

Parliamentary elections in Iran: victory for "reformers" masks social contradictions

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The coalition of 18 groups and parties supporting the Iranian President Mohammed Khatami garnered almost two thirds of the votes in the first round of parliamentary elections.

Election turnout on February 18 was well over 80 percent. In large cities such as Teheran, Isfahan, Shiraz and Tabriz polling stations had to remain open two hours longer than intended, and the Interior Ministry was forced to deliver additional supplies of ballot papers.

A large part of the 38 million electorate is very young: three-quarters of the Iranian population is under 25, and the legal age for voting is 16. Final results are expected in approximately two weeks. Candidates who received less than 25 percent of the votes cast will face a further ballot.

The candidates of the electoral alliance close to Khatami, generally referred to as "reformers", won a clear majority almost everywhere. In many cases, those elected were the brothers, wives, sisters or brothers-in-law of arrested politicians, or those not permitted to stand. In advance of the vote, the 12-strong Council of Guardians, a form of constitutional court appointed from above, declared 576 of some 6,856 candidates "unworthy".

The brother of former Interior Minister Abdollah Nouri (presently in detention and not allowed to stand for election) won a large majority, even though he had a reputation for understanding little about politics. Likewise in Teheran, Jamileh Kadivar, who is the sister of clergyman Mohsen Kadivar, imprisoned for "free thinking", and the wife of Culture Minister Ayatollah Mohajerani, came in second with almost 39 percent of the vote. The younger brother of President Khatami, Mohammed Reza Khatami, received over 56 percent of the vote, the best result of all.

The victorious alliance "2nd Khordad", named after the date of Khatami's election as president in the spring of 1997, includes several different organisations: the Islamic Participation Front, led by the sacked former culture minister; the Organisation of Islamic Mudjahadin, formerly loyal to the regime; the Islamic Labour Party; and social democrats and former Stalinists. Their election advertisements featured well-known public personalities, including journalists, publishers, artists and writers.

The "2nd Khordad" has become the new home for not a few

turncoats from the ranks the ruling elite. The alliance stands not so much for the replacement of those who have held power, as for their reorientation.

According to press reports, big sections of the trade and finance centre in Teheran, the so-called bazaar, swung behind the "reformers". *Die Presse* in Vienna wrote that "discussions with dealers in the bazaar point to the fact that for the first time a large part of the *Bazaaris* did not support the conservatives in these elections. Employing three hundred thousand and enjoying substantial financial means, the bazaar dating back to the 1960s was a crucial force behind Khomeini and his successors."

Another part of the picture is the fact that the president's brother, who was victorious in Teheran, is married to a granddaughter of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini.

It appears that many members of so-called "martyrs' families" switched their allegiance. The families of approximately 700,000 victims of the 1980-88 Iran-Iraqi war are supported by religious foundations and enjoy certain privileges. For example, their children are given preferential study places. For a long time the foundations active in this area have been accused of corruption and arbitrary actions.

The vote can be defined as a plebiscite against the existing regime, which has discredited itself and is hated by broad sections of the population. But behind this general rejection are concealed diametrically opposed social interests and political agendas, which will emerge more clearly in the coming period.

The mass of the population wants employment, better education, democratic freedoms and social security. But the course followed by President Khatami, supported by groups generally classified as "reformers", will lead to an enormous intensification of social contradictions and, ultimately, a reversal of the democratic concessions on which Khatami's popularity is based.

It is not accidental that the president supported the brutal suppression of last July's student protests. On the Sunday after the elections, a Teheran court confirmed the death sentence against Akbar Mohammadi, one of the students involved.

According to numerous media reports, the election victors are reacting to their success with remarkable reserve. "The day after the election, silence reigned at the headquarters of the

reform-oriented Iranian Islamic Participation Front (IPP), to which most delegates in the new parliament belong,” an astonished correspondent from *Die Welt*, who had hoped to be at the victory celebration, reported.

“However, the people are also behaving cautiously,” the correspondent continued. “No loud honking of car horns as two-and-a-half years ago, when Khatami achieved a surprising election victory, no triumphant marches. Although the youth still pin their hopes on Khatami, they are remarkably reserved.”

The *Financial Times Deutschland* noted: “the coalition of reformers... is so surprised at the extent of their victory that some of their prominent candidates are concerned that they cannot satisfy the hunger for economic and political change.”

The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* warned: “Despite rising petroleum prices, the material prerequisites for a better life are lacking. Iran's population is growing rapidly, and unemployment remains high... To disappoint the hopes that are now awakened could be very dangerous.”

There are good reasons for this tense atmosphere. The “reformers” policy comes down to a return, in some basic respects, to the conditions (or something even worse) that led in 1979 to the revolution and the fall of the Shah's regime. Under the rule of Reza Shah Pahlevi, his court and murderous secret service, the country's extensive oil reserves were sold off to Western consortia and Iran was placed at the service of America's strategic interests in the Near and Middle East.

After decades in which the old organisations of the workers' movement—above all the Stalinist Tudeh Party—had proven, in the eyes of the working class, to be politically bankrupt, the religious ideology of Islamic fundamentalism gained influence over the masses. By means of this ideology a layer of the native bourgeoisie around Ayatollah Khomeini drove out the Shah and took power in 1979.

The subsequent attempt of the Islamic regime to isolate Iran from the direct influence of American imperialism failed. In the aftermath of last week's elections, the “opening up” of the country will be accelerated. Thus the election result was received enthusiastically in Washington, Berlin and Paris.

US State Department spokesman James Rubin spoke of an “event of historical proportions.” The European governments likewise celebrated the “stabilisation of democracy”. Like hyenas, the Western governments, banks and oil companies are circling the newly “opening” state. They count on the fact that the last import controls and subsidies in Iran, which have already diminished gradually over the last ten years, will now rapidly fall.

A considerable market and a new bastion in the fight for control over Caspian oil now beckon. Although the US passed a law in 1996 under which companies investing over \$20 million in Iran were penalised with sanctions, European concerns such as Elf, Total and Royal Dutch Shell have concluded extensive business deals with Iran in the recent past. Since Khatami came to power US firms have pushed for a loosening of the laws, so

as not to fall too far behind.

Albert Rohan, Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, said he would immediately urge the European Union to begin a dialog with Teheran at the ministerial level. He is counting particularly on the support of Italy, France and Spain.

America is presently constrained by the presidential election campaign, and can hardly carry out such a tricky “paradigm shift”. The German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer, who immediately announced a journey to Teheran, can proceed much more freely and vigorously.

Just a few days after the Iranian elections, Gernot Erler, deputy chairman of the German Social Democratic Party's parliamentary faction, said he considered it “worthwhile” to build an oil pipeline from the Caspian Sea via Iran—which the American government so far has tried to prevent. According to Erler, perhaps Turkey, Iran and Russia could be united by a common approach to the Middle East.

On February 15, the correspondent of the Swiss newspaper *Der Bund* described the conditions of the people upon whose backs this policy will be carried out:

“After a long search, Ahmed found work two years ago with Iran Khodro (a vehicle factory on the western edge of Teheran)—limited to three months. His contract was extended again and again, but always only for a few months. He is paid 50,000 Tuman, overtime brings it to somewhat more. Ahmed is exhausted, angry and desperate. He does the same work as a colleague who is officially employed and who receives double. 4,000 workers share Ahmed's fate at Iran Khodro, in the whole country it is ten thousand. ‘I cannot afford my own house for my wife and child. I urgently need 20,000 Tuman, but neither the company nor the bank will lend me the cash, because I do not have fixed employment.’ ... The same picture can be witnessed in Teheran's poor south... Under the calm surface, Iran is seething. Since President Khatami came to power two-and-a-half years ago, the social deprivation of the people has grown worse...”



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