

Democracy and the Politics of Parliamentary Elections in Iran

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TRANSITION TO DEMOCRACY IS AN intricate process, entailing a complicated set of internal and external, mental, and material conditions. It minimally requires a ruling class that is bereft of legitimacy and lacks the requisite resolution to rule—one beset with chronic division in its ranks. This division and irresolution must be accompanied by unity and resolution amongst the ruled. Indeed, a crucial political prerequisite for transition to democracy is a citizenry that is dedicated to the rules of a democratic polity and to an opposition leadership that offers a coherent plan of action.

There has been something of a consensus amongst social scientists that democratic transition demands a vibrant and viable middle class with a certain level of education and income.¹ Some social scientists, for example, suggest \$7,000 as the minimum necessary annual income for such a class. Democracy needs the rudiments of a civil society and a network of autonomous institutions capable of performing a dual set of interrelated functions. It must be able to socialize the citizens in the rules of a democratic “social contract,” while protecting the same citizenry from the excesses of the often overreaching power of the state.

Even a cursory look at Iranian society on the eve of the 14 March 2008 parliamentary elections shows a discordant image of a society dangling in the long limbo of warranted but unrealized change, a society where most of the conditions for a transition to democracy—save a cogent leadership in the opposition—have been realized but no such transition has taken place. Not only is the country still in the grip of a despotic elite, but in the aftermath of the March 2008 parliamentary election—the 28th electoral ritual in the 29-year-old history of the Islamic Republic of Iran²—when

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independents and reformists won more seats than the supporters of President Ahmadinejad, the 100-year-old dream of democracy seemed more distant than 10 years ago, when President Khatami's promise of more democracy won him a landside electoral victory. If conditions for democracy were ready, how could a demagogue like Ahmadinejad, advocating a vapid messianic populism,³ win the last presidential election in 2005? Has the apparent political apathy and docility of the once active and defiant youth, their alleged transformation from assertive political actors into selfish, narcissist incarnations of Nietzsche's "Last Man," ended the promise of democracy in Iran? Does the drug pandemic amongst Iran's youth and the fact that Iran's total addicted population is now estimated to be as high as seven million, or about 10 percent of the population, mean that the hope for the rise of a democratic movement in the country is not quixotic? How, in short, can these apparently contradictory realities be reconciled, and did the March parliamentary elections in any way change the prospects of democratic change in Iran?

THE PARADOX OF OIL

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It is customary these days to talk of the "Oil Curse"—or the "Paradox of Plenty"⁴—as the culprit for creating despotic regimes amongst oil rich states. In fact, in countries like Iran, oil has a Janus face. On the macro-strategic level, for a century oil has been the Iranian democracy's most formidable foe but also its inadvertent and irreplaceable enabler. Oil is the vampire of democracy; it has deprived Iranian society of its democratic life by turning the state into society's master. At the same time, it has helped create and invigorate the *élan vital* of democracy by creating a rising middle class. Oil has deformed and structurally corrupted the relationship between the people and the state. If, in a democracy, the state survives and is created at the behest of a citizenry that is aware of its rights and responsibilities, the Iranian people have become "subjects" of the state and virtually survive by the mercy of its subsidies—a paltry portion of the oil revenue the elite share with the masses. At the same time, oil has allowed Iranian regimes in much of the 20th century to train thousands of technocrats, many of them at the best universities in the world. This technocratic class is the virtual Trojan horse of democracy. The March parliamentary elections and their aftermath poignantly capture the complexities that thrive behind the political Janus face of petroleum.

In the last few years, as the regime's domestic and international isolation has increased and as the regime has had to increasingly rely on its oppressive machinery, the surge of the petroleum windfall has allowed the regime to keep this machinery well-oiled. The Revolutionary Guards; the regime's multiple intelligence agencies; anywhere between two to five million members of the organization called the *Basij*,

gangs-cum-militia-cum-Brown-Shirts who dominate virtually every neighborhood and every educational, professional, agricultural, and industrial institution; and even families of the hundreds of thousands of “martyrs” killed or permanently disabled by the eight-year war with Iraq are handsomely paid courtesy of increasing oil revenues. These three groups account for about 15 to 20 percent of Iran’s population of 75 million. Their sole collective political identity is formed by their professed piety and their unconditional support of the clerical regime. They are easily the regime’s most reliable source of public and electoral support.

In the regime’s own neologism, this group is called the *Khodis*, or the insiders.

Most members of this group seem to live comfortable middle-class lives. An increasingly large number of them, mostly from the ranks of top commanders of the Revolutionary Guards, now exhibit the gaudy opulence reminiscent of sultans or viziers from *One Thousand and One Nights*. With gaudy opulence has

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come a lifestyle incongruent with the Islamic regime’s professed puritanical pieties. The sudden accumulation of these illicit but fantastic fortunes has led to open resentment in the public and rivalries amongst the *Khodis*. Ahmadinejad’s increasingly embittered rants against “the economic mafia” are the public face of some of these resentments. The recent arrest of two high-ranking generals of the Revolutionary Guards for orgies with prostitutes and for moral turpitude, as well as claims and counterclaims by regime insiders of billions of dollars of illicit gains by Revolutionary Guards, have been something of an embarrassment for the regime. The mounting tensions between different factions within the regime—and attempts by each side to weaken the other by leaking damaging information or exposing financial malfeasance—have led to a depressing bonanza of information about corruption and incompetence at the highest echelons of power. As the regime’s oil revenues have increased, its ability to feed the appetites of these competing oligarchies has also increased.

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The regime even uses parts of the oil-rich public fund to offer illicit electoral support to the candidates it favors. In the aftermath of Ahmadinejad’s surprising presidential victory, two of the defeated candidates—Mehdi Karubi and Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani—both well-connected within the ranks of the regime, even in its intelligence agencies, claimed that millions of dollars of public funds had been illicitly used to ensure Ahmadinejad’s victory. How such funds were used, if they were used at all, in the March parliamentary elections is still anyone’s guess.

Most importantly, the same oil windfall has been a balm to the regime’s failed economic policies. Ayatollah Khomeini’s advocacy of large families a quarter-century ago, prompted by the regime’s need for more soldiers in the war with Iraq, is now

haunting the regime in the form of almost a million new entries into the job market. In recent months, Ahmadinejad's bombast and his stark ignorance of the laws of economics have created havoc in the Iranian economy. While his attempt to forcefully bring down bank interest rates, even below the rate of inflation, has all but destroyed the country's banking system, his claim that the stock market is a form of gambling and forbidden in Islam lead to the loss of a third of the Tehran stock market's value. Finally, his constant harping on the virtues of the state sector has ended any desire by Iran's nascent private sector to invest in the economy. The situation has become more farcical by his repeated declarations that the Mahdi—in Shiism, the 12th Imam now in his "occultation"—is directly managing the Iranian economy. Moreover, rumors about the government's decision to nationalize the banks, Ahmadinejad's decision to change interest rates by presidential fiat (by law the purview of Iran's Central Bank), the fact that only weeks earlier he fired the Treasury Minister, and the dismissed minister's open criticism of the government's economic policies have all added to the country's economic woes. In a sense, Ahmadinejad's strange brew of economic hubris and messianic fervor has simultaneously caused recession, inflation, and a profound sense of economic insecurity in Iran. A most telling indicator of the public sentiment about these policies can be seen in the results of a recent study, in which Iran tops the list of countries losing their best and brightest to the "brain drain." Every year, between 150,000 and 180,000 people register their "vote" by leaving the country.⁵

Increased oil revenue has enabled the regime to subsidize many key commodities, from sugar and bread to gasoline and electricity. Some economists estimate the total value of these subsidies to reach almost a hundred billion dollars a year. The regime is clearly aware of the strong correlation that exists between urban riots in modern Iran and sudden increases in the prices of these goods—and thus subsidies for sugar and tea, bread and gas. Nevertheless, it is a measure of the regime's incompetence that, in spite of record revenues, inhabitants of Tehran have in recent months been subjected

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to at least three hours of nightly blackouts. It is not clear whether the shortage is the result of bad planning by the regime or a consequence of the regime's nuclear program and the fact that the many

sites conducting work in the program consume a big portion of the country's electrical supply. Some have even suggested that the regime, hoping to reap political benefits, has been giving a substantial portion of the country's electrical supply to Iraq. The utter lack of transparency in governmental matters makes it all but impossible to know the real reason for the disastrous blackouts.

The slow grind of inflation, the humiliation of hopeless unemployment, and now the discomfiture of daily blackouts are becoming political liabilities for the regime. Worried that the U.S. embargo can no longer provide the regime enough cover for its failures, the regime has been busy looking for someone to blame for the economy. In his inimitable populist and paranoid style, Ahmadinejad blamed a conspiracy of the “economic mafia”—a thinly disguised reference to Rafsanjani—for the economic failures of his administration.

On the other hand, Ahmadinejad’s solution to the economic problems has been to pour more money in the form of cash handouts into an already inflationary economy. In spite of record revenues, he has already dipped twice into the foreign currency reserve the government created to use in times of crisis. In mid-May, Ahmadinejad tried again to take \$2 billion out of the account, and when the board in charge of oversight for this account resisted, he simply ordered that it be dismantled. Mr. Khamenei, the Spiritual Leader, recently claimed that the regime’s economic woes were in fact caused partially by the global inflationary crisis and partially by the food crisis that has befallen all markets. He also blamed the international media for turning the economy into an issue and making much ado about nothing.

But obviously this gluttony of subsidies cannot continue indefinitely. In fact, the trajectory of every key indicator shows that the regime seems headed into a perfect economic storm. According to a recent study, its inability to invest in oil infrastructure, coupled with rising domestic demand, will mean that the regime will have no oil to export in less than a decade.⁶ The occasional success of the regime in signing an energy deal with foreign companies or countries—like the \$10 billion deal they signed with a supplicant Swiss minister of foreign affairs, Michelene Culny-Rey, who traveled to Iran wearing an Islamic headscarf—is unlikely to radically change the dynamics of this threat for the regime.

THE RISE OF ELECTORAL DISGRUNTLEMENT

The same oil revenues that have allowed the regime to mitigate the more catastrophic consequences of its economic incompetence, however, have also helped to create and sustain a middle and a technocratic class that form the foundation for any democracy in Iran. This middle class has hitherto used a variety of “safe” means to show its political disposition and dismay with the clerical regime. In 1997 and again in 2001, when a candidate like Khatami who at least extended the promise of promoting democracy and challenging the status quo, the middle classes used the electoral process to try and achieve their goal of changing the system. More than 70 percent of the electorate participated in those elections. Conversely, in the recent parliamentary elections,

faced with a list of candidates handpicked by the Spiritual Leader and his allies—a list purged of even some serving members of the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament)—less than 50 percent of eligible voters participated. In fact, the pre-election vetting process for the March parliamentary elections proved to be the most Procrustean of all past elections; 41.1 percent of applicants were rejected. The percentage of rejections for the last parliamentary election was 28.9 percent, while elections for the term before saw the rejection of less than 10 percent of the applicants. There is an apparent inverse relation between the number of candidates eliminated by the regime and the size of the population who chooses to vote. In big cities, where the middle class is concentrated, the voter turnout was even lower. In Tehran less than 26 percent of the eligible voters participated in the second round of the election. The city's top vote getter, Hadad Adel, the Speaker of the Parliament and by marriage a relative of Khamenei, won re-election with the support of only 13 percent of the total eligible voters of the capital. This weak showing, and the relative strength of the Larijani camp brought a surprisingly early end to Hadad Adel's tenure as the Speaker of the Majlis. There are also persistent rumors that Hadad Adel's fall from grace is at least partially the result of the fact that his son has divorced his wife, a daughter of the Leader. Whatever the real cause, Larijani was elected to that Speaker post without a single vote against him.

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The political meaning of these low percentages becomes even more poignant when we remember that the regime used every tool at its disposal to buttress the numbers. The country was ripe with menacing rumors about the government's decision to deny access to social and economic opportunities—from entering into university to getting a teaching job—to those who did not vote. As every citizen's identity card is marked once they vote, the regime was certainly in a position to realistically carry out the threat. Thus, a large number of citizens get a ballot, have their identity cards marked, and then either write nasty slogans or turn in empty ballots. In Tehran, a full 9.8 percent of the ballots were in one way or another compromised.

Aside from the low turnout, another telling sign of increasing disgruntlement with the vapid electoral process was a recent statement by Sa'ed Hajjarian. Once a high-ranking member of the regime's dreaded Ministry of intelligence, Hajjarian is believed to be the intellectual architect of the Khatami presidency. He now believes that the increasingly inhibitive control of the right-wing conservatives on the electoral process and their unwillingness to share in power has all but rendered elections useless. Forces hoping for reforms, he said, should seek alternative, albeit peaceful, ways for bringing about much needed democratic change in Iran.

A third sign of electoral disgruntlement within Iran is the fact that the faction identified with Rafsanjani virtually chose to sit out the election. Aware of increasing animosity between Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani, members of this faction knew most

of their candidates would not be “approved” by the Guardian Council or one of the other offices in the Ministry of Intelligence and the Ministry of the Interior, who must approve all electoral candidates. At the same time, in spite of the surprisingly open rancor that continues to exist between him and the president, Rafsanjani’s ability to increase his power since his embarrassing loss in the presidential elections; his ability to become—albeit with just one vote more than the minimum necessary—the leader of the important Council of Experts, entrusted with the task of choosing the next Leader; his continued prominent role in the regime’s national security apparatus; and the continued economic activities of his family all show the complexity of the power structure in Iran. The case of Rafsanjani also demonstrates the continued inability of Khamenei to create a one-man despotism in the country. The complexity of these inter-factional divisions within the ruling elite highlights the opacity of power in Iran.

“DEMOCRATIC” APARTHEID

In understanding the interface between elections, politics, and democracy in Iran, a few axiomatic propositions must be kept in mind. The Islamic Republic and its apologists use the reality and regularity of elections as a measure, even proof, of some semblance of democracy in Iran. In reality, the elections have two different functions: one for the elite and the other for the people, and neither is very democratic. For the elite, elections have become a tool for the regime to divide power and its perks amongst its many feuding factions. Even in a genuine democracy, elections perform a similar function for the elite. But in a democracy, every citizen is free to stand for office and a share of power or criticize the inequities of the electoral process. In Iran, the game is rigged wherein only the clergy and their cronies can play for power, and criticism of the regime is severely punished.

Amongst the people, the regime uses elections as a safety valve, an instrument of repressive tolerance. The unelected mullahs who control the process and results of each election use elections to give their despotic hold on power a veneer of legitimacy, allowing them to continue their control of the population. Such a veneer is particularly necessary given that the 1979 Revolution was in fact a democratic revolution later hijacked by the clergy.

The power and pseudo-legitimacy granted to the Iranian regime through elections have, in fact, turned Iran into an apartheid-like regime, where the *Khodis* are politically enfranchised and the rest of the society (the *gayer-Khodis*) is de facto disenfranchised. Voting under virtual coercion only for candidates who have been vetted by the unelected mullahs and who will occupy seats in a parliament or a presidency that controls a paltry share of power is nothing short of a kind of apartheid. In other words, the despotic

nature of the Iranian constitution, placing nearly every lever of political, economic, cultural, and religious power in the hand of the unelected, unimpeachable leader and his cronies, has been partially eclipsed by the regularity of elections.

Over the last presidential and the two parliamentary elections, Khamenei has successfully used the vetting process and his access to the media and to billions of dollars of oil revenue to create a de facto alliance with top leaders of the Revolutionary Guards.

As a result, he has stacked the parliament, the presidency, and many key managerial

The epidemic of corruption at every level in Iran has created an atmosphere where bribes and kickbacks for political or economic favors have become normal.

positions with members of the Revolutionary Guards or of the intelligence agencies (at least

three-fourths of the Majlis is now composed of past members of these two institutions). Based on these facts and the reality that he already controlled the judiciary, many scholars assumed that Khamenei and right-wing conservatives had finally consolidated their personal hold on power. But the recent elections proved the hypothesis false. In spite of the many obstacles in their way, the reformists won a credible 48 out of 290 seats in the Majlis (an increase from the 37 seats they held in the last Majlis). A majority of their most important and well-known leaders were not allowed to run. An almost equal number declared themselves independents and won seats without joining any of the dominant voting blocs.

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A FRACTURED SOCIETY


The traditionally simplistic dichotomies used to define these factions—"moderates" and "radicals" or "fundamentalists" and "pragmatists"—is less a reflection of reality and more the result of the need to fit the complex reality of Iranian politics into the familiar lexicons of Western social science. The "fundamentalist" wing in Iran was split between three fiercely fractious factions: one led by Ahmadinejad, another by a trinity of his critics—Larijani, Speaker of the Majlis, Galibaf, the Mayor of Tehran, and Rezai, for almost 18 years the commander of the Revolutionary Guards—and finally the Islamic Coalition Party (*Mo'talefe*), which has powerful ties to Iran's merchant class. In reality, the policies of these "fundamentalists" ranges from Ahmadinejad's radical messianism—where the function of the state is to expedite the apocalyptic return of the Mahdi and where efforts to privatize the economy are dismissed—to the Islamic Coalition Party, which strongly supports privatization and a strong government guarantee for private investments. Under the rubric of fundamentalist also comes Larijani, who advocates a negotiated solution to Iran's nuclear standoff with the West, to those who, like Ahmadinejad, believe Iran should make no concessions. In short, if the purpose

of labels is to help understand reality and differentiate factions from one another, then in the context of Iran and its recent parliamentary elections, words like fundamentalism lack any heuristic value. The reformists, with their often contradictory visions about domestic and foreign policy of Iran, were no less torn into factions. Amongst the pragmatists, those close to Rafsanjani chose to sit out the election, and others from the ranks of reformists close to Khatami, the ex-president, ran as independents. Moreover, while the pragmatists' conciliatory attitude towards the West and their desire to find a compromise solution to the nuclear standoff is palatable to Western powers, Ahmadinejad's attacks on the corruption of the financial mafia find many favorable ears inside Iran.

If these feuds have survived the apparent consolidation of power by Ayatollah Khomeini over the three branches of government, if they have continued in spite of the unanticipated oil windfall that affords the regime more money to satisfy the greed and need of these warring factions, it is because there are still unresolved, paradigmatic issues within the Islamic Republic. Some of these issues include state control versus private property, accommodating versus confronting the West and the United States in particular, rule of secular law versus rule of sharia, messianic fervor and export of revolution versus rational and measured construction of the state, empowerment of the clergy versus increased enfranchisement amongst the people, and Orient versus Occident. For many centuries, different dynasties and regimes in Iran have seen the West, or Occident, as Iran's strategic ally and inspiration. Today, there are forces in Iran, led by Ahmadinejad, that suggest Iran should change its allegiances, adopt an "Asian Look," and form alliances with countries like China and India. The continued existence of these feuds has provided a small breathing space for Iran's fledging democratic movement. Rancor amongst the rulers begets a courage to resist in the ruled. The movement, therefore, has had another inadvertent ally.

In pseudo-totalitarian societies like Iran, where regimes try and fail to enforce a "total" ideology or create a monolith of power, corruption is an inadvertent "friend" of democracy. On the one hand, corruption weakens the very fabric of a democratic society. The epidemic of corruption at every level in Iran has created an atmosphere where bribes and kickbacks for political or economic favors have become normal. But corruption has also allowed some of the regime's richer opponents to buy their way to freedom. Moreover, as former Revolutionary Guard commanders consolidate their hold on power, accrue more and more illicit fortunes, and abuse the perks of power, they become more interested in their "property rights" and less worried about ideological orthodoxy or piety. Once the property rights are endangered—either by the reemergence of the revolutionary zeal in the likes of Ahmadinejad, rising popular dissent, or by the threat of a military confrontation with the United States—then the

propertied elite seeks ways for a compromise that safeguards its "rights." In Iran today, there is a whole class of such former revolutionaries, leaders who are in key positions of power and anxious about the future of the regime and their property. Rafsanjani is the public face of this group. The embryos of a grand alliance consisting of the whole spectrum of opposition forces—elements of civil society, and those within the regime who recognize the impossibility of continuing the status quo—can be seen on the horizon. Another potentially powerful addition to this grand alliance is the increasingly large ranks of mid-level managers of the regime's bureaucracy. A large number of these managers have been trained in the West, and while they are willing to show the required piety in their public demeanor, they criticize the regime in private. They know that the status quo is untenable. Members of this stratum have conducted many of the "track two" contacts between the United States and Iranian officials. Anecdotal evidence about this group's willingness to criticize key elements of the status quo, and concrete evidence of their willingness to promote and participate in such contacts, are promising indications that this group will join the incipient grand alliance. The contours of this alliance, far more than the results of "engineered" elections, can be considered the measure of democracy in Iran.

Two things are sure to complicate, if not altogether abort, such an alliance. First is the fact that many of the nouveau riche revolutionaries were directly complicit in the regime's reign of terror and the death of thousands of dissidents. There are many in this de facto alliance, all from the ranks of the current opposition, who demand punishment or disenfranchisement for those guilty of complicity in capital crimes, and needless to say, such demands would obviate the desire of these regime elements to join the coalition. The second threat to the creation of such a potential alliance is the possibility of a military attack on Iran or its nuclear sites by Israel or the United States. If such an attack takes place, then nearly every element of this potential alliance will either be forced to come to the defense of the regime, or at best remain silent and inactive. That is why for the radicals like Ahmadinejad, such an invasion is arguably their only hope for keeping power, and this calculus at least partially accounts for his government's increasingly intransigent policy on the nuclear issue. The recent Russian foray into Georgia, celebrated in Iran by the likes of Ahmadinejad as the death knell of "American-inspired color revolutions," has only further emboldened the regime. Only a wise and prudent U.S. policy, supported by European allies, and at least not actively opposed by China and Russia, can help Iran's dormant democratic movement rise to power and solve the problem of the regime's nuclear and political adventurism. 

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NOTES

1. For the classical argument for this kind of relation between prosperity and democracy, see Seymour

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Martin Lipset, "Some Social Requisites of Democracy: Economic Development and Political Legitimacy," *American Political Science Review* 53, no. 1 (March 1959): 69-105. Lipset's axioms have recently been subjected to some criticism. For example, Acemoglu, et al., found that, in fact, "there are no causal affects of income on democracy," particularly if you control "for factors that simultaneously affect both variable." See Daron Acemoglu, et al., "Income and Democracy," Working Paper no. 11203, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w11203>.

2. Dr. Farideh Farhi, "Iran's 2008 Majlis Elections: The Game of Elite Competition," *Middle East Brief*, no. 29 (Crown Center for Middle East Studies, Brandeis University, May 2008). <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB29.pdf>.

3. For a discussion of Ahmadinejad's rise and populism, see Abbas Milani, "Pious Populism," *Boston Review*, December 2007.

4. Terry Lyn Karl, *The Paradox of Plenty: Oil Boom and Petro-States* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

5. For a brief discussion of the IMF report's findings on Iran, See Frances Harrison, "Huge Cost of Iranian Brain Drain," *BBC News*, 8 January 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/6240287.stm.

6. Roger Stern, "The Iranian Petroleum Crisis and the United States National Security," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science* 104, no. 1 (2 January 2007). The author has provided a summary of his findings; see Roger Stern, "Iran Actually is Short of Oil," *International Herald Tribune*, 8 January 2007.