

Outcome of Iranian election points to simmering popular discontent

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Counting in last Friday's parliamentary election in Iran is still to be finalised, but the main trends are clear. The conservatives, also known as principalists for their hard-line defence of the country's theocratic state, will again dominate the *majlis* or national assembly. The reformers, who advocate limited democratic reforms, an accommodation with the major powers and economic restructuring, will retain a small parliamentary presence despite the disqualification of many of their leading contenders prior to the poll.

A great deal of attention focussed on the overall vote, amid fears in the political establishment that many people, disgusted with all factions, would simply not participate. Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, senior government officials and the state-run media pulled out all stops, urging people to vote as their patriotic duty to counter international criticism of the election. In a bid to maximise the numbers, polling hours were extended late into the night last Friday.

The nervousness in ruling circles was evident in the speed with which the Interior Ministry announced the initial results on Sunday: a win for the conservatives and a turnout of more than 60 percent. Supreme leader Khamenei immediately hailed the outcome, declaring: "Once again, your glorious and powerful presence in the election foiled enemies' plots. Their psychological war to make a low turnout was no more than an empty bubble."

While higher than the all-time low of 50.5 percent in 2004, the overall vote last Friday was still well below previous parliamentary elections. In Tehran, the official figure was only 40 percent. Critics have suggested that even these results were doctored. Economist Fariborz Raisdana told the *Telegraph* that the overall turnout was likely to have been only 35 percent. "This is not a

true election. They hold it because they want to show off to the world and persuade people they are democratic," he said.

Whatever the actual turnout, there is undoubtedly widespread alienation and dissatisfaction over the lack of basic democratic rights, skyrocketing inflation and high levels of unemployment. Ahmadinejad won the 2005 presidential election by making populist promises to help the poor and pledging to take a tough stance against the Bush administration's menacing threats over Iran's nuclear programs. He was able to capitalise on disaffection with his predecessor, the reformist Mohammed Khatami, who had failed to implement democratic reforms in the face of hard-line opposition and presided over declining living standards produced by his free market policies.

According to the Interior Ministry, the conservatives won 71 percent of seats so far decided in last Friday's poll. Ahmadinejad's supporters claimed the outcome as a victory, but there are divisions even within the conservative camp. Those backing the president ran on list for the United Principalist Front, while conservatives critical of his handling of the economy and his abrasive foreign policy stood for the Broad Principalist Coalition.

According to the Mehr news agency, the United Principalist Front won 88 seats and the Broad Principalist Coalition 75 seats. Two reform groups—Khatami's supporters and Etemad-e Meli—gained 23 and 17 seats respectively. Some 49 "independents" were also elected. The remainder of the 290 seats will be decided in a second round of voting next month.

All of these figures, however, are approximate. Other reports put the number of finalised seats at only 204. Moreover, who is counted in which camp is confused

by the indistinct character of the coalitions and the fact that a large number of candidates stood on multiple lists. Amir Ali Amiri, the coalition coordinator for the Broad Principalists, claimed that his group would have 80 seats, but only 32 of those successful candidates had stood solely for that list.

The reformers are claiming a victory simply because their faction will have a similar number of seats as in the previous parliament—40. Reformist politician Mohammad Ali Abtahi told the media: “The important message for us was that it was the right decision not to back down after the mass rejection of prominent reformist candidates and stay in the race. We managed to mess up their plans.” In fact, the decision to stand, rather than mount a boycott to protest the disqualifications, reflected the unwillingness of the reformers to mount any serious political challenge to the dominant conservative factions.

The validity of the vote, particularly in Tehran, has been questioned. Various figures have been reported for the seats decided in the capital—from 14 to 24 out of a total of 30, with the remainder to be decided in the second round. All of the seats, however, have gone to Ahmadinejad’s supporters with none being won by reformers or rival conservatives. An editorial in *National Confidence*, a pro-reformist newspaper, asked: “How it can be that reformists won 30 percent of the seats in rural areas, but [none so far] in the capital where reformists enjoy more media support?”

Tehran is also the base of support for Tehran mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, who, along with former top nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani, are key figures in the Broad Principalist Coalition. Qalibaf swept to power in Tehran in nationwide local elections in 2006, exploiting deep discontent among working people over deteriorating living standards. The official inflation rate is nearly 20 percent, with the cost of basic food items and housing rising sharply. While fuel prices are still low, the government imposed unpopular rationing last year in a bid to rein in the cost of subsidies.

The election outcome sets the stage for the presidential poll due next year. The strong showing by Ali Larijani, who won a seat with 76 percent of the vote in the holy city of Qom, places him in a strong position if he decides to challenge Ahmadinejad for the presidency. Qalibaf is also positioning himself as a possible contender for the post. All of these

calculations, however, depend on factors that are beyond the control of Ahmadinejad or his potential rivals.

All of the factions in Tehran are no doubt watching the US election very closely. Larijani, in particular, may be calculating that a new US administration would be more amenable to an easing of relations with Iran. While he has played down any fundamental differences with Ahmadinejad over nuclear policy, Larijani has been critical of the president’s rhetoric as unnecessarily antagonistic to the major powers. At the same time, US President Bush has not ruled out the option of using military force against Iran and is quite capable of launching such an attack in his remaining months in office—a move that would dramatically alter the political equation in Tehran.

Any downturn in the world economy will inevitably impact on Iran producing a further decline in what for many are already intolerable conditions. In such conditions, Ahmadinejad’s already tattered image as the man of the people who promised to put oil money on everyone’s table would rapidly disintegrate. All of his rivals, however, are advancing economic policies that would rein in government spending and deepen the gulf between rich and poor.

The results of the stage-managed election in Iran only serve to underscore the narrow range of opinion represented in the political establishment in which support for Iranian capitalism and the theocratic state that emerged from the 1979 revolution are mandatory. All factions are acutely aware that the simmering popular discontent that found so little expression in last Friday’s poll will not go away and has the potential to erupt in unexpected forms.



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