



## UNDERSTANDING KEY ASPECTS IN IRAN'S ELECTIONS: PHASE II

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Iran's political structure is very unique as it is a society based on the principles of Islamic jurisprudence. Elections in Iran are also important from the fact that there are no political parties in Iran with the Members of Parliament (*majlis*) being divided into blocs; with some taking the moderate path and the others taking the Hard-line posture. The Assembly of Experts (*Majlis-e-Khobregan*)-the body in charge of selecting the Supreme Leader's successor- is an 88 member body of Islamic jurists, elected by a direct popular vote for eight years. The Assembly's directive is to appoint, monitor and dismiss (if appropriate) the supreme leader. The body is comprised of a leadership council and six committees, which meet twice a year. With the limited interpretation of its mandate and the non-regularity of meetings, the Assembly has no significant role in the day-to-day politics in Iran. However, in practice, the Assembly has never really questioned the supreme leader.<sup>1</sup>

The successful completion of the first phase of the Iranian election on February 26, 2016 clearly indicates the direction in which, the Islamic republic is heading. There emerged no clear winners during February elections. The first round of elections in Iran saw the moderate President Hassan Rouhani and his supporters making huge gains. However, it was not a clear majority clearly hinting that the outcome of the second round could affect the balance of power in the legislature. Further, as mentioned above, the political ideology is fluid in Iran, meaning that the self-identified moderates might support Rouhani on economic matters, but not on social and security concerns. The figures of the election results also point to the fact that no single group or party will control the next parliament that can lead to a possible political stalemate.<sup>2</sup>

The recent elections in Iran are also important since according to the official sources 14 female candidates—all reformists—have won the seats across the country.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this,

seven more women candidates are expected to contest in the April round of elections. There is also a rise of five MPs compared to a total of nine female MPs in the last Iranian parliament. This means that around five percent of Iranian MPs are women.<sup>4</sup> With the run-off candidates potentially winning, this could be the largest female delegation in the history of Iranian Parliament, including the pre-Iranian revolution assembly. The rise in the number of the female MPs in the Iranian parliament suggests that there will be more voices to fight for the women's cause that would, eventually, lead to the improvement in the social conditions of the female workers, promote better working hours for women, child custody and more importantly, free movement of women without any supervision of male family member. However, as against this positive outcome, in the Assembly of Experts election—which coincided with the parliamentary elections in Iran—all female candidates were disqualified. Despite the persistent attempt by the women politicians in Iran to make their voices heard, their presence on the political front can be termed as bare minimum. Though, there is much to be seen about what this female power can achieve in the present domestic political circumstances in Iran.

The recent election results also marked the defeat of the two front running hardliner figures—Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi (Chairman of the Assembly of Experts) and Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah Yazdi who lost their

seats in the Assembly. The latter was also known as the spiritual mentor to former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the most hard-line of Iran's Presidents. Another prominent hardliner, Ahmad Jannati, who chairs the Guardian Council, finished last in the assembly elections clearly indicates that the people of Iran are supporting the reform movement of the Rouhani government which includes economic liberalisation and normalisation of relationship with the western powers.<sup>5</sup> President Rouhani has also secured a seat for himself in the Assembly of Experts in the recent elections, coming in second behind Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—a former president who has also become an important ally. Yet the eighty-eight ayatollahs who win the next assembly election will occupy their seats for eight years, and given that the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's is fairly old (75+) with a weak health condition due to a prostate surgery in 2014, most observers speculate that they will face the challenge of appointing his successor.<sup>6</sup> Iran has a clear legal procedure for choosing the Supreme Leader, which has not been followed till now. The membership of President Rouhani and former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani into the Assembly can play a crucial role in case it comes to choosing the next Supreme Leader of Iran.<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that there are severe factional battles in Iran, with clear differences of opinion among present Iranian politicians. However, these differences may prove important in choosing the next supreme leader.

The second phase of the same elections will be held on April 29, 2016 which will decide the fate of the candidates running for 69 Parliamentary seats. The run-off in April is necessary because under Iran's election rules a Member of Parliament must win 25% of the votes casted, which happened only for 221 out of the total 290 seats at the recently concluded election in Iran.<sup>8</sup>The second round will involve only the top two contenders from the first list for each seat that is left vacant. There is the possibility for witnessing a more progressive parliament in Iran after the voting is concluded in the April 2016 elections. These results will have a significant impact as it will set the course of its relations with the international community.

*(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

<sup>1</sup> Emma Borden, "Everything you need to know about Iran's Assembly of Experts election", February 9, 2016, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2016/02/09-iran-election-assembly-of-experts-explainer-borden>. Accessed on April 6, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Shahir Shahidaless, "Decoding Iran's Elections", March 3, 2016, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/decoding-iran-s-2016-elections-38335535>. Accessed on April 6, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Ted Regencia, "Iran election: Women Make Gains in New Parliament", March 7, 2016, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/03/iran-election-women-parliament-160301121014801.html>. Accessed on April 6, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Barney Henderson, "Iranian MP sparks outrage by stating 'women, donkeys and monkeys have no place in parliament'", March 10, 2016,

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/12189593/Iranian-MP-sparks-outrage-by-stating-women-donkeys-and-monkeys-have-no-place-in-parliament.html>. Accessed on April 7, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Mehdi Khalaji, "Choosing Iran's Next Supreme Leader", February 4, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/choosing-irans-next-supreme-leader>. Accessed on April 7, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> David Blair, "Iran Elections: Hassan Rouhani hails 'new chapter' as first results show sweeping gains for moderates", February 28, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/12176594/Hassan-Rouhani-hails-new-chapter-as-first-results-show-sweeping-gains-for-moderate-candidates.html>. Accessed on April 7, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> "Second Round of Iran's Elections Set for April 29", March 14, 2016, [http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2016-03-14/news/71509870\\_1\\_president-hassan-rouhani-iran-elections-reformists](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2016-03-14/news/71509870_1_president-hassan-rouhani-iran-elections-reformists). Accessed on April 6, 2016.