



IRANIAN LEGISLATIVE ELECTION: TOWARD A RECONFIGURATION OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

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INTRODUCTION

During the 41st anniversary of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Rūḥānī claimed: "The revolution happened because the gate for elections were locked. The closure of the path of elections led people to tear down the shackles through a great revolution (...)"¹ Through these words, the Iranian president addressed a veiled yet strong warning at the Rahbar-e Enqelāb Khāmeneī: if the regime intends to heal the divide between the ruling elite and the population, it must hold free and fair elections. Since the results of the recent legislative election will ultimately impact the future of Iran-EU relations, this paper suggest that the European Union must redouble its efforts in negotiating with the Islamic Republic of Iran to promote a positive change in the country.

¹"روحانی: اگر رژیم فاسد گذشته به انتخابات سالم تن می‌داد انقلاب نمی‌شد", BBC Farsi, February 11, 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/persian/iran-51458877>

KEY TAKAWAYS

- On 21st February 2020 legislative election took place in Iran.
- A second round is planned on 17th April in the constituencies where no candidate won the 20 percent required to win a seat.
- Conservative formations score a resounding victory.
- The Guardian Council of the Constitution prevented moderate and reformists figures to take part in the election.
- Numerous activists called to boycott of the election as a strategy of civil disobedience.
- The turnout reached its lowest level in the history of the Islamic Republic.
- The election appears as the first step of a reconfiguration of the Iranian political elite, foreshadowing a step backward toward authoritarianism.
- The result of the election is likely to impact the future of Iran-EU relations as it is likely to prelude the 2021 presidential election.

THE IRANIAN MAJLES

Composed of 290 seats allocated among 207 electoral constituencies, the Majles-e Šūrāye Eslāmī (Islamic Consultative Assembly) embodies the legislative power in Iran. This institution is endowed with prerogatives such as approving international treaties,² investigating over all affairs of the country,³ or validating the government's bills through a confidence vote.⁴ However, its power has gradually declined because Khāmeneī has repeatedly interfered in the Majles' affairs, consolidating his control over this institution. For instance, he ordered the deployment of forces in Syria without the parliament's approval.⁵ He assigned the responsibility for the annual budget to a non-elected body,⁶ and refused to ratify the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (UNTOC), previously signed by the parliament.⁷ Consequently, the Majles has progressively transformed into a mere decorative institution.⁸

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Nevertheless, the 2020 legislative election remains an important event. Firstly, because the Islamic Republic is defined as an authoritarian elective regime.⁹ While maintaining an authoritarian structure, the regime has adopted formal democratic procedures as a legitimizing tool.¹⁰ Through elections it may conveniently argue to rightfully represent the Iranian population. However, if restricted forms of pluralism among the

political elite have been tolerated, to a certain extent, the election certainly contributed to reshape the Iranian political landscape. Secondly, this election is the first one to follow the recent unrest that erupted all around the country, highlighting some instrumental challenges for the regime.¹¹ Unfortunately, while the election could have materialized as an opportunity to answer the demands that the protesters expressed, by allowing more pluralism, the regime has further strengthened its control over the political field, restricting the electoral competition at the expense of moderate and reformist formations.

A RESOUNDING CONSERVATIVE VICTORY

The conservative camp scored a resounding victory in the Majles, winning most seats including all the ones allocated to Tehrān's constituency. Nonetheless, this faction appears as fragmented in several subgroups: the traditional conservatives, led by Mīrsalīm, the technocratic neo-conservatives of Qālībāf, former member of the Basij and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the ultraconservatives' Front of Islamic Revolution Stability, led by Āqātehrānī.¹² Qālībāf reached the highest score in Tehrān,¹³ as he secured his victory through an alliance with the traditional conservatives.¹⁴ Both Qālībāf and Āqātehrānī rival for the position of chairman. The latter virulently attacked his opponent over his support for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).¹⁵ The 2020 election has radically transformed the Majles from a relatively balanced

² Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, article 77, 1989.

³ Idem, article 76.

⁴ Idem, article 87.

⁵ Behrouz Turani, « Start of Iran's Election Campaign Marked by Public Indifference, Disunity Among Conservatives », Radio Farda, February 13, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/election-campaign-in-iran-marked-by-public-indifference-disunity-among-conservatives/30432459.html>

⁶ Idem.

⁷ « Iran Postpones Approval of UN Convention Against Transnational Crime », Radio Farda, January 19, 2019. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-postpones-approval-of-un-convention-against-transnational-crime/29719066.html>

⁸ Pezhman Tahavori, "Elections End Any Pretense of Democracy in Iran", IranWire, February 22, 2020.

<https://iranwire.com/en/features/6731>

⁹ Clément Therme, "Iran : la fin de la révolution islamique ?", Cairn Info, 2018.

¹⁰ Kjetil Selvik, « Autocratic legitimation in Iran: Ali Khamenei's

discourse on regime "insiders" and "outsiders", Democratization, 2018. DOI 10.1080/13510347.2018.1446947

¹¹ "Protests in Iran: A Desperate Call for Reforms", Brussels International Center, 2020.

<http://www.bic-rhr.com/research/protests-iran-desperate-call-domestic-reform>

¹² "Rouhani's Spokesman Says Going to Polls Prevents Islamic Republic's 'Collapse'", Radio farad, February 3, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-rouhani-s-spokesman-says-going-to-polls-prevents-islamic-republic-s-collapse-/30414954.html>

¹³ "Partial Iran Election Results Show Low Turnout, Specially in Tehran", Radio farad, February 23, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-gradually-releases-election-figures-delays-tehran-turnout-announcement/30450070.html>

¹⁴ Ruhollah Faghihi, "Iran's hardliners set to triumph in legislative elections as reformists sidelined", Middle east Eye, February 20, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iranians-gear-parliamentary-poll-conservative-victory-all-assured>

¹⁵ Idem.

institution into an assembly of conservatives.

Highest scores reached in the constituency of Tehrān, Rey, Šemīrānāt, Eslāmshahr and Pardīs ¹⁶			
Candidate	Mohammad Bāqer Qālibāf	Moštafā Mīrsalīm	Morteḏā Āqātehrānī
Faction	Conservative		
Sub-faction	Neo-Conservative	Traditional Conservative	Ultra-Conservative
Running List	Coalition Council of Islamic Revolution Forces	Coalition Council of Islamic Revolution Forces	Front of Islamic Revolution Stability
Score	68.69%	48.45%	47.13%

The moderates' sharp defeat relies on four main factors. First, the Guardian Council of the Constitution, tasked with ascertaining the validity of electoral candidacy based on allegiance to the doctrine of Velāyat-e Faqīh, established a more draconian approach. It disqualified most moderate candidates over political motives.¹⁷ Its deliberate strategy of forbidding the reformist elements to run in the election at such a large scale appears as an unprecedented move. This disqualification clearly intensified after the 2019 November protests,¹⁸ evidencing an intentional tactic to prevent any convergence between members of the political elite and protesters. Second, the disappointment derived from the poor record of Rūḥānī's administration which failed to concretize its promises of economic prosperity and socio-political liberalization.

¹⁶ "نتیجه انتخابات مجلس شورای اسلامی"، Ministry of Interior, February 23, 2020. <https://tehran.ostan-th.ir/News/6894/-نتیجه-انتخابات-مجلس-شورای-اسلامی.html>

¹⁷ Maziar Bahari, « Iran has been Moving Toward a Military Dictatorship, One Parliament at a Time», IranWire, February 20, 2020. <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6722>

¹⁸ Maziar Bahari, « Iran has been Moving Toward a Military Dictatorship, One Parliament at a Time», IranWire, February 20, 2020. <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6722>

¹⁹ Clément Therme, "Iran : la fin de la revolution islamique ?", Cairn Info, 2018.

²⁰ Hessaam Ghanatir, "Why Did Iranian Reformists Turn Conservative Overnight?", IranWire, November 25, 2020. <https://iranwire.com/en/features/6494>

²¹ "With Most Reformists Barred, Iran's Parliamentary Elections Offer Little Choice", Radio Farda, February 8, 2020.

Third, the apathy of the population regarding the election. In the eyes of many Iranians, the status quo consisting of an opposition between reformists and conservatives is no longer a viable option,¹⁹ as some may view the rival factions as the two sides of the same coin.²⁰ Fourth, following the protests, numerous activists called the population to boycott the election as a strategy of civil disobedience.²¹ Such considerations may also explain why the elections in the election witnessed the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic.²² Indeed, the rate of participation reached only 42,5% for the entire country and 25,4% in Tehrān province.²³

A RECONFIGURATION OF THE POLITICAL ELITE

The process of the election evidences the extent to which revolutionary non-elected bodies, directly supervised by the Rahbar-e Enqelāb, have consolidated their control over elected institutions, foreshadowing a step backward into authoritarianism. The election initiated a new pattern in Iranian politics which shall have tremendous consequences.

First, the restriction of the electoral field to a competition solely between conservative sub factions is likely to reinforce the apathy of the population. In this regard, the regime may gradually damage its claim of representation, further driving a wedge between the political elite and disillusioned citizens.²⁴ Second, the Guardian Council's behaviour may spell the end of reformism as a tolerated voice of opposition inside the

<https://en.radiofarda.com/a/with-most-reformists-barred-iran-s-parliamentary-elections-offer-little-choice/30423088.html>

²² "Partial Iran Election Results Show Low Turnout, Specially in Tehran", Radio farad, February 23, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-gradually-releases-election-figures-delays-tehran-turnout-announcement/30450070.html>

²³ Ehsan Mehrabi, "Khamenei Appears Not Shaken by Lowest Election Turnout In 40 Years", Radio farad, February 24, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/khamenei-appears-not-shaken-by-lowest-election-turnout-in-40-years/30451894.html>

²⁴ Shahir Shahidsaless, "Iran elections: How Khamenei is closing down the reformists", Middle East Eye, February 19, 2020. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-elections-how-political-system-distancing-itself-people>

system. Hitherto, reformism's coexistence with conservatism permitted check and balance.

The gradual exclusion of moderates from the power circles shall ultimately result in the reconfiguration of a more cohesive and homogeneous political elite characterised by an unwavering obedience to Khāmeneī. Third, the homogenisation of the political elite shall mark a new step in the parliament's transformation into a mere ornamental institution.

Fourth, the 11th Majles will certainly adopt a more confrontational tone toward the West. For most conservatives, resistance must take precedence over negotiations. Thus, the new members of the parliament might make diplomacy with western countries more complicated. Fifth, the new Majles is likely to use its prerogatives to obstruct the endeavours of Rūḥānī's administration on the domestic and international levels. The hardliner members of the 10th Majles already gave a hard time to Foreign Minister Żarīf, accused of threatening national interests,²⁵ such clashes with the government will likely reoccur on a more frequent basis under the legislature of the 11th parliament.

It is noteworthy to point out that the election process was heavily impacted by a context of wide tensions. Threatened by internal and external challenges, Khāmeneī had two options: regaining legitimacy by compromising with the protesters or reinforcing the regime's stability by relying on a deep state, composed of a loyal oligarchy derived from IRGC and the Basij backgrounds.²⁶ ²⁷ Khāmeneī's choice for authoritarianism materializes as a strategy of survival. By silencing internal dissident voice, he intends to form a more cohesive

front in order to resist external threats. In the meantime, his desire for concentration of powers may also signify that Khāmeneī is preparing his succession.²⁸ Nevertheless, this move might backlash as the Rahbar-e Enqelāb shall be, more than ever, exposed as the sole responsible for the regime's behaviours.²⁹

KEY INSIGHTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of these developments, the BIC strongly urges the European Union to reenergize and accelerate negotiations with Iran in order to safeguard the JCPOA. Despite the reconfiguration of the Iranian political landscape, President Rūḥānī remains the last standing man endowed with enough influence and willingness to ensure a fruitful cooperation with the European Union. On numerous occasions, his government reiterated its readiness to fulfil, once again, all the obligations derived from the deal.³⁰ The EU cannot afford losing this opportunity since the upcoming 2021 election might witness the rise of a more unpredictable and less pragmatic Iranian president.

Ensuring the implementation of the JCPOA would not solely benefit the Islamic Republic,³¹ initiating a first step in its formal integration within the international community, it would also provide the European Union with some leverage on the regime. In a previous paper entitled "Protests in Iran: a Desperate Call for Domestic Reforms",³² the BIC argued that by reaching an equilibrium between safeguarding the deal and instrumentalizing it to pressure the Islamic Republic, the EU could significantly improve the domestic situation in Iran.

²⁵ "Iran Hardliners Protest Against Zarif In Tehran", Radio Farad, January 27, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-hardliners-protest-against-zarif-in-tehran/30400701.html>

²⁶ Saeid Golkar, "Paramilitarization of the economy: the case of Iran's basij", *Armed Forces and Society*, 38 (4), 2012. DOI: 10.1177/0095327X12437687

²⁷ Zoltan Barany, « Who will shield the Imams? Regime protection in Iran and the Middle east », *Middle East Policy Council*, Vol XXVI, No. 1, 2019.

²⁸ Behrouz Turani, "Iran's Parliamentary Elections: Winners And Losers", *Radio Farda*, February 23, 2020. <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-s-parliamentary-elections-winners-and-losers/30449652.html>

²⁹ Behrouz Turani, « Start of Iran's Election Campaign Marked by Public Indifference, Disunity Among Conservatives », *Radio Farda*, February 13, 2020. [https://en.radiofarda.com/a/election-](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/election-campaign-in-iran-marked-by-public-indifference-disunity-among-conservatives/30432459.html)

[campaign-in-iran-marked-by-public-indifference-disunity-among-conservatives/30432459.html](https://en.radiofarda.com/a/election-campaign-in-iran-marked-by-public-indifference-disunity-among-conservatives/30432459.html)

³⁰ "Rouhani hopes nuclear deal will be preserved through cooperation", *Tehran Times*, March 1, 2020. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/445714/Rouhani-hopes-nuclear-deal-will-be-preserved-through-cooperation>

³¹ Abdolrasool Divsallar and Marc Otte, 'Reviving the Security Function: EU's Path to Save the JCPOA', *Egmont Security Policy Brief*, No. 113, <http://www.egmontinstitute.be/reviving-the-security-function-eus-path-to-save-the-jcpoa/>

³² "Protests in Iran: A Desperate Call for Reforms", *Brussels International Center*, 2020. <http://www.bic-rhr.com/research/protests-iran-desperate-call-domestic-reform>

Therefore, the EU must accept the outstretched hand of Rūḥānī before witnessing a complete lockdown of the Iranian political system. Furthermore, because the step backward into authoritarianism, preluded by this recent election, materializes as the result of Iran's marginalization from the international community and the pressure exerted by the US, breaking Iran's isolation and defusing the tensions by empowering Iranians to reject the American pseudo-solution must remain a top European priority to prevent any further deterioration of the situation. One instrument available to the EU to achieve these goals is the Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), designed to thwart the American sanctions and which, unfortunately, remains a mere theoretical framework.

Thus, it is imperative to initiate the implementation phase of INSTEX forthwith. Moreover, in order to increase the chances of success of this approach, the European Union should closely cooperate with the other signatories of the JCPOA: China and Russia. The Russian government has already stated its willingness to collaborate with the EU on INSTEX.³³ Delivering economic benefits to the regime in return for the reimplementation of the JCPOA remains the best strategy to ensure a fruitful cooperation with Rūḥānī's administration.³⁴

BIC POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > Reenergizing negotiations with Iran to safeguard the JCPOA as it is the last mean of pressure available to the EU to promote a positive change in the country. For this purpose, the EU must fully enforce INSTEX and closely cooperate with China and Russia to thwart the American sanctions in order to prompt Iran to reimplement the JCPOA.

³³ "Russia will not let the UNSC become toy in the hands of US: Ryabkov", Mehr News Agency, February 27, 2020.

³⁴ "A way out of the US-Iranian Impasse", International Crisis

Group, January 29, 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/way-out-us-iranian-impasse>

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