

Iran's March 2008 Parliamentary Elections: Slogans and Stakes

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What I would like to do is to begin by pointing out some basics about Iranian elections in general that I think are important and in effect give shape to what can be said about the upcoming elections:

1. The parliamentary elections to be held on March 14 will amazingly be the 28th set of elections held since the revolution. This number includes the first three elections held in the immediate post-revolution year regarding the change of regime, election for the Constitutional Assembly and the approval of the Islamic constitution. This averages to about one election a year, even if in some years (for instance in three of the Iran-Iraq war years) no elections were held and in some Iranian calendar years elections for two separate offices were held at the same time or at different times (meaning that the country mobilized for an election two different times during the same year).
2. It was the extensiveness of resources required to mobilize for nationwide elections that led to the decision to hold the December 2006 elections for the Assembly of Experts (every eight years) and municipal councils (every four years) together. Similar attempts were made throughout last year to synchronize presidential and parliamentary elections, both held every four years, but the Guardian Council declared unconstitutional every legislative attempt to either shorten the president’s term or lengthen that of the parliament (*Majles*). Unlike the terms for the Assembly of Experts and municipal councils, the Constitution is explicit about the four -year duration of the presidential and parliamentary terms, and on this particular technicality the Guardian Council has proven a stickler to the letter of the law. This means that, unless there is some sort of constitutional change - something the current Iranian leadership is unlikely to allow for now out of the fear that any tinkering with the constitution will open the door for further tinkering - yearly or almost yearly elections will be the name of the game in Iran. (2008, 2009, 2010/2011, 2012, 2013...).
3. I point this fact out because the number of elections held and the considerable resources mobilized by the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council to run and

supervise elections and by candidates and political forces to run campaigns have involved a somewhat gradual rationalization of the process that has included an increase in the minimum age of the voters (now set at 18 for all elections) and an increase also in the minimum age and education of candidates. Some of these changes, like delimiting the age of the candidates (30 to 75), are clearly rational to avoid the silliness of very young registering and then being vetted for lack of experience and will in all likelihood be lasting. Others like the requirement of having a Masters degree with membership in each session of parliament as one educational degree are obviously political ploys to benefit the incumbents and my sense is that they will not be lasting.

Having laid out the basics about elections in Iran, a number of points stand out regarding the upcoming March 14 elections:

1. The interesting aspect of the upcoming Majles election is that despite considerably more difficult requirements for candidacy, the number of those registered is still significant. The numbers of registrants have been reduced from 8172 to 7168, a net reduction of about 1000 or about 11 percent, suggesting that like previous times disqualifications will be extensive (even a 60 percent disqualification rate would still leave on average 10 candidates for each seat), some of which for obvious reasons of not meeting the basic qualification and others for political reasons.
2. What is generally not known is that the disqualification process in Iran is a drawn out process, involving several stages. Most of us have heard of the vetting process done by the Guardian Council but this body is the final body that deals with qualification. At this point, we have just gone through the initial process of vetting done by what is called the executive boards. These boards are appointed by the Interior Ministry and as reflections of the political forces that are in charge of the executive branch they are or at least can easily be quite partisan. In the last Majles election, the members of these boards were appointed by a reformist controlled Interior Ministry and as such worked as a counter weight to the conservative supervisory boards at the provincial and central levels connected to the Guardian Council. This was not the case this time and the results show. Although I am having a difficult time finding the exact number of disqualifications at this level for the 2004 elections, everyone is suggesting that the numbers and percentages are much higher this time around (the Interior Ministry's official numbers suggests a 31 percent disqualification rate while reformist sites report something like a 5 percent disqualification rate for the last election. But the latter percentage I cannot confirm.).
3. This suggests an interesting difference between this election and last because last time around the relatively high qualification of candidates by the executive boards was rejected by the conservative supervisory boards which are arms of the Guardian Council at the provincial and central levels. The conservative control of both the executive and supervisory boards is obviously an issue of concern that

places the onus even further on the Interior Ministry especially since the person in charge of elections is a military man on leave from his military post. This opens the possibility that the Guardian Council may play an opposite role to what it usually plays in elections and end up re-qualify some of the more prominent candidates that have been vetted by the executive boards. Consultations in this regard with both the Guardian Council and the supreme leader by centrist and reformist leaders (Khatami, Karrubi and Hashemi Rafsanjani) seem to be under way and we may end up seeing something different in this election, proving once again that one cannot easily predict the direction of politics in Iran.

4. Despite the expected large number and percentages of disqualification, it is important to note that issue at hand is not disqualifications in terms of percentages per se but who will be disqualified. It is always important to remember that a relatively large number of people who do sign up are not really neither qualified nor known enough to be elected. They do try to sign up because a qualification and actual running of a campaign has financial and social advantages. So the issue is always not how many but who is vetted And in this process there is always a basic rule that is followed: disqualify your opponents as much as possible but don't do it in such a way that totally undermines the legitimacy of the elections in the minds of the supporters of the Islamic Republic.
5. This is why elections in the Islamic Republic remain significant and massive exercises in bureaucratic as well as popular mobilization, a process that the Islamic Republic as a state considers significant because it considers them exercises in its legitimation. But they are also massive because of what they entail. As I mentioned, most of us know about the Guardian Council disqualification of candidates. What is not generally known are layers of supervision and qualification process candidates have to go through at the district and provincial levels before the Guardian Council makes its final decision and the amount of resources the Interior Ministry has to mobilize to give the appearance of fair elections.
6. Setting the legitimation and bureaucratic functions elections play in Iranian politics in general, this particular election is an important election since a good showing by reformist, centrist and even moderate conservatives candidates will be seen as a rejection of Ahmadinejad's economic policies which have been deemed by opponents as expansionary, inflationary, and outright incompetent. A good showing will also set the stage for the challenge of his presidency in May 2009 on the basis of a coalition built among reformist and centrist forces allied with Iran's past presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami as well as the past speaker of Iran's Parliament, Mehdi Karrubi who, despite his loss in the past election, continues to have presidential aspirations.
7. From the looks of things key players in Iranian politics are taking the contest very seriously. The process of forming slates of candidates for large cities has been in full swing. As many of you know, the past few elections have revealed what I call

- a “hyper-fractionalization” of the political forces to the point that without some sort of concerted effort to form coalitions, political parties and organizations identified as either conservative/principlist (*osulgara*) or reformist/centrist (*eslahgara*) will not be able to declare any kind of victory in the Majles election. But in forming coalitions, the reformist/centrist and principlist forces have faced different challenges.
8. For the reformist and centrist political parties, the issue has been registering enough candidates so that after expected disqualifications they would still have appealing slates in large cities (by appealing I mean that the top tiers of the slates are sufficiently well-known to attract the voters to come and vote and, when they do, vote for the whole slate).
 9. Even more important is to overcome the fractionalization that has cost them several elections by offering slates that despite some variation essentially share a core of candidates that are acceptable to all the reformist and centrist forces. This strategy was tried during the 2006 municipal elections and led to significant gains in large cities. In the city of Tehran, for instance, the reformist/centrist council members now constitute a significant minority and because of this they were able to prevent the attempt on the part of hard-line conservatives to dislodge the mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Qalibaf, who today is considered a moderate conservative and one of the more likely persons from the conservative ranks to challenge Ahmadinejad in the next presidential election of 2009.
 10. At this point, it does not look like the reformists and centrists will be able to do this. In all likelihood, there will at least be two significant lists in Tehran and probably in other major cities, even if in some districts candidates for both the national Confidence Party (supporters of Karrubi) and the Reformist Coalition (including the Participation Front, Servants of Construction, and Mojaheddin of Islamic Revolution) will be the same. The way it looks they will not be able to set aside the bitterness that was generated at the end of Sixth Majles between the more radical deputies and centrist leaders. By being unable to come up with a unified list particularly in the city of Tehran, they will undoubtedly pay because of split loyalties. Ironically, however, if the extent of disqualification of reformist/centrist candidates stands as it is today, this will actually enhance the chance of a unified list because of dearth of reformist and centrist candidates. This is indeed a dilemma for the highly partisan forces that would like to disqualify as many of their opponents as possible.
 11. In any case, with the more radical reformists assuredly disqualified, the reformist and centrist candidates that end up being elected to the parliament will work together in the parliament. And more importantly their campaign slogans will be the same rather all purpose, even if somewhat empty, slogans of “moderation” and “competence” which only makes sense with Ahmadinejad’s presidency as a backdrop. But a caveat is important here. As will be discussed later, these two

slogans will be essentially focused on his domestic, particularly economic, policies.

12. The conservatives (or osulgarayan/ principalist) will in all likelihood not be able to come up with a unified list either. In fact, I initially thought that being in power and not facing the kinds of adverse moves that the reformists/centrists have faced in the past few years against their political survival, they will have a more difficult time overcoming their ideological and political differences over the running of the economy than the reformists/centrists. I may have over-estimated the conservative split in comparison to their opponents. Still, many conservatives, despite agreement with some of Ahmadinejad's policies have serious disagreements with his expansionary economic policies as well as his tendency to rely on a very close circle of trusted friends to run the government. This is why the likelihood of at least two significant lists is still high, with one dominated by Ahmadinejad supporters and one by others identified alternatively as independent or moderate conservatives/principalists.
13. They could of course make a marriage of convenience for the sake of maintaining power (something they were unable to do during the 2006 municipal elections) if they are able to reach an agreement about who should head the list (this is important because it gives you clues about who will in likelihood become the next speaker). But given past experience, they know that this marriage will fall apart immediately after the election as it has during the time of the current parliament.
14. Added to the cleavages that exist among the conservatives is the challenge that in reality the problem moderate conservatives have with the current parliament and the general direction of the country currently headed by Ahmadinejad and his hard-line supporters is not that different from the problem the reformist/centrists have with him. This is why whether or not sufficient reformists/centrists are elected, if enough moderate conservatives are elected the direction of the parliament will change, moving it to the center, and this change of direction will definitely set the stage for a very serious challenge to Ahmadinejad in the next presidential election by a centrist or conservative as opposed to reformist bent.
15. This situation also partially explains why the stakes are so high in this election for hard-line conservatives who are worried about this election signaling their end and others who are hoping a re-direction of the country towards the center.
16. It also explains the actual slogans of the election for a whole range of Iranian elite who are now mobilizing against Ahmadinejad and his supporters in the parliament. Three slogans I think will dominate the campaign: moderation (yes, this will be an actual slogan), competence, and enhancement of the stature of the parliament. A couple of points are noteworthy here: one that as mentioned before these slogans only make sense with Ahmadinejad's presidency as a backdrop; second, that these slogans will be enveloped by an attempted campaign focus on domestic economic issues in general and economic management specifically. The

argument will be that there has been an immoderation in economic policies (causing inflationary pressures), combined with the existence of an incompetent executive branch that was not checked by an impotent or docile parliament.

17. Now we all know that both charges of immoderation and incompetence can also be hurled against hard-line conservatives in the arena of foreign policy but it will not be for two basic reasons: First, it will be difficult to separate hard-line conservative immoderation in foreign policy from the foreign policy of Ayatollah Khamenei and hence it will not be tried. Second, and more importantly, it will be difficult to attack hard-line conservatives on this front because they, with solid support from Ayatollah Khamenei, have managed to convince a whole lot of people in Iran, including themselves, that immoderation is Iranian foreign policy (or what they call aggressive foreign policy) has paid off in comparison to the conciliatory and dialogue-oriented foreign policy of the Khatami era. Despite repeated sanctions, it is argued that Iran's standing has improved in the region; an assertion ironically constantly repeated by everyone in the US! They also argue that Ahmadinejad's redirection of Iranian foreign policy towards the Persian Gulf countries and the East has had better payoff than Khatami's European tilt.
18. Another reason the moderates will try to stay from foreign policy is the fear of their association with being the "party of appeasers" and "implementers of George Bush's policies" in Iran. The issue of U.S support for some groups in Iran's elections was brought up in a January 8 speech given by Ayatollah Khamenei. He said, "The sensitivity of the leadership regarding elections is due to the concern that some individuals find their way to the parliament who have tendencies towards being dominated, weak in front of powers, and passive when facing international agitations." Two days later, reacting angrily to the call for the international observation of Iranian elections by the opposition group, the Freedom Movement, Ayatollah Khamenei was even more explicit: "American support for anyone in Iran is a disgrace. Both people and the group for which the president of America has declared his support should think why America wants to support that group and that group had what deficiency that made America to come to its support... We must be careful so that the elections do not become a plaything in the hands of foreigners and political groups and individuals should define their boundaries with the enemy because if these boundaries lose their color or are erased, there is the possibility of the enemy crossing these boundaries or some individuals carelessly falling into the lap of the enemy... Political groups and individuals, along with delineating their boundary with the enemy, must also define their boundary with the hired hands, servants, and individuals who are in the service of the enemy."
19. All these accusatory and threatening thunder occurred in a week in which candidates for the March 14th parliamentary elections were supposed to register. So the question was what the conservatives, with the protection and cue from Ayatollah Khamenei, are up to. I can think of two explanations, one having to do with transforming the general atmosphere that has characterized recent elections

in Iran and second essentially revolving around the conservatives' campaign strategy.

20. Regarding the transformation of the atmosphere, I should make clear that Iranian elections are always raucous with lots of accusations flying around from all sides. But the period leading to elections, particularly in the past few elections, are usually periods when a conversational space opens and many issues regarding the manner elections are held, the vetting process, handicapping of many political players, constraints imposed to prevent a truly competitive process, and impediments to a truly democratic process are aired. The clear and unambiguous references to the "enemy hands" and domestic groups and individuals wanting to "surrender to the enemy" are intended to close that conversational space and in all likelihood will tighten it.
21. To be sure, there will be numerous complaints about the tightening of this conversational space in reformist and opposition blogs and websites but newspapers connected to various political groups who are contesting the conservative control of the parliament will have to be more restrained in their complaints about the rules of the game lest they'll be accused of having sold their souls to George Bush. In Iran, like in other contested political environments, the charge of weakness against the enemy, or using the enemy's talking points, is usually a pretty good conversation killer.
22. Tightening of the conversational space is only one aspect of what is going on. As I mentioned above, for the hard-line conservative candidates, the focus on foreign enemies and their domestic servants is also intended to serve a much more mundane purpose of helping them win in an election which they worry they might lose to more centrist candidates.
23. By pointing the accusatory finger towards the reformists, they hope to change the conversation and deflect attention from the criticism - coming even from the centrist candidates and parties with a good chance of doing well in the election - that the conservatives controlling both the executive and legislative branches have been both reckless and incompetent in their running of the economy.
24. Instead, the successes the conservatives have had in defending Iran's "national sovereignty" and standing tall on the nuclear issue will be highlighted with a constant reference to those who were ready to give in on the question of enrichment out of fear. This attempted change of conversation is also important for the maintenance of some sort of unity within the conservative ranks which as I mentioned above are deeply divided over economic issues and policies.
25. Ultimately, though, the chances of a more moderate parliament emerging is relatively high, with important figures shaping it who are either moderate or now considered moderate despite their rather hard-line past (such as Ali Larijani). Such a centrist coalition will set the stage for a challenge to Ahmadinejad in the

2009 presidential election with this caveat that this challenge will by no means be an assured or successful challenge. It is important to remember that through his many provincial trips and populist politics, Ahmadinejad has been preparing and literally campaigning for his second term the day he took office. As such, Iranian contested terrain remains fluid and difficult to predict.