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Iranian Parliamentary Elections and Ahmadinezhad's Discontents

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On April 25, a second round of voting will determine the remaining eighty-eight seats of the Iranian Majlis. The first round, held on March 14, decided 202 seats and was considered a defeat for both the reformists and President Mahmoud Ahmadinezhad. His reaction to the setback -- the dismissal of Interior Minister Mustafa Pur-Muhammadi, responsible for conducting the election -- is indicative of the difficult times ahead for the president and his allies, whose public and official support is steadily diminishing.

Poor Showing for Ahmadinezhad's Supporters

The political group that represents Ahmadinezhad's faction is dubbed the "Scent of Service" (Boo-ye Khosh-e Khedmat). In December 2006, this group circulated separate lists of candidates for both the Assembly of Experts and municipal elections. In both instances, the group's candidates attracted relatively few voters, showing the decline of Ahmadinezhad's popularity since his June 2005 election. For the latest parliamentary elections, the president decided against creating a separate list and instead tried to compromise with other conservative groups and create a common front. This policy has helped him conceal the reality of his unpopularity, preventing observers from determining to what extent he is personally able to mobilize supporters.

Indeed, determining an accurate number of Ahmadinezhad's supporters in the new Majlis is a matter of interpretation, given that he and his conservative opponents endorsed many of the same candidates. One respected news service, *Mehr News*, estimated that the conservatives allied with Ahmadinezhad and some other conservatives captured eighty-eight seats (44 percent of the first round total), while his conservative opponents seventy-five, reformists twenty-three, and independents forty-seven. Tabnak, a website run by anti-Ahmadinezhad conservatives, had slightly different numbers: sixty-six seats for Ahmadinezhad supporters, sixty-three for conservatives opposed to him, thirty-six who were endorsed by both, and thirty-four reformists. It is hard to understand how both sources arrived at these totals since neither adds up to 202. But in general, it would be difficult to claim that Ahmadinezhad's supporters won a majority.

The most noteworthy confrontation of this election has been between Ahmadinezhad and the conservative critics who deeply detest him. These newly elected conservatives include Ali Larijani (the former secretary of the Supreme Council of National Security whom Ahmadinezhad dismissed over nuclear policy differences) and Ahmad Tavakkoli (head of the Center for Majlis Research and an outspoken critic of the president's economic agenda). Even the tension between Ahmadinezhad and Majlis speaker Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel has intensified over the past year. Haddad-Adel criticized Ahmadinezhad for ignoring the parliament's adopted bills; in return, Ahmadinezhad accused Haddad of seeking any pretext to pressure his government.

Apart from these individual clashes, criticism of the president's economic agenda was a fixed theme of most candidates' campaigns, reflecting popular discontent. Even Ahmadinezhad joined in to criticize the government's economic policy. In an inflammatory speech in Qom on April 16, he accused his administration of ignoring his policy to fight corruption and monopolies. His critique extended even to his own appointees, including Finance Minister Davood Danish Jafari, the central bank governor, and the heads of other economic

organizations. Ahmadinezhad's decision to dismiss both Jafari and Interior Minister Pur-Muhammadi provoked protests from dozens of parliamentarians as well as the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan* newspaper, appointed by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

To make matters worse, Iran's economic situation is likely to worsen. In February, annual inflation was officially reported at 22.5 percent and is rising each month (unofficial numbers are much higher), while gasoline demand was higher than before rationing was introduced last year. Shortages of natural gas -- widely used for heat in the colder northern climates -- have also been reported across the country.

The Next Majlis

The upcoming second round of voting will not change the parliament's makeup drastically. In the first round, the reformists, who have a small minority, only won seats in the provinces -- in Tehran, every one of the nineteen reformist candidates lost, and none were able to get more than 25 percent of the vote. Yet, although the reformists are not a substantial threat on their own, they could unite with Ahmadinezhad's conservative critics and, together, attract enough support from independents to defeat his supporters.

Although conservatives will hold most of the seats, this is no comfort for the president. It seems that his firm supporters may number fewer than fifty members -- only a fraction of those in the shared conservative list he endorsed. And as time goes on, the political price for remaining in the president's faction increases. For instance, on his last visit to Qom, not one religious authority (marja) agreed to meet with the president. Indeed, clerical criticism of Ahmadinezhad is becoming more common, and harsher. On April 17, Ayatollah Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, head of the Association of Militant Clerics of Tehran and a leading conservative figure, publicly criticized the economic situation and stated, "I told Mr. Ahmadinezhad to not regard us as a tool. We were militant before and after revolution, and we will fight corruption and everything else that is not in the interest of our religion and country." In other words, some leading conservatives explained Ahmadinezhad uses clerics when he needs them but ignores them the rest the time.

The Majlis conservatives opposed to Ahmadinezhad will cause his government a number of problems, from refusing to vote for proposals or suggested ministerial candidates to criticizing his budget. For one thing, Majlis members are likely to exploit the president's failed economic policies to make themselves more popular -- particularly the raging inflation figures and the worldwide price increase of basic commodities such as wheat. Moreover, as the May 2009 presidential election approaches, the competition between different conservative factions will be reinforced. And since Ahmadinezhad's rivals in the last presidential election are now leading figures in the Majlis, criticism of him is likely to escalate.

In addition to these problems, the Majlis approval for new ministers will complicate the president's calculations if he continues his policy of removing ministers to cover or justify his government's failures. Although this policy may deflect popular criticism, it leaves him open to difficulties with the Supreme Leader. For instance, Pur-Muhammadi was very close to Khamenei and was appointed as interior minister on his recommendation. By dismissing him and others close to Khamenei (such as Ali Larijani), Ahmadinezhad risks losing the most important force supporting his presidency. Given all of these factors, the last year of Ahmadinezhad's presidential term could be tumultuous.

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