khamenei’s reliance on the security structures, are eroding the social legitimacy of the regime. The scale of the “green revolution” in 2009 in all the main cities of Iran showed the strong hostility of the younger generation to the existing theocracy, government corruption and economic mismanagement. The regime’s response was to tighten control over the Internet, place reformist leaders on house arrest, and conduct a new campaign of arrests in early 2012 of journalists and bloggers sympathetic to the “green movement”.

The success of the supporters of Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards in the new Majlis can be considered a prelude to the presidential campaign in 2013. Ahmadinejad is not from the clergy and, therefore, after his second term he will not have sufficient political and economic resources to maintain influence, unlike Rafsanjani in 1997. In 2011, the president and his ministers found themselves in conflict with the Supreme Leader and Revolutionary Guards after attempts to remove Minister of Security Heydar Moslehi. Taking into account the new factional balance in the Majlis, there is the high probability in 2013 that Khamenei will support a presidential candidate from the conservative Principlists. Because it is likely that reformist presidential candidates will be disqualified from the next election, the probability is also high for further spontaneous rage against the Iranian regime. These outbreaks would have a greater chance of success with a charismatic leader who challenges the foundations of the current regime. This is the case for only the main opposition forces among Iranians living abroad, however, since they do not have serious support within Iran. They include monarchists (mainly in the U.S.) and the militant People’s Mujahedeen of the former revolutionary Islamic left (mostly in Iraq, Jordan and the EU). This means that regime change may be achieved only with the radicalization of the “green movement” or the appearance of entirely new political forces within Iran.

The elimination of reformists and the marginalization of pragmatists in the new Majlis might result in a worsening of the political and economic situations in Iran. Parliament approves the budget and retains control of the office of the president and his ministers, which is enough to sabotage Ahmadinejad or any of his confidantes who may try to succeed him. With the expected impact of the U.S. and EU sanctions and the politics of the Iranian presidential campaign in 2013, there are poor prospects for an improvement in Iran’s economy. According to official and IMF data, inflation in Iran is at 22.5% and unemployment is at 15%, food prices and rents are constantly rising, many state subsidies have been withdrawn, and the devaluation of the Iranian rial has accelerated. Even before the election (in February 2012), the previous Majlis urged the president to explain the state of the economy of Iran. However, the new parliament is no more favourable than its predecessor to any necessary reforms that would guarantee jobs for young people, strengthen the private sector or improve the business climate for the few remaining foreign investors.

Prospects for Iran–West Nuclear Talks. Even though the Majlis has no authority over Iran’s security policy, its composition is a guarantee of full support for the government on issues related to its nuclear program and through the parliamentarians’ intensified anti-Western rhetoric. The lack of cooperation between Iran and the latest IAEA mission might be a bad sign for another round of nuclear negotiations with the “P5+1” group. A proposal to the U.S. and the EU-3 to return to negotiations on the basis of “freeze-for-freeze” (suspending sanctions in exchange for suspending uranium enrichment) is still seen as valid. Nevertheless, the Supreme Leader’s comments in February this year suggest that Iran will not give up uranium enrichment. This might indicate his full determination to build an Iranian nuclear arsenal or at least a desire to preserve this option for the future. Therefore, the possible failure of diplomacy might have an even greater impact on Israel’s thinking about potential pre-emptive strikes on Iranian nuclear sites. Because of differences between the U.S. and Israel in their assessments of the “red lines” Iran should not cross, all the implications of an Israeli pre-emptive strike on Iran should be seriously considered. Apart from the nuclear issue, the EU countries should continue their efforts in defence of the human rights of all Iranians as well as support for dissidents in Iran.