



**Islamabad
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Supporting Dialogue for Peace & Development

Iranian Parliamentary Elections 2020

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The recently held parliamentary elections in Iran may have far-reaching consequences for the future political landscape of the Middle East. The elections for Iran's tenth Islamic Consultative Assembly held in 2016 had witnessed considerable gains for the moderates, including both reformists and centrists, thus putting the conservatives at a disadvantage. Desperate Iranians then had discovered a ray of hope in the newly signed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) also known as the Iranian nuclear deal. The deal aimed at incrementally removing punitive sanctions on Iran in return for Tehran's commitment to halt uranium enrichment that could lead to the creation of nuclear weapons. The Iranians had found in the moderates a panacea for addressing their grievances concerning dwindling economy, international isolation, and crippling western sanctions.

The deal was wholly backed by the then US President Barack Obama. It was, at that time, expected that subsequent US administrations would also go along well with Iran if the reformists, who strongly favoured rapprochement with the US, stayed in power in Tehran. Therefore, in view of the prospects of peaceful engagement with the Western powers, Iranians in 2016 had voted for the reformists giving them a massive majority in the Parliament. Rouhani-led moderates had then swept all 30 parliamentary seats in Tehran and had performed exceptionally well in other parts of the country. Even at the 88-member Assembly of Experts, a body constitutionally charged with appointing Iranian supreme leader, witnessed gains for the moderates with two prominent conservatives losing the polls.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei too had conditionally endorsed a working relationship with the West, keeping in mind the past unsuccessful efforts of President Khatami.

Then events took a dramatic turn in 2018 when the newly elected US President Donald Trump, under overwhelming pressure from the pro-Israel neoconservative bloc, withdrew the US from the nuclear peace deal. It was a severe blow to the popularity of President Rouhani-led Iranian moderates. The episode vindicated the conservatives who had stringently opposed the Iranian nuclear deal and the idea of further engaging with the West. What made the 2020 elections for Iran's eleventh Islamic Consultative Assembly interesting was the fact that it was the first parliamentary election that took place after US withdrawal from the nuclear deal.

The parliamentary elections that took place on February 21, 2020, brought a shocking defeat for Iranian moderates, reformists and their pro-West supporters. Iranian conservatives got a thumping majority with whopping 221 parliamentary seats haul from a total of 290 seats on which polls were held. This victory included all 30 crucial seats from Tehran. The reformists were, meanwhile, able to win just 16 seats. The remaining 53 members included independents, minorities, and seats on which recontest would be held.

When compared with the previous parliament, only 56 members retained their seats. It should be recalled that of the 290 MPs from the previous parliament only 170 ran for re-election, after 75 outgoing members were disqualified, out of which 56 won. Importantly, the 56 returning members include 41 conservatives. Rouhani's group in the parliament was completely decimated. Only seven members of the pro-Rouhani group have returned to the new parliament out of 102 in the previous legislature.

There were numerous reasons for the crushing defeat suffered by the reformists and the decisive victory of the Iranian conservatives.

First, there were more than 58 million people eligible to cast their votes, yet the elections witnessed the lowest turnout since the Islamic revolution of 1979. First reports of deaths from coronavirus pandemic, which coincided with the elections, played a paramount role in limiting the participation and thus resulting in the lowest turnout in decades. Electoral turnout peaked in 2006 when around 71% of people cast their vote and the previous lowest turnout was recorded in 2004 when only 51% went to the electoral booths. This time the turnout remained at 42.57%, which by international standards is still quite decent. However, the numbers in Iran's case are important because the clerical establishment cite the turnout as an indicator of its legitimacy and credibility and continued public acceptance of the revolution. It was in this context that Ayatollah Khamenei and other pro-revolution figures accused West and anti-revolution elements of using Corona virus scare to stop the people from going out to vote.

Second, as has been mentioned above the US withdrawal from Iran deal brightened the electoral prospects of the conservatives as their stance on no-engagement stood vindicated. The US withdrawal was soon followed by more stringent sanctions on the Iranian oil and banking sector. This resulted in further increase in inflation, lower growth, and decreased employment rate. These factors together diminished the popularity of President Hassan Rouhani, who had fetched votes on the promise of huge dividends from the nuclear deal. Thus, the reformists lost the confidence of the voters, who had in 2016 polls backed them and pinned hopes on them for resuscitating the dwindling economy in the last parliamentary elections. The outcome of 2020 elections looked to be much similar to that of 2004 when reformists suffered major defeat in parliamentary elections because negotiations with France, Britain, and Germany on the nuclear program were then stalemated.

Thirdly, the other important reason for the phenomenal victory of the conservatives was the disqualification of more than 7,000 hopefuls by the Guardian Council, majority of them being the reformists including 75 current lawmakers. Since the powerful Guardian Council clears the way of candidates for the elections, keeping in view their overall performance and achievements, the reformists could not recover from the setback. This paved the way for the victory of the conservatives in the parliamentary elections.

Fourth, there are certain elements within the conservatives, who are not so rigidly opposed to the nuclear deal and averse to engaging with the West on it. For example, Tehran's former mayor and chief of the police Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, was both conservative/pro-regime (clerical establishment) and at the same time staunch supporter of the Iranian nuclear deal. He managed to secure 1,265,000 votes, the highest in Tehran. Therefore, with the reformists down before the polls, the contest was in reality between the conservatives and ultra-conservatives, leaving no chance for the reformists to emerge victorious.

Fifth, the popularity of the regime too had suffered reversals ahead of the elections. Introduction of 33% increase in fuel prices in 2019 had led to largescale anti-government protests in which the clergy too was blamed for the situation. Another wave of protests hit at the beginning of 2020 when the government did not reveal for days the cause of Flight 752 crash and later admitted that it was inadvertently downed by Iran military misconceiving it as an enemy missile/plane. These two episodes damaged the prospects of the reformists, but were bigger blows for the clergy that dominates the policy making.

Sixth, the killing of serving Iranian military commander General Qasem Soleimani by an American drone while on his diplomatic visit to Iraq stirred nationalism and sympathy factor. Millions of Iranians came out of their homes to pay homage to the slain Soleimani. This severely undermined the stance of the reformists who had favoured engagement with the West. The US action was seen as a blatant violation of international law and a grave breach of Iraqi sovereignty. The incident helped the conservatives, who had always alleged the US of backstabbing and acting as an agent of chaos in the region.

The resounding victory of the conservatives in the parliamentary elections may lead to critical changes in Iranian domestic and foreign policy approaches:

- The results of the parliamentary elections could potentially have a direct impact on the presidential elections scheduled for next year setting the tone for the polls. It should be recalled that similar results in 2004 had a year later in presidential elections brought in Ahmedinejad. A potential victory of a conservative candidate in upcoming presidential polls is very much on the cards. However, that would to a great extent depend on the outcome of US Presidential Elections and the performance of the elected 11th Consultative Assembly in Iran with regards to delivering on the expectations of the constituents.
- The relatively lower turnout does not prove a major shift in public perceptions in Iran towards the right with regards to governance, economy and foreign policy handling. However, at the same time, the actions of the clerical establishment prove that contrary to what is being propagated in the West about people turning against it and growing disenchantment, it remains sure footed and confident. There was no going back on oil prices after widespread protests last year, and the

clearance process for candidates remained as ruthless as could have been expected. Had the clerical establishment been nervous, it would have acted differently.

- Conservative dominance of the parliament could, however, hamper President Rouhani from pursuing his policies independently.
- Although the Guardian Council, a 12-member body that acts as a constitutional watchdog, has a final say in making decisions concerning foreign policy, yet the parliament also plays a crucial role in important policy related decisions, like rectification of international treaties and agreements; approving annual budgets; and also issues concerning average citizens, for instance, human rights including those of women, security, democracy, and economy. The Guardian Council is highly pro-conservative in its composition since its six out twelve members are directly appointed by Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamenei and the remaining six jurists too are indirectly installed with the blessing of the supreme leader. Before the elections, the conservatives, despite wielding enormous power in the Guardian Council, had to remain cautious since the reformists enjoyed a majority in the parliament. Now, with dominance of both the parliament and the Guardian Council, the conservatives would be able to consolidate their grip on both domestic and foreign issues.
- The conservatives might tread a path of economic resistance to counter the US-led campaign of 'maximum pressure' on Iran, thus adopting a harsh policy towards the West, unlike the reformists who, for years, had been pursuing policies to forge close ties with the US and its allies. The conservatives are likely to make an effort to draw Iran closer to Russia and China; both regional competitors of the US.
- The reformists led by President Hassan Rouhani had agreed to sign an international agreement for countering money laundering. The prospects of signing the agreement have now been bleakened with the Iranians, already ditched by the US numerous times, less likely to press ahead, especially at a crucial time when the conservatives dominate both the Guardian Council and the Iranian Parliament.
- The reformists were also planning to introduce a new draft for a referendum that could limit the powers of the Guardian Council in the Iranian Constitution. The possibilities of any such draft taking shape in the near future also appear murky. It means newly formed Iranian parliament dominated by the conservatives will further strengthen the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), a highly specialized force involved in unconventional warfare and intelligence operations in the Middle East. The region may undergo an intense struggle of power in the coming years, especially when the Israelis have again voted for ultra-nationalist Benjamin Netanyahu in the recently held Israeli parliamentary elections.