



## Iranian Politics After the 2004 Parliamentary Election

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The parliamentary election held on February 20, 2004 in Iran was a key turning point in that country's political evolution. The election marked the conclusive end of the campaign for political and social reform initiated by Mohammad Khatami after he was elected president in a landslide vote in May 1997. However, while it is clear that Khatami's efforts have failed, it is not clear what will come next. Although Khatami's Conservative opponents decisively won the election, they have little popular support and it remains uncertain whether they can govern effectively. Moreover, the radical wing of Khatami's Reformist movement remains intact and could present a strong challenge to the Conservatives in the future. Therefore, while the February election essentially marked the end of the Khatami era, Iran's future remains very uncertain.

This article examines the likely prospects for Iran in the aftermath of the 2004 parliamentary election. It begins by reviewing several key outcomes of the election that have important implications for Iranian politics in the coming period. It then discusses several domestic political scenarios that might emerge in Iran in the next few years. It concludes by examining the implications of the election for regional security and for U.S. interests in the coming years.

### The 2004 Parliamentary Election

Close observers of Iranian politics had been eagerly awaiting the February 2004 election for some time. The previous parliamentary election, held in February 2000, had been bitterly fought and produced a sweeping victory for Khatami's Reformist allies over their Conservative opponents. The Conservatives then mounted a concerted effort to block the Reformists' efforts to implement political and social reforms, halting progress on these reforms and leaving the country's political system hopelessly deadlocked. As this deadlock persisted, the Iranian public grew increasingly disenchanted with Khatami and the Reformists, who seemed incapable of delivering on their promises of far-reaching reform. This disenchantment was reflected in the February 2003 municipal council election, which saw a sharp drop in turnout and the defeat of almost all major Reformist candidates.

The Reformists' declining popular support and their poor showing in the 2003 municipal council election raised the prospect that they might also do poorly in the 2004 parliamentary election. The Reformists therefore began to act more aggressively toward the Conservatives, most notably by pushing legislation to increase the power of the president and curb the power of the Conservative-dominated Judiciary and Guardian Council. (The Judiciary has imprisoned scores of prominent Reformists on trumped-up charges in recent years. The Guardian Council has authority to veto parliamentary legislation and vet all candidates for elected office.) The Reformist-dominated parliament overwhelmingly approved this legislation, but it was then vetoed

by the Guardian Council; and the Reformists subsequently made no real effort to revive it. Moreover, despite some talk of boycotting the parliamentary election, the main leaders of the Reformist movement announced in the fall of 2003 that they would participate in the election as long as it was conducted fairly.

The Conservatives tried to project a new image in the months prior to the election, with most of their leading candidates portraying themselves as pragmatists and advocating what has become known in Iran as the "China model." The China model has four main elements. First, its central focus is to reform Iran's economy in ways that will generate employment and raise living standards, which remain well below the levels reached before the Islamic revolution, more than 25 years ago. Second, it calls for continuing the relaxation of restrictions on female dress codes and other cultural matters in order to provide a "safety valve" to reduce unrest, especially among Iran's deeply alienated youth. Third, it calls for better relations with the West, including the United States, in order to facilitate trade and foreign investment and further placate disenfranchised Iranians. Fourth, it entails a freeze on political liberalization and the suppression of challenges to the Islamic regime and its Conservative leaders, though this, of course, is rarely mentioned openly.

In early January 2004, the Guardian Council announced that it was disqualifying 43 percent of the eight thousand-odd candidates who had entered the election. Those disqualified included some eighty Reformist incumbents, including almost all Reformist leaders of parliament, and all Reformist candidates running for some 200 of the 290 seats in parliament. These disqualifications clearly would have ended the Reformists' control over parliament. The Reformists therefore denounced the disqualifications and threatened to boycott the election. Reformist members of parliament began a sit-in and declared that they would continue their protest until their colleagues were reinstated. Most cabinet members and provincial governors said they would resign if the disqualifications were not reversed. Iran's highest official, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who usually backs the Conservatives, even instructed the Guardian Council to reexamine the disqualifications and reinstate all incumbents. However, when the Guardian Council announced the final list of candidates on January 30, almost all of the eighty Reformist incumbents remained disqualified and most of the other disqualifications remained in effect.

After this stunning announcement, 125 Reformist members of parliament declared that they would boycott the election and resign their seats, and the Reformist interior minister declared that the election would not be held on the scheduled date, February 20. However, President Khatami then announced that the election *would* be held on time, and he rejected the resignations of his cabinet ministers and provincial governors. These actions paved the way for the election to be held and signaled a split between the radical and moderate wings of the Reformist movement.

The election was held on the scheduled date, and the results emerged during the following days. In a stunning defeat, the Reformist candidates who chose to contest the election took only about 20 percent of the 225 seats decided in the first round. Key Reformist leaders such as Speaker of Parliament Mehdi Karrubi and Jamileh Kadivar, a prominent female member of parliament, were not elected in the first round. Conservatives took about 70 percent of the first-round seats, with the remainder going to independents. The turnout rate was 51 percent, much lower than the 67 percent rate recorded in 2000, but considerably higher than the 30-40 percent rate most observers had expected. Consequently, roughly ten percent of the electorate voted for Reformist candidates and 35 percent voted for Conservatives. The corresponding figures in the 2000 election were roughly 50 percent and 10-15 percent, respectively. The second round of voting took place on May 7 and produced very similar results.

The most important conclusion to be drawn from these results is that the Iranian people are deeply disillusioned with the Reformists and chose to repudiate them, either by abstaining or by voting against them in this election. This disillusionment seems to have been aimed primarily at Khatami, who largely personified the reform movement and has been widely criticized in recent

years for failing to confront the Conservatives more boldly. It is not clear whether this disillusionment extends to more-radical Reformists, since most of them were disqualified or boycotted the election. However, it seems likely that the radical Reformists also would have fared poorly if they had participated in the election because they had not clearly distinguished themselves from moderate Reformists in the eyes of most Iranians by the time of the election.

However, the sharp drop in support for the Reformists does not necessarily mean that a large number of Iranians enthusiastically switched their support from the Reformists to the Conservatives. Roughly 10-20 percent of the electorate had voted for Conservative candidates in the two presidential elections and the municipal council and parliamentary elections held from 1997 through 2001. These are the Conservatives' most devoted supporters. Since there is no reason to think the Conservatives' popularity has increased in the last few years, the 15-25 percent of the electorate that voted for Conservatives in 2004 but not in 1997-2001 probably consists largely of apolitical Iranians who had voted for the Reformists previously but became disillusioned with them and either felt obliged to vote or decided to give the Conservatives a chance to implement the China model. In other words, most Iranians who voted for Conservatives in this election probably support them only half-heartedly. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that a majority of Iranians probably still favor the political and social reforms promoted by the Reformists but have given up on Khatami's moderate approach to achieving these reforms.

### **Implications for Iran's Future**

It is difficult to say what will happen in Iran during the next few years. Indeed, this is perhaps the most uncertain time in Iran since the Khomeini era ended in the late 1980s. However, we can sketch several general scenarios that might emerge and discuss the conditions surrounding them.

Iran probably will remain fairly stable in the short term, with no major challenges to the Conservative-dominated regime. The Reformists have been badly beaten and will need time to regroup. The election outcome and the lack of visible unrest during the period surrounding the election suggest that the Iranian people are not ready for an open confrontation, and may even want to give the Conservatives a chance to implement the China model. This "honeymoon period" may end as soon as May 2005, when the next presidential election could sharply raise tensions.

In the longer term Iran could become more unstable, and there is some chance that a major challenge will emerge to the Conservatives. This is possible for two main reasons.

First, it seems very unlikely that the Conservatives will be able to implement effective economic reform, which is the central focus of the China model. Very few Conservative leaders have the kind of technocratic outlook necessary to reform the economy. Moreover, the Conservatives will find it politically difficult to reduce the vast web of subsidies that has emerged over the years; and key Conservative constituencies centered in the bazaar and the parastatal foundations will oppose many other much-needed reforms. Finally, Iran's oil income is likely to remain high during the next few years, reducing the urgency of economic reform. Consequently, Iran's economy (outside of the oil sector) is likely to remain stagnant in the coming years and unemployment is likely to grow, fueling popular unrest.

Second, even if economic reform and other elements of the China model can be implemented, most Iranians firmly oppose the Conservatives' broader vision for Iran. This is especially true of Iran's rapidly growing youth population, which strongly favors greater political and cultural freedom and has little attachment to the Islamic regime and the revolution that produced it. This gap between the aspirations of most Iranians and the intentions of Iran's Conservative rulers will

continue to grow as the country's youth become increasingly influential. Consequently, popular opposition to the Conservative-dominated regime is likely to grow, regardless of whether the economy improves.

Although domestic unrest therefore will probably grow after the Conservatives' honeymoon period ends, it is not at all certain whether this will produce a major challenge to the Conservatives and, if so, whether such a challenge will succeed or fail. Two main factors bearing on this remain very uncertain.

First, it is not at all clear who would lead such a challenge. The only faction capable of leading a major challenge to the Conservatives in the foreseeable future is the radical Reformists, and they have not given any indication that they intend to do so. The moderate Reformists clearly will not challenge the Conservatives, and it is doubtful, in any case, whether many Iranians would support them now. Religious-nationalist groups like the Liberation Movement of Iran and monarchist forces operating abroad have little popular support in Iran. There is no significant secular democratic movement. The Islamic-leftist Mojahedin-e Khalq is widely despised. New opposition leaders might emerge in the coming years, but none are apparent now.

Second, the Iranian people have become remarkably quiescent during the last few years, and it is not clear what might lead them to become more active politically. It is especially bewildering that Iranians have not reacted strongly to the Conservatives' various attacks on the Reformists in recent years, to their blatant efforts to control the election in February, and to Iran's continuing economic stagnation. If these conditions have not activated the Iranian public, it is difficult to say what might do so. Moreover, high oil prices and a possible U.S.-Iran rapprochement could help defuse popular unrest during the next few years.

If a major challenge does somehow emerge to the Conservatives, it could produce one of three main outcomes. First, in what could be called an "Iranian Velvet Revolution," a major challenge might break the Conservatives' grip on power and produce a relatively democratic regime—either an "Islamic democracy" or perhaps a secular democracy, depending on how events play out. Khatami's failure to reform the Islamic regime from within suggests that this will occur only if a mass movement of some sort emerges. Second, in what could be called an "Iranian Tiananmen Square," the Conservatives might succeed in putting down such a challenge and then rule in a much more repressive manner, replacing the relatively mild Islamic-populist regime that exists today with an Islamic dictatorship. Third, both sides might back down before a Velvet Revolution or Tiananmen Square scenario emerges, producing a reversion to the *status quo ante*.

It is impossible to say in advance which of these scenarios might occur. Clearly the outcome of such a confrontation would depend very much on the determination of the challengers to achieve their goals, the loyalty of the security forces, and the actions of key leaders. However, each of these factors would be affected very much by the unfolding dynamics of the confrontation itself, so we cannot say with any certainty how they might play out and which outcome might emerge.

Of course, this uncertainty and the gravity of these outcomes for Iran's future might well persuade Iran's leaders to avoid confrontation or back down in the early stages of one - a pattern that has, in fact, played out repeatedly in Iran in recent years. Consequently, the most likely scenario for Iran's future probably is a continuation of the tense factional standoff that has prevailed for many years now.

### **Implications for Regional Security and U.S. Interests**

Regardless of what happens domestically, Iran's foreign policy is likely to remain fairly pragmatic in the foreseeable future, continuing the pattern of recent years. Both the Conservatives and the radical Reformists are preoccupied with domestic matters and therefore are likely to avoid open

confrontation, both with their neighbors and with the West. Moreover, inflammatory rhetoric aside, recent trends suggest that both factions want better relations not only with Europe but also with the United States, whose economic sanctions are a major obstacle to improving Iran's economy.

Nevertheless, there could be two important foreign-policy differences between a radical Reformist-dominated regime and a Conservative-dominated regime. First, while the radical Reformists have given up the confrontational, anti-Western foreign policy views they once held, the Conservatives' coalition contains a small but important element of foreign-policy hardliners. Consequently, Iran's leaders are more likely to challenge the regional status quo under a Conservative-dominated regime in response to demands from these hardliners. Such a challenge might take the form of continued efforts to develop a nuclear weapons capability, efforts to expand Iran's intermediate-range missile forces and its biological and chemical weapons capabilities, and efforts to maintain a capacity to attack the United States and its regional allies through proxies like Hezbollah, Hamas, and perhaps forces in Iraq. The radical Reformists express little interest in these matters and seem more determined to improve relations with the United States than the Conservatives.

Second, the Conservatives generally are more xenophobic and less pragmatic than the radical Reformists, so a Conservative-dominated regime would be less reliable and less trustworthy than a radical Reformist-dominated regime. With the Conservatives largely in control of foreign policy, Iran in recent months has violated both the spirit and the letter of its October 2003 agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on the development of its nuclear capabilities. Unreliable behavior of this sort is likely to continue as long as the Conservatives control Iran's foreign policy. Moreover, agreements with Iran to stop its missile development, its biological and chemical weapons development, or its support for proxy forces like Hezbollah would be even harder to verify than the IAEA agreement, so Iran's behavior probably would be even more unreliable on these matters under the Conservatives.

Consequently, since the Conservatives are likely to remain in control of Iran's foreign policy for the foreseeable future, we can expect continued efforts by Iran to avoid confrontation and even achieve rapprochement with the United States and its allies, but also continued challenges to the United States and likely violations of any agreements that might be reached on key issues. For substantial change to occur in Iran's foreign policy, a major change in Iranian domestic politics—a Velvet Revolution of some sort—is probably necessary. This seems unlikely during the foreseeable future.

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