

MERIA

IRAN'S 2000 ELECTIONS

By A. W. Samii*

The February 2000 Iranian parliamentary elections marked a major turning point in the battle between reformist and conservative elements in the Islamic republic. This article analyzes the existing political situation, the campaign, and the election itself, explaining the forces and factors involved, including the reason for the overwhelming victory for those supporting President Muhammad Khatami and domestic changes in Iran.

On February 18, 2000, 69.25 percent, or 26.8 million, of Iran's 38.7 million voters cast ballots in the election for Iran's sixth parliament (Majlis-i Shura-yi Islami, or Islamic Consultative Assembly).(1) Even as the votes were being counted, it became clear that mostly conservative or "independent" candidates had lost to "reformists" identified with President Hojatoleslam Muhammad Khatami-Ardakani. The final tally will not be known until May, when run-offs are held in 52 constituencies for 65 seats, but as of February 26, 148 parliamentary seats were won by reformists, 37 by conservatives, 35 by independents, and 5 by religious minorities.

Reformist Iranian newspapers said the twenty-ninth of Bahman (February 18) was another second of Khordad (May 23, 1997, the date of Khatami's election). But more cautious political commentators in Iran recognized that the parliament, with or without a reformist majority, will be faced with many difficulties before realization of the reforms demanded by the public.

The sensation over the results of the election was justified. Although candidates did not have to register until December and actual campaigning did not start until February, electoral issues had been a major focus of the Iranian media since mid-1999. This was particularly so because many Iranian newspapers are in one way or

another affiliated with a political faction, a state institution, or both.(2)

This article will discuss the sixth parliamentary election using Iran's print and broadcast media as the primary sources. The first section will focus on the pre-election phase, which was marked by newspaper closures, the entry and exit of major political personalities, and the adoption of restrictive legislation. The second section will describe the actual campaigning period, which was marked by disagreements over the disqualification of candidates by the Guardians Council and incidents of violence, but also by candidates' and parties' serious efforts to define their positions on issues. This will be followed by a description of election day, and the conclusion will present a forecast of the parliament's future.

THE PRE-ELECTION PHASE

The print media played an important role in all phases of the election by raising many important issues that the state broadcast media tried to avoid. Hardliners in the government tried to silence reformist voices by imprisoning outspoken journalists and closing publications such as Salam and Khordad (both closed in 1999). These were not the only cases, however. Adineh, Fakour, Hoviat-i Khish, Neshat, and Zan were closed for offenses such as questioning

religious principles or supporting the pre-revolution monarchy, but all these publications openly criticized government policies. Other publications and journalists were warned, tried, or closed on a variety of pretexts. Despite this pressure, new publications kept emerging, often using the same facilities and personnel of a just-closed publication, and they covered most aspects of the election.

The Iranian government also tried to control outside commentary on the election by jamming short-wave broadcasts by Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty's Persian Service, the British Broadcasting Corporation, and the Voice of America. It would do so either by direct bubble-type interference or by over-riding the foreign broadcasts with the Arabic Service of the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran (on the western and southern borders) and the Dari Service of the Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran (on the eastern and northeastern borders). Iranian newspapers, however, continued to cite the foreign broadcasts because they had access to them through the internet.

One of the first questions that cropped up about the parliamentary election was whether or not Expediency Council chairman Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani-the former Speaker of Parliament and president-would enter the race. Adding fuel to the fire were persistent rumors that the current speaker, Hojatoleslam Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, would not stand in the election. Finally, a private member's bill in parliament made Rafsanjani an exception to the rule that a candidate must resign from government office three months before registering for the election.

Rafsanjani seemed to have wide appeal, because he was linked with the technocratic Executives of Construction Party (ECP) that engineered Khatami's successful presidential campaign. Also, Rafsanjani was linked with the country's two

main clerical factions, the conservative Tehran Militant Clergy Association (Jameh-yi Ruhaniyat-i Mobarez-i Tehran, JRM) and the more moderate Militant Clerics Association (Majma-yi Ruhaniyun-i Mobarez, MRM). Some thought this indicated an ultra-factional nature, but others saw this as political opportunism. Some claimed that Rafsanjani was "a camel that would sleep at anybody's door."⁽³⁾

Yet Rafsanjani's multiple memberships threatened to split the electoral tickets. The reformist Office for Strengthening Unity (OSU) refused to include Rafsanjani on its list of candidates as early as September, although it had other candidates in common with the ECP and the MRM. Faezeh Hashemi of the ECP ruled out a joint platform with conservative candidates, although she acknowledged that "there are certainly candidates whom we (conservatives and reformists) both support."⁽⁴⁾

Rafsanjani registered in December, saying the objective of his candidacy was to "bring about national solidarity in the parliament and help promote government programs." ⁽⁵⁾ Conservative commentators welcomed this event and he had prominent defenders, such as Islamic Culture and Guidance Minister Ataollah Mohajerani. ⁽⁶⁾ Others were not so enthusiastic. According to an observer at a December 12 speech by President Muhammad Khatami, students chanted: "Political Development Cannot be With Hashemi [Rafsanjani]!" Prominent reformists also spoke disparagingly about Rafsanjani as a candidate. ⁽⁷⁾

By the end of 1999, most of Rafsanjani's potential rivals were out of the picture. His most prominent potential rival was Hojatoleslam Abdullah Nuri, the former Interior Minister and the director of Khordad newspaper. Nuri's trial in November only increased his popularity, as he discussed every taboo topic imaginable, including the Special Court for the Clergy's legitimacy,

religious leadership, Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri-Najafabadi's house arrest, and relations with the United States. Nuri had the courage to say "what all of us want and demand," according to Ayatollah Abdol-Karim Musavi-Ardabili, who serves as a Friday Prayer leader in Tehran and is a member of the Assembly of Experts. (8) Nuri's candidacy was eliminated when he received a five-year prison sentence. (Khordad was subsequently closed.)

Another potential rival was Hojatoleslam Muhammad Asqar Musavi-Khoeniha, director of the banned Salam daily, the popular co-founder of the OSU and a leader of the Students Following the Line of the Imam, the organization that occupied the U.S. Embassy in 1979. He could have garnered support from clerical groups and from the second of Khordad front, but in August 1999, he received a suspended sentence from the Special Court for the Clergy, and his popular newspaper was banned. Musavi-Khoeniha, furthermore, refused to consider running for parliament. (9)

ELECTION LAWS AND THEIR IMPACT

The Iranian constitution's Article 99 was a particularly acute issue in the 1999 campaign phase. The article states: "The Guardians Council has the responsibility of supervising the elections of the Assembly of Experts for Leadership, the President of the Republic, the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and the direct recourse to popular opinion and referenda." Questions over the meaning and interpretation of "advisory supervision" were hotly debated in 1999, as the law was used to disqualify about 600 potential candidates in what had come to be a highly politicized process. Perhaps what reflected this most strongly was President Khatami's apology to disqualified candidates during a February 8 speech. (10)

Ayatollah Hussein Ali Montazeri, who headed the Assembly of Experts that prepared the Islamic Republic's first constitution, told seminarians in June 1999 that the way Article 99 is currently implemented, Iran actually has two-stage elections. (11) In the first stage, the Guardians Council selects the acceptable candidates, and in the second stage, the public is allowed to choose from among the approved candidates. Montazeri said, "That is clearly in contravention of the spirit and the wording of Article 99. Experts who drafted and approved the Constitution at the first Assembly of Experts never intended Article 99 to convey such a meaning." Montazeri repeated these sentiments six months later, when he said that, "The law [constitution] is explicit on the fact that the supervisory role of the Guardians Council pertains to 'supervision over the elections' and not 'supervision over the candidates.'" (12)

In August, the parliament approved an amendment to the electoral law that said, "the Guardians Council will have the supervisory task in every stage of the parliamentary elections. This supervision will be expedient and comprehensive in every election related to the Majlis." (13) Moderate parliamentarians tried to modify this by introducing a bill that said candidates must be given the legal reason for disqualification, so they would have a greater chance to appeal. But the Guardians Council, which must endorse all legislation, rejected this measure, because "in some cases the explanation could create corruption and destroy an individual's reputation." (14)

The other body with responsibility for elections is the Interior Ministry. Its chief, Hojatoleslam Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari, complained that, "the Guardians Council is responsible for supervision and the Ministry of Interior is responsible for administration...Any move which damages

the separation of responsibilities or puts the supervisor in place of the administrator is contrary to the constitution." (15) Musavi-Lari added that the government tried to reach an understanding with the parliament and the Guardians Council on the election law, "but unfortunately the Guardians Council rejected the single article that was supposed to be the basis of the agreement." (16) At the end of September, parliament concluded its discussions on the draft election law, and eliminated Article 60, which gave the Guardians Council authority to "disqualify any candidate for the Majlis who commits any type of offense-or any offense which may affect the outcome of the election-and declare the election null and void." (17)

The Guardians Council continued to increase its powers, declaring in January that it is not sufficient for parliamentary candidates to be Muslims, they also must show commitment to Islam. This did not go over well, and a government-run newspaper said that judging a person's faith and religion "is entirely in the hands of Almighty God." (18) Thirty-two prominent Iranian political figures sent an open letter urging Khatami to ensure that the parliamentary election is not rigged. (19)

Other aspects of the electoral laws caused problems. In January, hardline parliamentarians proposed eliminating second-round run-offs, suggesting that anybody who gains a plurality should win, whereas under then-current laws the winner had to gain at least one-third of the votes. A walkout occurred and a quorum could not be formed when deputies objected to the proposal. After a closed-door session the next day, a compromise was reached in which it was decided that whoever earned a minimum 25 percent of the vote would win, and in case of a second round, the winner just needed to gain a majority.

THE LAW'S IMPACT

By December 18, about 6860 Iranians, including 504 women and 35 non-Muslims, registered as candidates for the February parliamentary elections. Five parliamentary seats are reserved for non-Muslims. Within ten days, 401 candidates had been rejected. (20)

Candidates' eligibility, in terms of their personal, political, and ideological backgrounds, was investigated initially by commissions in each constituency. The work of these commissions had to be endorsed by supervisory councils that fielded the grievances of disqualified candidates. The supervisory councils endorsed or reversed the decisions of the local commissions on the basis of evidence offered by the rejected candidate. And the supervisory councils had the option of explaining their decisions in cases where doing so will not have (unexplained) "unwelcome consequences." (21)

Many candidates were rejected on the basis of Article 28 of the election law, which calls for "belief in and practical commitment to Islam and the Islamic Republic system" and loyalty to the constitution and the Vilayat-i Faqih (Guardianship of the Supreme Jurisconsult). Others were rejected, per Article 30, because they had worked to strengthen the monarchy in the past or had acted against the theocracy more recently. (22)

The Guardians Council announced on January 27 that its investigation of appeals was complete, and it confirmed the rejection of 600 candidates (out of an original total of 758), and two days later it announced that 669 candidates were rejected, with 192 candidacies being reinstated and 99 new candidates being disapproved. (23)

The Guardians Council spokesman explained that, "[candidates] were rejected

because legally their files were imperfect. The reasons for the rejection of most of the candidates...were that they did not have the educational qualifications, were not old enough or had not resigned their posts-only in those professions which they were legally obliged to resign. Some of them did resign, but their employers did not accept their resignation within the deadline....The rejection of a candidate did not mean he [or she] was not worthy. We just observed the law." Possibly predicting complaints, the Guardians Council spokesman said: "The council does not favor any particular faction or individuals. And when the final results are announced, the people will definitely make a fair judgment."(24)

People were complaining already. Hojatoleislam Hadi Khamenei, secretary-general of the reformist Groups Following The Imam's Line, said, "some people, feeling a sense of religious duty, permit themselves to step beyond the bounds of the law when vetting candidates." (25) The head of Iran's election headquarters said that some of the candidates were not even told why they were disqualified, and he wondered why those whose candidacy was approved in previous elections were rejected this time. (26)

Most of the rejected candidates were identified as reformists, while others were fairly outspoken opponents of the system. (27) Among the former group were Islamic Iran Participation Party (IIPP) founders Abbas Abdi and Ali Reza Farzad. And among the latter group were Heshmatollah Tabarzadi, director of the banned Hoviat-i Khish and leader of the Islamic Union of Students and Graduates, and nationalist-religious figures like Ezattollah Sahabi, Habibollah Peyman, and Ebrahim Yazdi of the banned (but tolerated) Freedom Movement.

President Khatami also voiced unhappiness with "advisory supervision" at this time. As if to reassure any hardliners,

Khatami said during a meeting with students that, "even if we leave this society alone and do not place supervision or conditions over it, the choice of most of the people would be religion, independence, and honor."(28) In an added warning, he said: "We should refrain from useless pressure and strictness, which are called for neither by religion nor by law."

A few days later, Khatami restated these themes. (29) He said that the public still wants Islam, but it is "an Islam that has respect for these people...[one] that wants to see the establishment of a popular government and to have the people decide for themselves and determine their own destiny." Turning to advisory supervision and its critics, Khatami remarked that: "Some people may like this law, some people may not like this law, but the right thing for us to do is to respect the law." Khatami added that "no right should be trampled, neither the right of the voter, nor the rights of the people being elected."

The Guardians Council announced its ultimate list of 576 rejected candidates on February 7. "The list sent by the Guardian Council to the election headquarters, dated the eighteenth of Bahman [February 7], is final and should form the basis for action." (30) But a week later it was reported that the Guardians Council was trying to reject more candidates. (31) Campaigning officially started on February 10, and two days before the election the Interior Ministry announced that there was a total of 6,083 candidates running for parliament. The same day, the Interior Ministry announced that 890 candidates had withdrawn, which would bring the total to 5,193. (32)

The Guardians Council announced on February 15 that all disqualified candidates were provided with written explanations. Those who appealed got a fair hearing and were shown the relevant documents, except in cases where "this had to be done for legal reasons and for the sake

of safeguarding the rights of third persons or the country's interests." (33)

CANDIDATE LISTS ANNOUNCED

Although about 10 percent of the candidates were disqualified by the Guardians Council, many members of the 18-member pro-Khatami second of Khordad coalition were accepted. In theory, this would work to their advantage but one interesting analysis suggested that the conservatives' strategy was to permit many reformist candidates to run so that they would divide and weaken the reformist vote. (34) Also, voters would be sufficiently confused that they would just vote for the most familiar-that is, incumbent-names.

Indeed, splits within the reformist coalition had emerged in the autumn over Rafsanjani's acceptability. The OSU and the IIPP refused their support, while the ECP supported him actively. The chasm became even wider when the ECP accused the IIPP of eavesdropping on one of its meetings. (35) Eventually, the reformist coalition fielded several different candidate lists: from the OSU, the ECP, the MRM, and the IIPP.

In Tehran, the IIPP list had four members on it, while 11 names on the ECP list also appeared on the IIPP list. Of the 26 Tehran candidates supported by the ECP, 15 were also on the MRM list. There was greater unity in the candidate lists fielded by the main conservative factions-the hardline Islamic Coalition Association and the JRM. There was even a slight crossover, with some ECP candidates appearing on the JRM list. Rafsanjani also appeared on the Islamic Coalition Association list. (36)

Ayatollah Montazeri suggested that some candidates should withdraw so that the reformist vote would not be diluted. He said: "Candidates should consider the expediency of Islam, the country and their constituency and, if necessary, withdraw in order to create unity and to allow the best person to

win." (37) Presumably this explains the February 16 withdrawal of 890 candidates.

CAMPAIGNING STARTS

By law, the campaigning period lasted just one week, from February 9 to February 16. But newspaper coverage of electoral issues had started much earlier, and as was mentioned earlier, many of the newspapers are de facto party organs. Party officials, furthermore, traveled the country to address "meetings" well before the official campaigning began. Also, the news coverage given to officials in office doubled as a platform for campaigning.

Rafsanjani was one of the most flagrant in his attempts to appeal to voters as a reformist. When the JRM criticized President Khatami at the end of September, Rafsanjani distanced himself from the organization; "an informed source" said that Rafsanjani, "had long since discontinued his organic links" with the group and "in a distant past" he only "routinely and sporadically" met some of its members. (38)

Rafsanjani also advocated some of the causes raised by Abdullah Nuri during his trial. He claimed that the restrictions on Ayatollah Montazeri would be lifted (39) and that he tried to block Nuri's five-year prison sentence. Regarding ties with the United States, he said: "severance of ties will not continue. I believe that this issue must be resolved some day." He added: "the solution is very clear. The solution is that America demonstrates goodwill."

The next major event in Rafsanjani's candidacy was the release from prison of former Tehran mayor Gholamhussein Karbaschi, who was imprisoned in early 1999 on corruption charges. A commentator opined that Rafsanjani would like to get the credit for Karbaschi's release, while a reformist newspaper claimed that Rafsanjani actually wrote Karbaschi's appeal for clemency. (40) A parliamentarian predicted

that Karbaschi's release would bring the second of Khordad front and the ECP closer together. (41)

Known as a king-maker (shah-saz) for his part in engineering Khatami's presidential victory, one newspaper asked whom Karbaschi would coronate this time. (42) Yet, the former major stayed silent during the campaign period, though he spoke out on Rafsanjani's behalf after the election. (43)

As a substitute Friday Prayer leader, Rafsanjani was in a strong position to discuss campaign issues, because the Tehran Friday Prayers are normally carried by state broadcasting. He used this platform to call his critics "sanctimonious extremists" who are acting "just for the sake of gaining a few votes from the people or the uninformed young people." (44) Rafsanjani later suggested that people who were once insiders (khodi) were now at odds with the revolution and sought "refuge in foreign powers and global arrogance." (45) He added that the so-called reformists are actually extremists: "You wouldn't imagine how much I suffered in trying to curb their excesses-hangings, trials, and confiscation of private property-in the early years of the revolution." (46)

Rafsanjani seemed to garner the most attention because his candidacy was so controversial. But other candidates and parties also engaged in early campaigning. Expediency Council secretary Mohsen Rezaei, for example, suddenly became a great fan of the second of Khordad movement, calling it a "golden page" in Iranian history. (47) Ebrahim Asgharzadeh of the OSU was "beaten up and seriously injured" when he visited Rasht, a provincial capital, in January. (48) The IIPP's Muhammad Reza Khatami got off lightly when he went to Rasht the next month, because protestors only jeered him. (49) He had less luck when he visited the southwestern town of

Andimeshk, where 30 people chanting anti-reformist slogans attacked him. (50)

In Khuzestan, home to many Iranians of Arab origin where ethnic sentiments have been a political issue in the past, "Some of the candidates and their supporters [were] involved in inciting nationalist feelings and provoking ethnic tendencies among the people to obtain votes." (51) There also were reports of election unrest in Tabriz and Ardabil, which have large populations of ethnic Azeris. One source claimed that voters in Tabriz would boycott the election because the authorities refused to allow the registration of "independent candidates for deputy, including Tabriz University Professor Mahmudali Chehragani," (a nationalist figure who allegedly is being persecuted by the authorities). (52) Another claimed that in Ardabil, about 50 Chehragani supporters were arrested. (53)

Once the campaign was officially underway, there were more violent incidents. A hardline pressure group physically assaulted members of the reformist OSU at a rally in Ardabil, and a similar incident occurred in Qom. (54) A IIPP candidate's office in Mashhad was set on fire, and a 16-year-old who distributed IIPP campaign literature was stabbed. (55) An IIPP candidate was attacked when he said Ayatollah Montazeri should be released from house arrest, (56) and a man was stabbed to death at an IIPP rally in the southern city of Bandar Abbas. (57)

Two candidates in Tehran said the Law Enforcement Forces attacked their office. (58) A percussion grenade went off near the house of former Minister of Intelligence and Security Ali-Akbar Fallahian-Khuzestani, a candidate in Isfahan, after another one was thrown at his election headquarters a week earlier. (59) Hardliners attacked the election headquarters of another candidate, former Interior Minister Hojatoleslam Ali-Akbar Mohtashemi-Pur. (60)

"Political liberation is impossible with Rafsanjani," the audience chanted at a IIPP rally, and also denounced Fallahian. (61) Bystanders at an ECP Tehran rally tore up posters of Rafsanjani. (62) A meeting featuring nationalist figure Habibollah Payman was disrupted when a brawl broke out. (63) In Qazvin, nationalist journalist Fatimeh Govarai was arrested. (64)

In addition to the sensational violence, the election campaign featured serious debate over issues such as limiting judicial power, addressing the serial killings of political dissidents, liberalizing the economy, and improving relations with the United States.

There was also some political gamesmanship, when the IIPP suddenly changed the order of its candidates list, choosing the president's brother, Muhammad Reza Khatami, as its top candidate. In a clever move, the IIPP also selected an Armenian candidate, Artanus Baghumian, for its Isfahan list. (65) He was one of the only minority candidates to ever be on a mainstream candidate list. Voters can either choose one minority candidate or an entire list of regular candidates, but they cannot do both.

The reformists employed Western campaigning strategies and techniques, recognizing that old methods would not work on the younger generation. Campaign slogans shifted away from ideology and revolutionary commitment. The ECP emphasized "Security, Prosperity, and Freedom" and the IIPP called for "Iran for all Iranians." Slogans promoting the twenty-ninth of Bahman (February 18) as another second of Khordad gained currency. Reformist candidates often described their academic qualifications or technical experience in promising to build a better future and spoke of themes such as economic reforms, pluralism, greater individual freedom, and the equality of all citizens before the law. Reformists were

usually pictured as smiling, like President Khatami, and sporting designer stubble—a two or three-day beard long enough to meet theological requirements but not long enough to look like a cleric.

The conservatives also changed their approach, a little. Two of the main conservative bodies—the Tehran Militant Clergy Association (Jameh-yi Ruhaniyat-i Mobarez-i Tehran, JRM) and the Coalition of the Line of the Imam and Leader—emphasized "understanding" in their slogans. In their speeches, however, conservatives most often spoke of their religious qualifications as they promised to maintain the original values of the revolution. Their speeches stressed spiritual integrity and faith in theocracy. In their campaign posters the conservatives did not smile, in line with a dictum by the revolution's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi-Khomeini, that anyone who smiles is smiling at Satan. The rationale is that true Shi'a are grieving over the seventh-century martyrdom of Imam Hussein.

GETTING OUT THE VOTE

State officials and religious figures urged the public to vote in the days before the election, although they gave different reasons to do so. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei told prospective Hajj candidates in an address broadcast by state radio that they should participate wholeheartedly in the election, because "elections symbolize the people's participation and restoration of their rights." (66) Saying that voting is both a right and a duty, he added that, "it is important what percentage of people who could vote take part in the elections and vote." He urged the public to vote for candidates who are "able to stand up to coercion, scare-mongering, excessiveness, and avarice of world powers, and assess the problems of the country and the nation."

President Khatami urged women and the young, among his greatest supporters, "to participate actively" in the elections. (67) Khatami said that there has been progress in women's affairs, but much more remains to be done if women are to have an active presence in economic, social, and political affairs. In the same speech, Khatami apologized to disqualified candidates.

Some of Khatami's get-out-the-vote speeches seemed factionally-oriented. In a speech marking the revolution's anniversary, he urged people to elect candidates who will not oppose the executive branch's policies. (68) Khatami said: "The government will be able to take more confident steps to serve you, if it were to enjoy the cooperation of a qualified parliament and a parliament which carefully scrutinizes the behavior and decisions of the executive officials and the judicial authority."

Two days before the election, Khatami urged the nation to vote. He said: "Noble and great nation of Iran! ... Friday ... is a day for mapping your destiny." (69)

Senior clerics, such as Sources of Emulation Ayatollah Nasser Makarem-Shirazi and Ayatollah Yusef Sanei urged massive participation. So did Friday Prayer Leaders such as Ayatollah Abdullah Vaez-Javadi-Amoli. (70) Hojatoleslam Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, supervisor of the Razavi (Imam Reza) Shrine Foundation in Mashhad, said: "If the people are united and if they participate in large numbers in the elections for the sixth Majlis and choose the best candidates, they will defeat our enemies." (71) Ayatollah Montazeri urged people to choose their candidates with care, because if a parliamentarian pursues harmful policies, those who elected him or her are considered accessories. (72)

Interior Minister Hojatoleslam Abdolvahed Musavi-Lari also urged massive participation, because the "election is a manifestation of republicanism of the system and an opportunity for the entire

community to play a role in the management of the country." (73)

ELECTION DAY--FEBRUARY 18, 2000

On election day, polling stations were supposed to be open for a maximum of 12 hours, but the Interior Ministry reported that turnout was so large that voters who had arrived before the deadline and were standing in line were allowed to vote anyway. In light of the final reported turnout of 69 percent, it seems more likely that the polls were kept open in the hope that somebody would show up. The Guardians Council had rejected efforts to computerize the counting system, so all votes were counted by hand. It took only a few hours to get the results in the smaller constituencies, but in Tehran it took a week.

Within two days of the election it was clear that reformists had gained many seats and conservatives had fared badly. By February 26, the numbers were 148 reformists, 37 conservatives, 35 independents, and 5 religious minorities. The election headquarters announced that run-offs would be held in late April or early May in the 65 constituencies where no candidate attracted 25 percent of the votes. (74)

In the days before the election, rumors surfaced that there would be attacks on polling places. On election day, 120,000 police officers were on guard to prevent disruptions, and the Interior Ministry said the army, the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps, and the Basij Resistance Forces were ready to assist. (75) While this was unnecessary, there were some irregularities.

Guardians Council supervisors never turned up at some of the polling stations in Tehran and other cities, so polling at these locales was delayed by several hours. A mosque in western Tehran refused to open its doors for the election officials, so the Interior Ministry had to use mobile ballot

boxes to collect ballots. A candidate in the Firuzkuh and Damavand voting district campaigned on election day, ignoring inspectors who told him this was against the rules. (76)

There were complaints that the Tehran vote-count was delayed so that an unnamed well-known candidate (presumably Ali-Akbar Rafsanjani, who was faring badly, near the bottom of the top 30) would benefit. (77) The vote-counting was delayed to favor the reformists, claimed a conservative daily, because Interior Ministry Deputy Mustafa Tajzadeh, who heads Iran's election headquarters, is a member of the IIPP. (78)

Seminarians in Orumieh staged a rally to protest electoral violations. (79) A losing candidate in Kurdistan Province claimed that state broadcasting favored one of his opponents. (80) A candidate in Semnan asked that release of the results be delayed because of vote rigging. (81) Most serious were post-election riots in Shush Danial, Shadegan, Izeh, and Dasht-i Azadegan, Khuzestan Province, over allegations of vote buying. (82)

THE TWENTY-NINTH OF BAHMAN-- WHAT WILL IT MEAN?

As the election results came in, it became clear that many conservative candidates had lost. Although reformists did well, voter turnout was not as high as it was during the 1997 presidential election. At 69 percent, participation was well below the 88 percent of 1997 and even less than the 75 percent turnout for the 1996 parliamentary race. (83)

But, in terms of significance, the 2000 election was somewhat like the 1997 presidential election in that voters registered a protest. Iranians both times voted against the status quo. It is hard to say what the public voted for, however, because the candidates were members of a wide variety

of political factions. Even factions within coalitions had different candidate lists, and none of the candidates presented what could be called a substantive platform.

For that matter, there was not that great a difference among candidates, largely due to the Guardians Council's vetting process. Political analyst Khosro Abedi warned that the election results might not be translated into real changes or increased transparency because "Iranian politics is a lot like a private club." (84)

The last session of the fifth parliament was held on February 22, and the new parliament will be sworn-in in May. It will face many of the same issues that its predecessor faced, including vague press laws, restrictive electoral regulations, social codes that are unevenly enforced, a weak economy and high unemployment, privatization of state-owned industries, and troubled relations with the United States.

But the new parliament's ability to act is severely limited. (85) The Guardians Council must approve all legislation before it becomes law. State security organizations, the military, and state broadcasting are under the supervision of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's office and are not answerable to the executive or legislature. Press Courts and the Special Court for the Clergy target regime critics.

The judiciary and other governmental bureaucracies, even when headed by President Khatami's appointees, still have many employees who have their own personal and ideological agendas. Influential and powerful personalities with direct financial interests in the state industries and para-statal foundations will be very resistant to anything that threatens their wealth and influence. And the Supreme Leader has veto power over everything.

Rafsanjani's role further confuses the situation. He barely made it into the parliament, finishing in thirtieth place in Tehran. As Chairman of the Council for the

Discernment of Expediency, however, he will continue to have a great deal of power over legislation. Reformist groups must now moderate their hostility toward him to reach a modus vivendi if legislative impasses are to be avoided. There is, furthermore, disunity among the various reformist groups, which may result in intra-parliamentary conflicts. (86)

New representatives' political affiliations make predicting how they will vote on legislation difficult. In the previous parliament, the large block of independents did not follow any consistent voting pattern because the deputies voted in opportunistic, rather than ideological, terms. On local issues, they voted to benefit their constituencies, but on wider, national issues, they voted in an ultra-factional fashion. And when they did so, they were not accountable to any political organization. (87) Such problems will exist in the new parliament. Many candidates who called themselves independents are in fact conservatives, suggesting that once in office they will vote against reformist legislation. (88)

Political commentator in Iran thus proceeded cautiously, telling a daily that the new parliament will be able to work better with the executive branch. But the headline warned: "People should not have wonderful expectations of the reformists." (89) Another daily warned: "Let's be careful! Let's study this golden age." (90) Also, it is not clear what the reformists' plans for the future are. As one reformist daily asked: "The elections are over, what will happen tomorrow?" (91)

Said Hajjarian of the IIPP predicted that the reformists' strategy would not be factional, because all the factions have worked together in the past, and will therefore enact a four-year (the length of a term) national strategy. Reformist candidate Behzad Nabavi warned: "We should not be after outlandish programs and must not create expectations among people." (92)

The new representatives have made contradictory statements about their immediate plans. New Isfahan representative Rajabali Mazrui said a first step would be to change the law banning satellite dishes. (93) Soheila Jelodarzadeh, on the other hand, said women's issues would top the agenda. (94)

What is important to the voters? Certainly intellectuals, journalists, and those seeking prosperity, such as the residents of wealthier northern Tehran, are keen for more press freedoms and less state-imposed restrictions on their private lives. The same can be said of young people whose opportunities for social interaction are restricted. Students still demand the prosecution of those responsible for the violence at Tehran University and in Tabriz in July 1999. The case of intellectuals and dissidents murdered in late 1998 has yet to come to trial. Women, too, resent restrictions on how they can look, work, and live.

Most Iranians desire economic improvements. The country suffers an estimated 25 percent inflation rate. Unemployment is officially at 16 percent, but it is estimated to be at least 25 percent. Even those who are employed often go unpaid for months. This has led to dependence on government subsidies and a rising rate of drug addiction. Iran is dependent on food imports because of under-investment, mismanagement, and corruption in the agricultural sector, which has led to more unemployment and greater reliance on subsidies. As indicated by violent demonstrations in several cities in January, people want improvements in basic social services, such as roads, running water, electricity, and telephones. But reformist Quchan parliamentarian Muhammad Baqer Zakeri warned, even before he was re-elected, that none of the political factions has a clear economic plan. (95)

The people who elected the reformists in February are presumably the same ones who elected President Khatami. Until now, his supporters have been able to argue that a conservative parliament has blocked Khatami's plans. A reformist majority eliminates this excuse. If social reforms are not forthcoming, and if the jobs people need do not materialize, Khatami may lose much of his domestic public support.

Will reformist dominance in the parliament have an impact on Tehran's foreign policy? Washington was quick to praise the election, possibly expecting changes in this area. U.S. Secretary of State Madeline Albright commended the large public participation, saying on February 19: "[The Iranian people's] enthusiasm is testimony to the growing strength of democracy in Iran, which we do welcome." State Department spokesman James Rubin's February 21 comments were even more enthusiastic. He gushed: "All indications are that this election is an event of historic proportions. The Iranian people have demonstrated unmistakably that they want policies of openness and engagement with the rest of the world. They have also made clear their preference for internal policies that allow them greater freedom within Iran. ... We welcome that."

Iran's Supreme National Security Council allegedly voted in favor of improved relations with the United States recently, a move vetoed by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. (96) This veto power is part of the problem, but long-standing Iranian attitudes are, too. Leading reformist candidate Muhammad Reza Khatami repeated Tehran's normal policy stand when he said: "We are interested in détente and in the birth of relations based on equality and on mutual respect. But we want concrete acts, like for example the lifting of the embargo, not mere diplomatic bowing and curtsying." (97)

James Rubin described the kind of changes the State Department hopes to see in Iran. "For our part, we would like to see a change in specific policies of concern. They relate to Iran's attitude towards the Middle East peace process, they relate to the seeking of weapons of mass destruction and the support for terrorism." Such expectations regarding the relationship between Iran and Hizballah, Hamas, and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad are misplaced. Muhammad Reza Khatami said: "We are defending the right of people whose land is occupied, and America is defending the people who occupied this land." (98)

President Muhammad Khatami also addressed the wishful thinking of foreign observers when he said that "The nation will not lose its path and it will go ahead regardless of what other think or wish." (99) Iran will not change, he added, "It is up to others-the analysts and the powers-who with their goodwill, should adjust themselves with the aspirations and the wishes of the nation."

**Dr. A.W. Samii is a Regional Specialist with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Inc.*

NOTES

- 1) An unidentified Interior Ministry spokesman initially said 80-83 percent; AP, February 19 2000. Muhammad Reza Abbasifard of the Guardians Council said that 70-80 percent of the electorate voted; Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA), 18 February 2000. A hardline daily accused the Interior Ministry of intentionally falsifying the numbers to deceive the public and to exaggerate support for the reformists; Jomhuri-yi Islami, February 26, 2000.
- 2) See A.W. Samii, "The Contemporary Iranian News Media, 1998-1999," MERIA Journal, v. 3, n. 4 (December 1999).
- 3) Arya, February 23, 2000.
- 4) AFP, September 13, 1999.
- 5) IRNA, December 15, 1999.

- 6) See comments by Habibollah Asgaroladi-Mosalman, secretary-general of the hardline Islamic Coalition Association, IRNA, December 11, 1999; Jebheh editor Masud Dehnamaki, *Sobh-i Imruz*, November 8, 1999; and parliamentarian Ali Movahedi-Savoji, *Asr-i Azadegan*, November 9, 1999.
- 7) Among those who were unenthusiastic about Rafsanjani's candidacy were Abbas Abdi of the Islamic Iran Participation Party, *Asr-i Azadegan*, November 17, 1999; parliamentarian Alireza Mahjoub of the Islamic Labor Party, *Entekhab*, November 11, 1999; and former Deputy Minister of Islamic Culture and Guidance Ahmad Burqani, *Sobh-i Imruz*, November 11, 1999.
- 8) Reuters, December 2, 1999. Others who spoke out against Nuri's conviction were Grand Ayatollah Yusef Jannati-Sanei, Isfahan Friday Prayer leader Ayatollah Jalal Taheri, Ayatollah Montazeri, President Khatami, parliamentarian Elias Hazrati, the Executives of Construction Party, and the Islamic Iran Participation Party. On the other hand, the hardline Ansar-i Hizbullah stated that "the verdict of the Special Court has mended the broken hearts of Hizbullahis and has been like a heavy blow to corrupt people;" *Kayhan*, November 28, 1999.
- 9) *Aftab-i Imruz*, December 20, 1999.
- 10) *Mosharekat*, February 9, 2000. State radio did not broadcast this part of the speech, which is why *Mosharekat*, a daily affiliated with the Islamic Iran Participation Party, wrote about it the next day.
- 11) *Aban*, June 12, 1999.
- 12) Reuters, January 13, 2000. See also, *The Guardian*, January 13, 2000. The directors of *Sobh-i Imruz*, *Fath*, and *Asr-i Azadegan* had to appear in court because they published parts of these interviews.
- 13) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, August 12, 1999.
- 14) *Sobh-i Imruz*, September 21, 1999.
- 15) *Khordad*, September 20, 1999.
- 16) IRNA, September 24, 1999.
- 17) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, September 28, 1999.
- 18) *Iran*, January 5, 2000.
- 19) IRNA, January 4, 2000. Among the letter's signatories were the secretary-general of the Militant Clerics Association, Hojatoleslam Mehdi Mahdavi-Karrubi; Hojatoleslam Muhammad Asqar Musavi-Khoeniha; parliamentarian and secretary-general of the Islamic Assembly of Women, Fatemeh Karrubi; Islamic Labor Party founder Soheila Jelodarzadeh; and former Khatami adviser Seyyed Mehdi Imam-Jamarani.
- 20) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, December 28, 1999.
- 21) *Iran News*, December 20, 1999.
- 22) IRNA, December 29, 1999.
- 23) Ayatollah Reza Ostadi, quoted by Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 27, 2000. Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 29, 2000.
- 24) Ayatollah Reza Ostadi, quoted by Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 27, 2000.
- 25) *Sobh-i Imruz*, January 25, 2000.
- 26) Interior Ministry Deputy for Socio-Political Affairs Mustafa Tajzadeh, quoted by IRNA, February 2, 2000. 40 people who had served in previous parliaments were rejected this time, according to *Mosharekat*, January 13, 2000.
- 27) Muhammad Rezai-Babadi, Tehran deputy governor for political and security affairs and head of the Tehran Province Election Headquarters, quoted in *Iran*, January 31, 2000.
- 28) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 25, 2000.
- 29) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 31, 2000. It also is possible that Khatami urged voter participation in order to avoid the embarrassment of a boycott. The regime cites voter participation as a mark of its legitimacy, so a boycott of any sort could

undermine such claims. This interpretation finds support in Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's warning that "the enemy is trying to prevent people from massively participating in the parliamentary elections so as to claim that people have distanced themselves from the revolution and system." Through their massive participation, Khamenei said, the Iranian people will "slap America's face." IRNA, February 2, 2000.

30) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 8, 2000.

31) Interior Minister Musavi-Lari, cited by Hamshahri, February 14, 2000.

32) IRNA, February 16, 2000.

33) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 15, 2000.

34) Iran Focus, v. 13, n. 1 (January 2000).

35) Faezeh Hashemi of the ECP claimed that Sobh-i Imruz director Said Hajjarian, who is a leader of the Islamic Iran Participation Party, bugged an ECP meeting and then published the transcript in his newspaper. RFE/RL Iran Report, January 3, 2000.

36) On candidate lists, see IRNA, February 7, 2000, Sobh-i Imruz, February 8, 2000, and Iran News, February 9, 2000.

37) Reuters, February 12, 2000.

38) IRNA, September 29, 1999.

39) AFP, December 21, 2000. As of late-February, Montazeri was still under house arrest.

40) Professor Sadeq Zibakalam, interview with RFE/RL's Persian Service, January 26, 2000. Aftab-i Imruz, January 22, 2000. Karbaschi told the February 10, 2000 Newsweek that Rafsanjani had consistently defended him, and he served as the intermediary in getting Karbaschi released.

41) Parliamentarian Muhammad Baqer Zakeri, quoted by Arya, January 26, 2000.

42) Iran-i Vij, January 26, 2000.

43) Mosharekat, February 23, 2000.

44) First sermon, Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 21, 2000.

45) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, January 26, 2000.

46) Iran, January 26, 2000. Rafsanjani did not name names, but he was referring to individuals like Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkhali (the "Hanging Judge" who toyed with the corpses of American soldiers killed in the 1979 hostage rescue mission) and hostage-takers like Abbas Abdi (now a member of the IIPP) and Ebrahim Asgharzadeh (now the leader of the Office for Strengthening Unity).

47) IRNA, January 29, 2000.

48) Sobh-i Imruz, January 5, 2000.

49) Iran Daily, February 8, 2000.

50) Iran, January 22, 2000. According to the February 8 Kayhan, there were three reasons for this violence. First of all, the town was plastered with posters of the president and signs welcoming "Dr. Khatami," so locals had prepared petitions and letters of complaint for the president. They were somewhat unhappy when his brother showed up instead. Secondly, Muhammad Reza Khatami was effectively campaigning before campaigning could legally start. Finally, the IIPP's parliamentary candidate was not a local.

51) Jomhuri-yi Islami, February 3, 2000.

52) The United Azerbaijan Movement, cited by Baku's Turan news agency, January 28, 2000. 120 candidates ran for Tabriz's six seats. Two reformist candidates, one of them an incumbent, won in the first round of voting in Tabriz, but run-offs will be required for the four remaining seats. Rather than the apathy suggested by Azerbaijani sources, the week of campaigning was "hectic;" Robin Allen, "Tabriz gripped by election fever as Iranians prepare to vote," Financial Times, February 18, 2000.

53) The National Liberation Movement of Southern Azerbaijan, cited by Azadlyg, January 25, 2000. For more on this subject, see A.W. Samii, "Ethnic issues in Iran-Azerbaijan relations," Caspian Crossroads, v. 4, n. 3 (Spring 1999).

- 54) Hamshahri, February 11, 2000.
- 55) AP, February 11, 2000.
- 56) Ahmad Shirzad, quoted by Reuters, February 13, 2000.
- 57) Jomhuri-yi Islami, February 15, 2000.
- 58) Sobh-i Imruz, February 12, 2000.
- 59) Kayhan, February 14, 2000.
- 60) Asr-i Azadegan, February 14, 2000.
- 61) AFP, February 13, 2000.
- 62) Kayhan, February 16, 2000.
- 63) Fath, February 17, 2000.
- 64) Fath, February 17, 2000.
- 65) AFP, February 14, 2000.
- 66) IRIB, February 15, 2000.
- 67) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 8, 2000.
- 68) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 11, 2000.
- 69) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 16, 2000.
- 70) Qom Friday Prayers sermon, Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, February 5, 2000.
- 71) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, February 4, 2000.
- 72) Sobh-i Imruz, February 12, 2000.
- 73) IRNA, 12 February 2000.
- 74) Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, February 19, 2000.
- 75) IRNA, January 31, 2000.
- 76) Sobh-i Imruz, February 19, 2000.
- 77) Payam-i Azadi and Bayan, February 23, 2000.
- 78) Resalat, February 23, 2000.
- 79) Sobh-i Imruz, February 23, 2000.
- 80) Ham-Mihan, February 23, 2000.
- 81) Sobh-i Imruz, February 21, 2000.
- 82) IRNA, February 19, 2000.
- 83) Ayatollah Abdullah Javadi-Amoli, in the February 25 Qom Friday Prayer sermon, asked why 12 million people (31 percent) did not vote. Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 26, 2000.
- 84) AFP, February 17, 2000.
- 85) It has been suggested that: "The range of action open to the Majles is very wide and essentially unexplored." It could use its power under constitutional Article 76 to investigate the activities of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, state broadcasting, the judiciary, the para-statal foundations, and the military. Also, laws passed by the parliament define the structure of courts and other agencies. Parliament elects the six non-clerical members of the 12-member Guardians Council from a list prepared by the judiciary chief, and in theory they could choose reformists. See Gary Sick, "Iran's Elections: Out of Chaos, Change," Middle East Economic Survey, February 28, 2000.
- 86) Iran News, February 24, 2000. AP, February 27, 2000.
- 87) Ahmad Shirzad, "What are the independent candidates committed to?" Mosharekat, January 13, 2000.
- 88) Abolfazl Bazargan, cited in Sobh-i Imruz, January 25, 2000.
- 89) Ham-Mihan, February 23, 2000.
- 90) Payam-i Azadi, February 23, 2000.
- 91) Arya, February 19, 2000.
- 92) Reuters, February 21, 2000.
- 93) AFP, February 22, 2000.
- 94) IRNA, February 27, 2000.
- 95) Javan, February 9, 2000.
- 96) Scott Peterson, "Iran opens door - a little - to U.S.," Christian Science Monitor, February 25, 2000. In a direct reference to this report, presidential adviser Ali Rabii said, "Basically relations with America was never a topic discussed on the agenda of Iran's SNSC;" Voice of the Islamic Republic of Iran, External Service, February 27, 2000.
- 97) La Stampa, February 22, 2000.
- 98) The Independent, February 23, 2000.
- 99) Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Network 1, February 26, 2000.