



Deciphering the Results of Iran Elections 2016

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On April 13, 2016, Iran's constitutional watchdog the Guardian Council approved election results of all 207 constituencies, including Tehran, where a moderate- reformist bloc had won all 30 parliamentary seats.¹ Results have been declared for most of the seats of elections of the Iranian Parliament and the Assembly of Experts, simultaneously held on February 26, 2016. In these elections, moderates and reformists fought jointly and performed better than their conservative and hard-line rivals, placing President Hassan Rouhani in a stronger position.

In these elections, 33 million out of the 55 million eligible voters had participated to exercise their franchise.² The elections for the Parliament and the Assembly of Experts were held in over 52,000 polling stations in Iran.³ In Tehran, the capital city of Iran, the turnout was around 50 percent while for the whole country it was 62 per cent. The turnout was termed as 'good' by the Iranian Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli.⁴ This was for the first time that the elections for these two elected bodies were simultaneously held in Iran respectively for constituting the 5th Assembly of Experts and 10th Parliament.

The election campaigns ended on February 25, 2016, one day before the elections. For these elections, the Guardian Council had set up executive committees for implementing the necessary electoral measures. These committees started in December 2015, well ahead of elections, to evaluate the candidates' profiles and qualifications. In the vetting of electoral candidates, four Iranian agencies were assisting, viz., the Intelligence Ministry, the Judiciary,

police and the Iranian Civil Registration Organization. The Guardian Council was playing the role of overseeing the entire electoral process during these elections.⁵

These elections were significant since they were the first to be held after the nuclear deal agreed by Iran and the P5+1 on July 14, 2015. Moderates' victory in the Presidential election held in 2013 and Rouhani's role in culmination of the deal and consequent lifting of sanctions made it probable that moderates had popular support and they stood good chance of winning these elections. These elections of Parliament and Assembly of Experts were also being seen as a referendum on Rouhani's policy of reconciliation with the West. The same was also realised by the conservative Guardian Council and accordingly they tried to pre-empt the winning of their moderate rivals by vetting many of them.⁶

The Assembly of Experts

The most significant factor of the elections of the Assembly of Experts, an elected body of 88 senior clerics having tenure of eight years, is that it is responsible for appointing the Supreme Leader. During this election, 801 candidates had registered to contest for the Assembly of Experts, out of which only 166 candidates were approved⁷ by the Guardian Council and ultimately, only 159 candidates contested in the elections.⁸ The current President Hassan Rouhani and the former President and current chairman of the Expediency Council Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani were amongst the prominent candidates contesting the election of the Assembly of Experts. The Guardian Council had disqualified many moderate and reformist contestants including Seyedali Mohammad Dastgheib, a member of the current Assembly of Experts and two close associates of President Rouhani, Hassan Namazi and Majid Ansari.⁹

Interestingly, in many provinces, the Guardian Council had ensured the handpicking of the candidates of its own choice by approving only as many applicants as the number of allotted seats for that province.¹⁰ Amongst the most prominent candidate disqualified by the Guardian Council was Hassan Khomeini, the grandson of the first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, probably because he was known for his moderate leanings. 16 women had also registered to contest the election of the Assembly of Experts, but all of them were disqualified by the Guardian Council.¹¹ By exercising its power of vetting candidates, the Guardian Council had tried to ensure that a conservative Assembly of Experts was constituted.

However, the coalition of moderates and reformists won 15 out of 16 seats designated for Tehran¹² in the elections of the Assembly of Experts. Amongst the prominent hard-liner loser of Iran constituency included the Chairman of the current Assembly of Experts Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi while the sole hard-liner candidate to have won from Tehran was the current Chairman of the Guardian Council Ahmad Jannati. Conservatives, however, performed better in other provinces of Iran.¹³ Nevertheless, candidates backed by the reformists and moderates won 52 out of total 88 seats of the Assembly of Experts.¹⁴

The Iranian Parliament

For the election of the Iranian Parliament, which has 290 seats and tenure of four years, 12,123 people had registered. Out of these, 10,815 were initially qualified by the executive committees. Out of these initially qualified candidates, the supervisory committees approved 4,720 people while 3,113 candidates were disqualified. At this stage, 518 candidates withdrew their applications and objections were communicated to the Guardian Council by many candidates, which resulted in the approval of 1,500 of the earlier disqualified candidates, making the number of total approved candidate as for Parliamentary elections as 6300.¹⁵ However, final number of candidates who actually contested the Parliamentary elections was 4,844 including about 500 women. In Tehran constituency 1,000 candidates were contesting for only 30 seats.¹⁶

Reportedly¹⁷, 'as few as 100 reformist candidates' had been approved by the Guardian Council to contest in the Parliamentary elections. Consequently, the reformists were making all efforts to defeat their conservative rivals and towards this end they had 'issued their joint list of 30 candidates' to win Parliamentary seats from Tehran. This group was led by Mohammad Reza Aref, a pro-government reformist figure and former Vice President of Iran.¹⁸ This strategy worked well and all 30 parliamentary seats designated for Tehran constituency¹⁹ were won by this joint list, effectively giving away all 30 seats of the Tehran constituency to the moderates and their allies. While Mohammad Reza Aref was the most prominent winner of Tehran constituency, other prominent candidates of this list included Ali Motahhari, Soheyila Jelodarzadeh, Ali Reza Mahjoub, Eliyas Hazrati, who are all considered as reformist figures.

The conservatives performed better²⁰ in other parts of Iran as seen by the nationwide result which shows that the moderates and their allies have won 81 Parliamentary seats, while 74

conservatives and 58 independents have won respectively.²¹ The run-off parliamentary elections would be held on April 29, 2016 in 21 Iranian provinces where no leading candidate could get more than 25 per cent of the votes in the February elections. For these seats, twice the number of the seats, viz., 138 candidates would be running in the elections.²² The new Parliament would start its term from May 27, 2016.²³

Implications of the Election Results

Soon after the election results, Rouhani praised the people of Iran for their 'vigilant participation' and 'meaningful' votes in the elections and assured the new Parliament of the support of his government.²⁴ The victory of the moderates and reformists in the recent elections is likely to strengthen the position of President Rouhani and help him in pursuing his current domestic and foreign policies which are rooted in economic development and accommodation with the West.

However, this victory may not bring about any sweeping change in the society and polity of Iran, despite such demands by those who voted for these moderates and reformists. This is because the conservatives and hard-liners still hold firm grip over most powerful unelected institutions such as the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the Judiciary, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Merely controlling the Parliament would not give Rouhani a free hand to introduce substantial changes in the basic structure of the Iranian system.

This has precedence²⁵ in the recent history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. During his eight years as the President of Iran from 1997-2005, reformists Mohammad Khatami had the support of a reformist-dominated Parliament four years, from 2000-2004. During this time, Khatami had attempted to challenge the basic power structure of Iranian politics by introducing a couple of bills which could enhance the power of the President and limit the powers of the Guardian Council. However, he failed in this attempt simply because the body whose authority he was challenging through laws was the same body which was authorised to approve these laws. The conservatives not only defeated Khatami's attempts to bring about sweeping changes, they actually reclaimed both the institutions of the President and the Parliament during the elections of the Parliament in 2004 and subsequently, the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005. The next decade witnessed a reversal²⁶ of most of the progress made by Khatami and currently, Mohammad Khatami is largely marginalised in the Iranian political system.

Nevertheless, the victory of the moderates and reformists in these elections is a positive development for Iran as well as the world. Their victory would enable President Rouhani to continue his current policy which is focussed on Iran's economic development and includes reconciliation with the West.

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The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

Endnotes:

¹ *IRNA*, April 13, 2016, cited in *Al Arabiya*, "Iran's constitutional watchdog ratifies election results," April 14, 2016, <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2016/04/14/Iran-s-constitutional-watchdog-ratifies-election-results.html>, accessed on April 15, 2016.

² *Press TV*, "Iran ends vote counting in crucial twin elections," February 29, 2016, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/29/452979/Iran-Rahmani-Fazli-Majlis-Assembly-of-Experts-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

³ *IRNA*, "Governor Gen.: 900,000 more voters participate in 10th parliamentary elections in Tehran prov.," February 29, 2016, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81984867/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

⁴ *Press TV*, "Iran ends vote counting in crucial twin elections," February 29, 2016, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/29/452979/Iran-Rahmani-Fazli-Majlis-Assembly-of-Experts-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

⁵ *Press TV*, "The Upcoming elections in Iran," February 24, 2016, <http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/24/452054/Iran-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

⁶ See Asif Shuja, "A Curtain-Raiser to the Iranian Elections 2016," *ICWA Viewpoint*, February 24, 2016, <http://www.icwa.in/pdfs/VP/2014/ACurtainRaisertotheIranianElectionsVP24022016.pdf>, accessed on April 6, 2016, p. 5.

⁷ *Press TV*, "The Upcoming elections in Iran," February 24, 2016, <http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/24/452054/Iran-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

⁸ *Press TV*, "Iran ends vote counting in crucial twin elections," February 29, 2016, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/29/452979/Iran-Rahmani-Fazli-Majlis-Assembly-of-Experts-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

⁹ International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran, "Hardliners Handpick Candidates to Block Moderates and Rig Elections," February 9, 2016, <https://www.iranhumanrights.org/2016/02/elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Press TV*, "The Upcoming elections in Iran," February 24, 2016, <http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/24/452054/Iran-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

¹² For the list of all 30 winning candidates of Tehran constituency, see "Final results of Expert Assembly voting in Tehran province," <http://www.moi.ir/portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=News&CategoryID=4e9075e4-b895-4d0d-a28c-0fbdd3ced1b&WebPartID=052e71a9-1e91-4a95-8601-29f926b86d31&ID=acd97b41-0ca9-4e45-80bf-224e8539526f>, accessed on April 14, 2016.

¹³ *BBC Online*, "Iran elections: Reformists make gains in Assembly of Experts," February 29, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35684776>, accessed on April 13, 2016; For the results of elections of the Assembly of Experts in rest of the provinces, see "Assembly of Experts election results by province, March 2016," <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/Iran-ExpertsAssemblyResults-March2016.pdf>, accessed on April 15, 2016..

¹⁴ Rohani, “Reformist Allies Win Control Of Iran's Powerful Assembly Of Experts,” February 29, 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/rohani-reformist-allies-win-control-irans-assembly-of-experts/27580613.html>, accessed on April 15, 2016.

¹⁵ *Press TV*, “The Upcoming elections in Iran,” February 24, 2016, <http://presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/24/452054/Iran-elections/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

¹⁶ *IRNA*, “Counting ballots starts in Iran elections,” February 27, 2016, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81981296/>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

¹⁷ *The Guardian*, “Iran’s reformers campaign to block hardliners ahead of key elections,” February 17, 2016, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/17/irans-reformers-campaign-to-block-hardliners-ahead-of-key-elections>, accessed on April 6, 2016.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For the list of all 30 winning candidates of Tehran constituency, see “Final results of Expert Assembly voting in Tehran province,” <http://www.moi.ir/portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=News&CategoryID=4e9075e4-b895-4d0d-a28c-0fbdd3cede1b&WebPartID=052e71a9-1e91-4a95-8601-29f926b86d31&ID=acd97b41-0ca9-4e45-80bf-224e8539526f>, accessed on April 14, 2016.

²⁰ *Press TV*, “Iran ends vote counting in crucial twin elections,” February 29, 2016, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2016/02/29/452979/Iran-Rahmani-Fazli-Majlis-Assembly-of-Experts-elections/>, accessed on April 13, 2016.

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²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *IRNA*, “President Rouhani hails nation’s massive participation in elections,” March 1, 2016, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81985463/>, accessed on April 13, 2016.

²⁵ “Who Really Won Iran’s Elections?” March 3, 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/03/iran-election-results-winner/472128/>, accessed on April 15, 2016.

²⁶ *Ibid.*