



View Point

Implications of the Parliamentary Elections in Iran

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The recent elections for the Majlis, or the Iranian parliament, held on March 2, 2012, proved to be a direct contest between the respective supporters of hardliner President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and conservative Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The third contender of power, the reformists, had already been marginalised through the suppression of their protest movement in 2009, popularly known as the ‘Green Revolution.’ This movement was in reaction to the controversial election of Ahmadinejad for the second term as President. Since the Guardian Council, a body invested with the task of approving the candidates, had disqualified more than a third of the registered candidates for the Ninth parliamentary elections, its ultimate outcome was obvious. The supporters of Khamenei won with a decisive majority in the 290-member parliament.

Khamenei had initially supported Ahmadinejad because of his role as a counterweight to the reformists. However, Ahmadinejad fell out of favour in the later part of his second term when his actions appeared to challenge the authority of the Supreme Leader. His public stand-off with the Leader over the issue of reinstatement of Intelligence Minister Heydar Moslehi in April 2011 was the clearest manifestation of such a challenge. It is in this context that he was subjected to a parliamentary hearing on grounds of economic mismanagement. At a crucial time when he ought to have been focusing on the parliamentary elections, Ahmadinejad was forced to prepare for defending himself.

Typical of the Islamic Republic, this tussle ended in the marginalisation of the challenger. This explains the result of the recent parliamentary elections where Ahmadinejad's supporters were subjected to a decisive defeat. Khamenei has been so frustrated with the challenges posed by the successive Presidents – first Khatami and then Ahmadinejad – that he has hinted the possibility of changing Iran into a parliamentary system. In the history of the Islamic Republic, such an action is not without precedence. In 1989, the post of the Prime Minister was eliminated through an amendment of the Constitution soon after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini. Given that precedence, an amendment can be ordered for the elimination of the post of the President.

While such an amendment is bound to change the character of the domestic politics of Iran, it may not promise any substantive change in its foreign policy. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran's foreign policy has been characterised by antagonism against the West, particularly the US. This stance has an element of continuity regardless of varying personalities occupying the post of the President. Similarly, Iran's nuclear issue predates the era of the firebrand President Ahmadinejad. The fact of the matter is that such a foreign policy posturing depicts the fervour of the Islamic Revolution whose ultimate custodian is the Supreme Leader and so far as he doesn't wish otherwise; these issues are bound to remain the same.

Ironically, Ahmadinejad's reckless and confrontational foreign policy has proved counterproductive in maintaining such a continuity because of an impending attack on Iran from the US or Israel. His approach is not in accordance with Khamenei who has always preferred a cautious and calibrated confrontation with the West. Indeed, Ahmadinejad's hawkish foreign policy was directed towards gaining political stronghold on the domestic turf against his political rivals. Consequently, Ahmadinejad has now been sidelined through the defeat of his supporters in the parliamentary elections. Further, in order to prove the legitimacy of these elections, the Clergy has made every effort to prove that there had been a high voter turnout.

The current problems in Iran has its roots in the authoritarian model conceptualised by the founding Father of Iran, the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah

Khomeini who chose to make Iran both Islamic and Republic. It was widely hoped by the liberal sections of the revolutionaries that with the passage of time, 'Islamic' would give way to the 'Republic.' However, the elimination of the post of the President would actually eliminate the last traces of the 'Republic.' With the Arab Spring providing greater regional strategic depth to Iran and enabling Shia resurgence in the Gulf, the new shape of the 'Islamic Iran' may be difficult to predict.

Khamenei may yet face several challenges despite enjoying a free ride in the domestic politics if he decides to eliminate the post of the President. In terms of power centres, Khomeini's model of authoritarianism is completely different from other authoritarian regimes that witnessed the Arab Spring because most of the authoritarian regimes were based on single power centre. Unlike these, Khomeini had created multiple power centres such as the President, the Prime Minister and the Guardian Council and had assigned himself the role of the final arbiter. While controlling the levers of power, Khomeini cleverly pitted one power centre against another. If Khamenei chooses to eliminate the post of the President, a major power centre that helps to check power centred in one point, would be gone. This will effectively bring Iran closer to any other authoritarian models which are more vulnerable to popular revolutions. Subject to the exclusion of the external factors, the shape of future Iran now largely rests on the wisdom of Khamenei.

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4 April 2012