



# The Middle East Institute

## Viewpoints

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*Viewpoints are a moderated dialogue between experts expressing opposing or differing opinions on a topic of contemporary relevance*

## *Iran's March 14, 2008 Majlis Elections*

Speaking of the need for an opposition party, Kemal Ataturk once said: "I do not want to be recorded in history as the man who bequeathed a tyranny." These words could also be uttered by Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i. Yet, the legacy that 'Ali Khamene'i will leave behind can perhaps best be described as a promenade of contradictory truths. Such contradictions are emblematic of the 8<sup>th</sup> round of Iranian parliamentary (Majlis) elections that are now upon us. It is true that the Iranian state employs a prodigious style of electoral engineering to regiment outcomes. But it is also true that the circulation of elites happens mainly at the bottom of the Iranian political pyramid. Therefore, it is important to follow closely the process of elite maneuvering and circulation at the level of parliamentarians.

The two essays presented in this edition of *Viewpoints* capture the above salient points. Dr. Fatemeh Haghighatjoo, a reformist member of the 6<sup>th</sup> Majlis, maintains that the hardnosed vetting (i.e., disqualification) of the candidates and other typical electoral irregularities/violations have made the entire process superfluous. She suggests that to keep these trends in check there is need for oversight of the electoral process by the international community. On the other side, Dr. Farideh Farhi, a keen observer of Iranian politics, emphasizes the robust competition among various political groups and points out the significance of their cleavages and corresponding electoral strategies.



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One of the strangest features of contemporary Iranian politics must surely be the reality that despite the concerted and successful effort to narrow the range of candidates allowed to run for various political offices, competition among individuals and groups has not only remained unabated, it has intensified. The elite jockeying that has taken place in the past few months, leading to the upcoming March 14 Majlis elections, is a good example of the competitive intensity that had come to characterize Iranian politics.



The current election cycle for the 290-seat Parliament began with a determination by principlist forces (principlist is now commonly used to refer to an array of forces that previously called themselves conservative or fundamentalist) close to the administration of Mahmud Ahmadinejad not to repeat the same mistake they made in the municipal elections of 2006. In those elections, individuals aligned with the President, rather smug about their man, chose to offer their own slate of candidates, particularly in large cities, and ended up with a relatively weak showing in comparison to the more centrist principlist forces and even reformist candidates.

To avoid this scenario, a two pronged strategy was designed that combined a political process intended to unify the principlists and a highly partisan effort to disqualify not only reformist candidates but also centrist ones. But both prongs of this strategy have faced resistance, bringing forth the possibility of a repeat of the results of the municipal elections.

In order to unify the principlists, three major legs of principlism, including Ahmadinejad supporters, the old guards of the Islamic Coalition Party as well as some critical of Ahmadinejad's policies, were brought together under the umbrella of the Unified Principlist Front with the intent to offer a unified list of candidates, particularly for the city of Tehran which has traditionally been the city from which most

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The 8th parliamentary election for the Islamic Republic of Iran will take place on March 14, 2008. One of the challenges of any election in Iran is determining just how free, fair, and competitive it is. The parliamentary election law bans those political activists who are deemed to lack "sufficient" belief in Islam, the 1979 Constitution, or the Supreme Leader — and the elections supervisor and administration usually wield the law as a tool in order to ban any rivals. In addition, cheating on Election Day and annulling votes are frequently employed tools for blocking certain political rivals from winning seats in the Majlis.



In the run up to the March elections, candidates allied with the Reformists, including several former Ministers, Members of Parliament, and clerics, have been disqualified. Reformists claim that, because of these disqualifications, they have been able to provide a list of just 60<sup>1</sup> candidates to contest the 290 Parliamentary seats. Even Shahabeddin Sadr, Executive Director of the Fundamentalist Coalition and a well-known Conservative, acknowledged that, "95 percent of the candidates for the 8<sup>th</sup> Parliament are fundamentalists."<sup>2</sup>

The disqualification of opposition candidates is not new. Indeed, it dates from the 1979 revolution when Marxists, liberals, and secularists were prohibited from running in elections. Following the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, Islamic leftists were more or less excluded from campaigning, though there was some degree of viable competition between those factions that accepted the basic pillars of the Islamic Republic, namely republicanism and Islamism.

The agenda of the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliament did not comport with the preferences of the Supreme Leader. The Parliament and Supreme Leader differed over, among other things, human rights and nuclear policy. As a result, most of the Reformist candidates

1. <http://emruz.biz/ShowItem.aspx?ID=13316&p=1>.

2. <http://news.gooya.com/politics/archives/2008/01/067329.php>.



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of Majlis' leadership is drawn. But, as negotiations about the content and order of the list dragged on, it gradually became clear that some of the major principlist players were dissatisfied. A key candidate for the leadership of the next Majlis, 'Ali Larijani, ended up deciding to run from the city of Qom. Moreover, the announcement of a competing list (which will include some but not all the names on the United Principlist Front list) identified with the Comprehensive Principlist Front — a front loosely identified with three well-known principlist players: Ali Larijani, Mohsen Rezaie and Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf — suggests that the splits that became evident during the municipal elections continue to persist.

The second prong of the strategy by the Ahmadinejad forces also faced resistance and in fact can be considered to have received a pushback. Since 1991, extensive vetting of candidates has been the work of the conservative Guardian Council. This time around, extensive and highly partisan disqualification occurred at the level of Electoral Executive Boards which operate at the provincial levels and are appointed by the Interior Ministry. The disqualifications included many current reformist and centrist deputies of the Parliament and past cabinet ministers or high ranking officials (even including a grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini), eliciting a loud reaction. The reformist and centrist political organizations cried foul. But there were expressions of concern on the part of some principlists as well. One well-known principlist deputy, Ahmad Tavakoli, went as far as to write a letter to the Guardian Council expressing his concern. Ayatollah Khomeini's grandson (not the one who ran and was initially disqualified but the one who runs his estate), gave an interview to a reformist outlet, expressing his dissatisfaction.

The centrist and reformist elders — Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mehdi Karroubi, and Muhammad Khatami — having already made their commitment to taking these elections seriously no matter the extent of disqualifications, also began doing what they always do: lobbying at the highest levels of the system. Karroubi, the leader of centrist National Confidence Party, even had publicized meetings with Ayatollah Jannati, the secretary of the Guardian Council, and Ayatollah Khamene'i, ultimately helping to bringing forth the rather unusual specter of the Guardian Council reversing some of the disqualifications meted out at the Electoral Executive Board level.

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(2,500), including 80 members of the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliament, were disqualified from running for seats in the 7<sup>th</sup>. That number has grown to approximately 3,000,<sup>3</sup> including Reformist MPs. The Speaker of the Guardian Council, which is responsible for overseeing the parliamentary elections, acknowledged that the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliament's protest, which entailed holding a sit-in, is one of the Council's reasons for disqualifying some candidates.<sup>4</sup> Holding a sit-in is not an unconstitutional action. This obviously illegal action is a blatant method of blocking rivals of the clerics' regime.

Another important issue for this election is security. Most reformists have stated their concerns as to how safe the election will be. Besides employing illegal methods of collecting votes, such as buying votes or using paramilitary staff in favor of a particular candidate, it is common for the Guardian Council to annul some or all of the votes of certain districts in order to support the candidates who are allied with the fundamentalists. For instance, during the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary election, the Guardian Council annulled 700,000 out of almost 2,000,000 votes from the Tehran district to block the nationalist-religious candidate, 'Ali Reza Rajai, in favor of the current Speaker of Parliament, Hadad Adel. Thus, in this 8<sup>th</sup> Parliamentary election, although reformist groups — the most significant rivals of the fundamentalists — could introduce reformist candidates, the annulment process of the Guardian Council could just as quickly knock them out of the race.

Although we can predict that an absolute majority of the 8<sup>th</sup> Parliament will be fundamentalist, it is likely that the fundamentalist candidates who are aligned with President Mahmud Ahmadinejad may lose the election, because the voting public is disappointed that he has not kept his campaign promises.

This trend also shows that the Supreme Leader Ayatollah 'Ali Khamene'i wants absolute power plus all three branches of government in line and loyal to him and his agenda. The primary purpose of holding the parliamentary elections process is to prevent any real change of people in positions of power. At the same time, however, the Supreme Leader needs to maintain at least the appearance of holding elections in order to maintain the constitutional mandate for parliamentary elections as well

3. <http://emruz.biz/ShowItem.aspx?ID=1236&p=1>.

4. [http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2008/02/printable/080216\\_dd\\_vettings.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2008/02/printable/080216_dd_vettings.shtml).



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To be sure, the disqualification of many well-known leaders of the reformist movements from Islamic Iran's Participation Party and Islamic Revolution's Mojahedin Party was not reversed. Their imputed "crime" is that during their famous sit-in in the 6<sup>th</sup> Parliament, when they protested their *en masse* disqualification for the 7<sup>th</sup> Majlis, they did something illegal by questioning the legitimacy of the institutions of the Islamic Republic. Still the re-qualification of many centrist and a few reformist candidates is an important pushback at the top.

The pushback also found partial expression in the discursive terrain. For instance, when the head of Islamic Revolution's Guard Corps (IRGC), 'Aziz Jafari, in a speech to members of basij militia, took a stance in favor of principlists and essentially asked members of the basij militia to vote for principlists out of religious obligation, he was immediately criticized for ignoring Ayatollah Khomeini's most famous injunction against military involvement in politics. Jafari had to clarify his position by saying that his words should be interpreted as a defense of principlism as the ideology of revolution and not as a political current.

The impact of all these maneuvers and highly partisan bickering will only be revealed on Election Day. What is evident though is that the attempted move for political dominance by a single bloc, which is rightly or wrongly identified as Ahmadinejad's camp since he is the most public and partisan face of it, has been resisted by an "establishment" that for years has been more or less used to a certain balance or plurality in governance among political rivals. As such, what pre-election maneuvering has shown so far is that the stakes have little to do with ideological (since resistance is also coming from within the principlist camp) or even generational divides (since there are young and old, war veterans, and clerics on all sides) and are more about the shape of power distribution in the Islamic Republic.

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as to showcase democracy to the rest of the world. For the sole purpose of putting on a show, the authorities speak to international organizations and media to boast about how free and fair elections in Iran are. For instance, the Secretary General of the Supreme National Security Council delivered a lecture on free elections in Iran to the EU Parliament recently.

Iranian elections are not free and fair because most of the nation's willing candidates are excluded from running. Reformist politicians were unsuccessful in their negotiations with the Supreme Leader to stop the banning of reformist candidates. Indeed, it seems that Iranian activists and politicians can do little to defend the right to free and fair elections due to the suppression of civil society. They need international support. Given that the regime uses international organizations and treaties to promote their mission, those who support the holding of free and fair elections in Iran should activate those same international tools. Here the United Nations' potential role in the promotion of democracy is very important.

The UN General Assembly has adopted a Resolution for Promoting and Consolidating Democracy which serves this very purpose. Proponents of free and fair elections in Iran should push for UN oversight of the entire Iranian elections process: "The objectives of United Nations electoral assistance are essentially two-fold: (I) to assist Member States in their efforts to hold credible and legitimate democratic elections in accordance with internationally recognized criteria established in universal and regional human rights instruments; and (II) to contribute to building the recipient country's institutional capacity to organize democratic elections that are genuine and periodic and have the full confidence of the contending parties and the electorate."<sup>5</sup> In addition, the European Union and other countries that have relatively good relations with Iran can, and should, seek to influence Tehran's policy regarding free and fair elections. More generally, international organizations should propose a new protocol in order to promote and strengthen free elections everywhere.

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5. [http://www.un.org/Depts/dpa/french/electoral\\_assistance/ea\\_content/ea\\_context.htm](http://www.un.org/Depts/dpa/french/electoral_assistance/ea_content/ea_context.htm).