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UNDERSTANDING IRAN'S ELECTIONS: MODERATES v/s HARDLINERS

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On February 26, 2016, the Islamic republic of Iran held elections to choose the 10th Consultative Assembly and 5th Assembly of Experts. Approximately 62% of the eligible Iranian electorate voted in these elections. Out of the 12,123 individuals who had registered their names to run for the Parliament, only 6,300 managed to win the approval of the Guardian Council.¹ And out of 801 people who put their names down for the Elections, only 161 qualified.² It is pertinent to mention here that the factions are not formalised and cohesive in Iran, as in US and Europe but they are based on ideology. The most pressing issues in the recent elections have been the economy, foreign affairs, and human rights.

Iran's Parliament (*majlis*) is a unicameral legislature comprising 290 members who are elected for a four year term. These parliamentarians are responsible for drafting legislations and approving the country's budget. However, the parliament is held in check by the

Guardian Council, whose members examine all the laws passed by the Parliament to determine their compatibility with the Islamic law. Guardian Council consists of 12 experts in Islamic law; six of them appointed by the Supreme Leader of Iran and six are nominated by the judiciary and approved by Iran's Parliament. These 12 theologians can veto parliamentary bills if considered to be in violation of Iran's constitution.³

The recent elections are important in order to understand the continuation of at least three main trends in Iranian politics—firstly, the convergence of centrists and reformists on many issues. At odds with one another from 1997 to 2013, they worked together to minimise the vote splitting, thereby, increasing their chances of winning. Secondly, traditional and hardliner conservatives have continued to nurse their differences on economy and foreign policy. Thirdly, and most importantly, Iranian electorate, by and large, decided to participate in



the elections after speculations that majority could choose to boycott over the issues related to electoral fraud and unfairness in elections.⁴ However, the voting pattern does suggest the possibility of a new force in Iranian politics, a strong coalition of moderates that can claim both popular support and traction among system's power negotiators. Recent elections have been able to nudge the overall partisan balance in the parliament distinctly away from hardliners and more towards the moderate political center in Iran.⁵

This election is also important as it saw the gains for the moderates (including the Centrists) and the reformists as against the notable losses of the hard-line conservatives in Iran. However, this is still the preliminary stage; there are many aspects which will be determined after the second round of elections to be held on April 29, 2016 for the remaining seats. The elected Members of Parliament will serve from May 28, 2016 to May 27, 2020. These elections are very important as they came only few months after the Rouhani Government's landmark nuclear deal with the western superpowers that settled a long running dispute over Iran's nuclear programme. However, Iranian parliament has more of a say in the domestic politics than in the foreign policy of Iran. Nevertheless, no particular faction won an outright majority in Iran. One clear change in the political environment is that conservative factions will not be as dominant as they have been in the past. The reformists did

better by taking all the 30 seats in Tehran despite the fact that many candidates were barred from contesting the elections. On the other hand hardliners and conservatives did better nationwide. The recent elections were also distinct with the fact that 14 women have won seats in the parliament, with 11 being the reformists.⁶

The recent elections are a litmus test for Rouhani's two most controversial policies: nuclear deal and opening up of Iranian economy to foreign direct investments in private sector. Analysts say that with the present result Rouhani will find it easier to pursue economic liberalisation to attract investment to boost growth and create jobs for millions of Iranians.⁷ With the lifting of sanctions, Iran aims to improve its economy by [producing an additional one million barrels](#) per day (bpd) of oil in 2016, and return to the 3.5 million bpd level it produced before economic sanctions were imposed in 2011 and 2012. Its move to increase oil production is a factor in the drop of oil prices in the world market, hurting other oil-producing countries including its main rival, Saudi Arabia.⁸ Victory of moderates and reformists can also play in favour of India with the reducing oil prices being favourable for Indian economy. This is also a positive development for India since the continuation of the current stance of President Rouhani would make it easy for India to conclude many longstanding bilateral agreements favourably. There are probable chances that the

present regime will look for more business opportunities in the stable West Asian as well as South Asian region, thereby reducing the problems that India was facing in conducting business with Tehran due to the sanctions. Greater democratic representation as witnessed in the recent Iranian elections is also a welcome development for India.⁹

In the past, many hardliners in Iran have been insisting that the US cannot be trusted and that President Rouhani was leading the country into disaster with the nuclear deal. It seems that with the election results being in favour of Rouhani, it has given him the approval for his policies. The results will also, to a certain extent, silence the hardliner criticism and at the same time put a lot of pressure on Iranian leadership to deliver more such policies. The favourable result for the reformists will also be significant for Rouhani as it increases his chances of seeking re-election next year.¹⁰

The balance of power in Iran has shifted to a younger, more pluralistic and more reform-minded generation. The recent elections have set the stage for major changes in Iran.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ The Guardian Council of the Constitution is an appointed and constitutionally-mandated 12-member council that wields considerable power and influence in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

² "Analysis: 2016 Iranian Parliamentary & Assembly of Experts Election Results", March 07, 2016, <http://majlismintor.com/en/2016/03/analysis-2016-iranian-parliamentary-assembly-of-experts-election-results/>. Accessed on March 11, 2016.

³ "Politics in Iran", <http://iranmatters.belfercenter.org/politics-iran>. Accessed on March 11, 2016.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Analysis: 2016 Iranian Parliamentary & Assembly of Experts Election Results", March 07, 2016, <http://majlismintor.com/en/2016/03/analysis-2016-iranian-parliamentary-assembly-of-experts-election-results/>

⁶ Garrett Nada, "Iran's Elections Erode the Hardliner's Dominance", <http://www.usip.org/publications/2016/03/03/qa-iran-s-elections-erode-hardliners-dominance>. Accessed on March 14, 2016.

⁷ Ian Black, "Iran Election Results put Hassan Rouhani on Cautious Path to Reform", <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/29/iran-election-result-hassan-rouhani-reform>. Accessed on March 14, 2016.

⁸ Ted Regencia, "Iran's Elections: Crucial Polls a test for Rouhani", February 26, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/02/iran-elections-parliamentary-poll-test-rouhani-160226041517683.html>. Accessed on March 14, 2016.

⁹ Asif Shuja, "Iran Elections 2016: Gains for Moderates", <http://airworldservice.org/english/archives/22291>. Accessed on March 16, 2016.

¹⁰ Saeed Kamali Dehghan, "Iran Election Campaign Kicks-off as Reformers Seek Comeback", February 18, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/iran-reformers-campaign-to-block-hardliners-ahead-of-key-elections>. Accessed on March 14, 2016.