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Pre-election Analysis

IRAN **Elections to the Islamic Consultative Assembly,** **February 2016**

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What is chosen?

On February 26th the first round of the 10th legislative elections to designate the 290 members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majles-e Shura-ye Eslami*), which is convened every four years, will take place. These will happen together with the 5th elections of the Assembly of Experts (*Majles-e Khobregan-e Rahbari*), institution formed by 86 clerics, which has the attribution of appointing, confirming and even dismissing the Spiritual Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This pre-electoral analysis will focus on the Islamic Consultative Assembly (ICA) legislative elections, leaving for a forthcoming analysis all related to the Assembly of Experts (AoE).

In the Iranian electoral system it is expected that all candidates to elective posts must register before the Interior Ministry, which will firstly sieve them according to administrative and legal criteria. After their approval, the Guardian Council (*Shura-ye Negahban*), institution formed by six religious and six non-religious jurists, is responsible for the final selection of candidates. As usual in Iranian electoral processes, this Council approval has aroused the international attention regarding the applied excessive zeal, which has left most candidates out of the competition in their January 17th provisional list.

The applications

According to the Interior Ministry data 12,123 Iranian citizens registered their application; out of these 10,954 were accepted after the first ministerial sieve¹. This number of applications is by large the highest since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 (see table). Also, the number of female candidacies is the highest, with 1,434 applicants. Nevertheless, the preliminary candidates list approved on January 17th set 25% of the applicants out, and 29% of them with a candidacy that could not be "authenticated". This last category, strongly questioned by the Interior Ministry, the reformist spokesmen, and even president Rohani himself, is not provided by the Iranian electoral law, since the authentication of the candidacies referred only to the administrative and legal process carried out by the ministry, whose goal is to discard any applicants with criminal records or legal and administrative irregularities. In Tehran province, the most influent electoral district where 30 members are elected, only 760 applications out of 2,769 were accepted.

Despite the high number of turned down applications, this vague category would enable to see some margin of negotiation to reinstate many candidates firstly rejected, as the Council vice-president, Siamak Rahpeyk², himself suggested. This, together with the announced pressure of President Rohani, the Interior³ minister, and Rafsanjani, and the probable mediation of leader Ali Khamenei himself, might turn into a not so limited figure.

¹ See <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81895339/> and <http://en.radiozamaneh.com/featured/most-parliamentary-hopefuls-pass-first-stage-of-scrutiny/>

² See <http://www.shora-gc.ir/Portal/Home/ShowPage.aspx?Object=NEWS&ID=c5c4c62c-2e5e-403a-b1b9-bdeef0925823&WebPartID=6d09f0b5-ba72-4511-9dc4-b46930f2a2c3&CategoryID=8fac823a-5745-41b6-a9e2-b879c74deb7b>

³ See <http://en.radiozamaneh.com/featured/minister-raises-rejection-of-reformist-candidates-with-leader/> y <http://en.radiozamaneh.com/news/rohani-comments-on-wave-of-disqualified-reformist-candidates/>

**Applications and accepted candidates,
Islamic Consultative Assembly 1980-2016.**

Election	Applications	Approved Candidates	% acceptance
1980	1,854	1,431	77.2%
1984	1,592	1,231	77.3%
1988	1,999	1,417	70.9%
1992	4,501	3,441	76.4%
1996	5,883	3,752	63.7%
2000	6,856	5,753	83.9%
2004	8,172	4,665	57.1%
2008	7,129	4,419	61.9%
2012	5,405	3,444	63.7%
2016	12,123	4,720*	38.9%

Sources: Ministry of Interior of Iran, Press TV, IRNA and IranPrimer.

* Provisional data, definitive list expected by 4th February.

The disqualified candidates

Among the most renowned names who have been rejected by the Guardian Council are Mehdi and Fatemeh Rafsanjani, two of the sons of the powerful Expediency Council head and President Hassan Rohani ally, Hashemi Rafsanjani. In fact, Fatemeh is a founding member of the Moderation and Development Party, whose current president would be a supporter. Another rejected candidate is Morteza Esraghi, grandson of the ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, founder of the republic, and close to the reformist political groups. Other well-known reformist who did not make the cut have been Ebrahim Jahangiri, brother of the current vice-president Eshagh Jahangiri, and Mohsen Mehralizadeh, reformist presidential candidate in 2005. According to reformist sources, only 30 of their registered candidates would have passed the cut throughout the country, and in Tehran only four, Mohammad Reza Aref, Soheila Jelodarzadeh, Mostafa Kevakebian and Alireza Mahjoub, which would leave the coming parliament almost with no reformist presence.

But not only have the reformists been affected by the Guardian Council's disqualifications, 37 current members of the Assembly, including 25 conservative and ultra-conservative or "principlists" also have been rejected. Ali Motahari, current and very prominent "principlist" MP, son of the ayatollah Morteza Motahari, disciple of Khomeini and one of the most influential ideologists of the Revolution, also was rejected, maybe because he strongly criticized the former president Mahmud Ahmadinejad, and for his support to some of Rohani's initiatives. Also were rejected Ebrahim Asgharzadeh, supporter of Followers of Imam's Line, which occupied US embassy in 1979; and Hamid Resaei, cleric and "principlist" MP of the Steadfast Front, which vehemently opposed the nuclear treaty and Rohani's policies. Being MPs, it is clear that their disqualification does not lie in the lack of credentials but in their political stands, which is never clearly stated in the Council's decision.

The final list will be published on February 5th, and the disqualified candidates will have until the 8th to submit their allegations. Between the 9th and the 15th, the Guardian Council will review these allegations and will present the final list on the 16th. The electoral campaign will officially start on February 18th, just eight days before the first round of election on February 26th. In that period the support and candidates lists will be drawn up, which will be analyzed in a forthcoming work.

What implications may the elections have?

Many analysts agree on the fact that these legislative elections, after two years and a half of Hassan Rohani's term are a plebiscite on his performance. It is evident that after the political and economic setback left by the former administration of Ahmadinejad, the task requested to Rohani was extremely hard: recover the Iranian economy, reduce the hyperinflation, attract foreign inversion, reduce unemployment, stop the young brain drain, modernize the petrol and gas industry, reset the relations with the international community, achieve the lifting of the international sanctions which ballasted the country, especially since 2006. Before these challenges, not only the people have a say on his management, but also the rest of the Iranian political class, especially the clerical elite, who tacitly accepted the strong bet made by Rohani regarding foreign policy. For the President, ending the sanctions was an imperative to achieve the rest, and to do so it was necessary to end with the taboo of talking directly with the US. Reluctantly, the leader Ali Khamenei accepted the negotiations, as did the most conservative sectors, not without vehemently expressing their fierce reluctance to the agreement during its parliamentary debate. The recent implementation of the JCPOA came with the first state visit to Tehran, the Chinese president, and Rohani's tour through Italy and France, with investment promises. This diplomatic success will doubtlessly allow Rohani not to depend on the legislative electoral results to continue with his foreign policy agenda, and will not put in risk the compliance of the nuclear agreement.

However, a conservative majority, like the current but with yet less reformist and moderate MPs, would represent an unachievable obstacle to implement other kind of reforms, such as the economic liberalization, the privatization of certain state companies, the relaxation of certain social and political control measures, the release of political prisoners, etc.