

Iran elections show growing alienation from bourgeois-clerical regime

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Preliminary results for Iran's parliamentary elections Friday show a victory of the bourgeois-clerical regime's "principalist" faction, which advocates a more confrontational stance on US imperialism's campaign of "maximum pressure" on Iran. Very low voter turnout in Tehran and other major cities underscored the regime's deepening crisis. It is driven on the one hand by Washington's economic sanctions and military threats, and on the other by mounting class tensions rooted in growing social inequality inside Iran.

The principalist or hardline faction of the ruling establishment advocates junking the 2015 Nuclear Accord struck with the United States and the European imperialist powers, and developing closer ties with Russia and China. Yesterday, its candidates appeared set to take around 200 of 290 parliamentary seats. Meanwhile, the "reformer" faction led by President Hassan Rouhani, which pushed for the deal with Washington and the European imperialist powers, secured just 17 seats, down from about 150 in the last parliament.

While the vote undoubtedly was a distorted reflection of popular anger at the 2015 accord's failure to bring jobs and social improvements as Rouhani had promised, the reformers' defeat also reflected the election oversight bodies' barring of many of their candidates. The powerful Guardian Council, over which Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei holds sway, banned about half of the 14,000 candidates who asked to stand. Ninety-two sitting parliamentary deputies, almost one third of the total, were also prohibited from standing.

The election's most important feature was the collapse in overall voter turnout. Reflecting mounting disillusionment with the entire regime, turnout plummeted from 62 percent in 2016 to just 42.6 percent on Friday. In Tehran, turnout was even lower, between 20 and 25 percent.

Iranian authorities did everything possible to boost

turnout. Khamenei declared voting a religious duty, and opening hours for the polls were extended twice, for a total of six hours.

The regime also tried to divert attention from mounting social inequality, the fundamental cause of the growth of political opposition, by blaming external factors for the low turnout. Khamenei denounced an anti-Iranian campaign in the Western press for spreading "negative propaganda" about the coronavirus, which he claimed dissuaded people from voting. The virus has killed eight people in Iran, where 43 cases have been reported.

However, one election volunteer for principalist candidates in the city of Isfahan bluntly told the *Financial Times*: "It is difficult to make a person who cannot afford a piece of bread for his family's dinner go to the poll, let alone vote for our favourite candidate."

One Tehran resident remarked on the inability of any faction of the regime to provide relief from crippling US-led sanctions. "Why should we wait for the result?" the resident told the *Guardian*. "It is a foregone conclusion and has been fixed in advance. They can do what they want, and we just have to get on making a living. We face years more of sanctions."

Bitter conflicts erupted inside the principalist faction in the lead-up to the elections. It failed to issue a united electoral list, as forces around former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad confronted backers of outgoing parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani, notably over the position of Islamic clerics. The Ahmadinejad faction, which wants to weaken the clerics' dominant role, appears to have emerged strengthened from the vote. Fourteen of Ahmadinejad's closest supporters, including his former central bank governor, won parliamentary seats.

The election constituted, firstly, a defeat for the reformers' strategy—approved by Khamenei and tolerated by the principalists—of cutting a deal directly with the

imperialist powers. This strategy has been blown to pieces by the US repudiation of the nuclear accord in 2018, followed by the European powers' refusal to defend it. The Trump administration's reimposition of economic sanctions has slashed Iranian oil exports, Tehran's main source of revenue, to virtually zero.

Tehran also faces a systematic US military build-up across the Middle East, aiming to consolidate US imperialism's regional hegemony by building an anti-Iranian alliance including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Persian Gulf oil sheikdoms. These aggressive actions targeting Iran culminated in January, when Trump ordered the illegal drone murder of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad.

Above all, the election gave distorted expression to growing class conflict between the workers and the Iranian capitalist class. Western sanctions have devastated social conditions, driving up inflation and poverty rates. A report last year by the Iranian parliament's research office projected that as many as 57 million of Iran's 80 million-strong population would live in poverty by next month.

This dramatic social polarization is the product not only of US-imposed sanctions, but also of the Iranian ruling elite's moves to overturn the social concessions made to the working class after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Over the past four years, this has included severe austerity and price hikes for basic commodities. Water shortages, unaffordable groceries, and high unemployment are common complaints, especially for youth and workers.

Strikes and protests among teachers and other sections of workers have continued since December 2017 and January 2018, when mass protests against unpaid wages, expensive groceries and other basic necessities, and joblessness swept Iran.

This was part of a broader global upsurge of the class struggle, with strikes and protests internationally including against Iranian-backed regimes in Iraq and Lebanon last year. A 300 percent increase to gasoline prices last November provoked protests across Iran which were bloodily suppressed. According to Amnesty International, the regime killed over 300 people in a week of violent reprisals, during which the state cut off Internet access.

Further opposition to the regime erupted after the IRGC accidentally shot down a Ukrainian jetliner at the height of the war crisis over the US assassination of Soleimani in January. The downing of the plane, killing all 176 aboard, and Iranian authorities' denials of responsibility triggered

angry protests, mainly among students and middle class professionals.

As multiple imperialist wars tear the Middle East apart, the election sets the stage for further escalation in conflicts with Washington and the European powers, who have made clear they will stop at nothing to cut across Iran's deepening ties to Russia and China.

On Sunday, Rouhani issued a statement insisting that the nuclear accord could still be "a good basis for new trust between us ... The European Union is expected to stand up to America's illegal actions." However, European powers have refused to do so. Despite pledging to uphold the nuclear accord after Trump scrapped it, Paris, Berlin, and London have refused to take any practical steps to secure Iranian access to world markets; European companies abandoned Iran to evade US reprisals.

After taking control of parliament, the principalists also hope to capture the presidency in August 2021. Rouhani, who is badly weakened, will depend on the principalists' approval to appoint ministers. Some reports speculated that throughout the remainder of Rouhani's presidency, the principalists will blame reformers for all Iran's social and political problems so as to strengthen their bid for the presidency.

As this bitter factional infighting mounts inside the Iranian bourgeoisie, a vast movement is building in the Iranian and international working class. The key task facing Iranian workers is to orient to this growing movement, reject both the Iranian regime's principalist and reformist factions, and unify their struggles with those of their class brothers and sisters across the Middle East and the world against imperialist war, based on a struggle for socialism.



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