

Implications of Iranian Elections

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Summary

An apparent strong showing by supporters of President Hassan Rouhani might reflect broad support for the nuclear agreement between Iran and major international powers ("Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action," JCPOA) that is providing significant sanctions relief. Iran's core national security goals are unlikely to change, and with runoffs still to come, any possible easing of social and political restrictions is difficult to predict. The results could affect the choice of the next Supreme Leader.

Election Processes

On February 26, 2016, Iran held elections for the 290-seat *Majles* (parliament) and for the 88-seat body called the "Assembly of Experts," which is empowered to choose a successor to the Supreme Leader and rewrite Iran's constitution. The *Majles* plays a significant role on budgetary and economic decisions, but less of a role on issues of national security.

The *Majles* seats are allocated to 207 geographic constituencies, meaning that some constituencies send more than one person to the body. Tehran, for example, sends 30 members to the *Majles*. The Assembly of Experts seats are divided among Iran's 31 provinces. The largest constituency in both elections is Tehran, which sends 30 persons to the *Majles* and 16 to the Assembly of Experts. Five *Majles* seats are reserved for members of the "recognized" religious minorities (Zoroastrians, Jews, and several Christian denominations). Political parties are generally banned, and factions compete as loose alliances of candidates based on ideology.

For the *Majles*: The Interior Ministry and cleric-controlled vetting body called the Council of Guardians (CoG) approved 6,200 candidates to compete for the 290 seats, including 586 female candidates—invalidating the candidacies of about 6,000 applicants. The disqualifications included the overwhelming majority of "reformist" candidates: proponents of substantial easing of restrictions on freedom of expression and political activism.

Former President Mohammad Khatemi and another leading reformist, Mohammad Reza Aref, [allied for the election with pro-Rouhani "moderate-conservatives" into a combined "List of Hope" slate](#) in an effort to reduce the percentage of "hardliners" (who call themselves "Principalists") in the body. The Principalists express loyalty to Supreme Leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i and some also support ex-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. For seats where no

candidate received at least 25% of the vote, runoff elections will take place in early April.

For the Assembly of Experts: Candidates must be broadly recognized by the Shiite clergy as able to interpret Islamic law, meaning that only Shiite clerics populate the body. Of the 800 candidates who applied, the CoG approved only 161 to run, rendering some races uncontested. One candidate whose disqualification provoked substantial debate was Hassan Khomeini, the 36-year-old grandson of Ayatollah Khomeini and the first member of the Khomeini family to enter Iranian electoral politics. Critics of the exclusion attributed the CoG's decision to Khomeini's advocacy of moderate positions.

Results

The turnout was about 62% of Iran's 55 million eligible voters, similar to recent elections. The number of *Majles* seats decided was 222, leaving 68 to be decided in the runoff, and meaning that the exact composition of the new *Majles* will depend on the runoff outcome. Even though the Interior Ministry has not released finalized results, available information indicates that, no matter the runoff results, Principalists will control far fewer than the nearly 200 seats they hold in the current *Majles*. The Principalists and the pro-Rouhani List of Hope appear to have each won between 80 and 90 seats in the initial [round](#), and the remaining seats were won by "independents" not aligned with any faction.

The pro-Rouhani coalition—and mostly reformists within that coalition—swept all 30 seats from Tehran constituency. [Experts agree that the new *Majles* will be far more supportive of Rouhani's policies](#) than is the current one, but *Majles* voting patterns are often determined by the issue, Khamene'i's views, regional circumstances, and many other factors. Moreover, differences within the pro-Rouhani coalition will likely emerge after the new *Majles* is seated. Reformists emphasize the lifting of social restrictions, whereas moderate-conservatives—and Rouhani himself—tend to emphasize economic reform. Rouhani has to date resisted confronting judiciary hardliners on issues such as releasing reformist figures imprisoned for leading the 2009 uprising in Iran.

[The Assembly of Experts](#) election could prove to be highly consequential if Khamene'i passes away during its coming eight-year term. [Moderate-conservatives won more than half the seats overall](#), and pro-Rouhani candidates won all but one of Tehran's 16 seats in the body. Two prominent hardliners—current Assembly chairman Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi and Ahmadinejad mentor Ayatollah Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi—both lost their Assembly seats. The only hardliner to win a seat from Tehran Province was the current CoG chairman, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who placed last (16th place). The top vote-getter in Tehran was ex-President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, Rouhani's mentor, a result that could boost Rafsanjani's chances of returning to the Assembly chairmanship he lost in 2011 after running afoul of hardliners. Rouhani placed third in that province.

Implications

The composition of the *Majles* will not be fully known until the April runoff, making further implications difficult to assess. Rouhani would appear to be favored for reelection in 2017. The loss of key hardline Assembly of Experts members could improve the chances for a relatively more moderate leader to replace Khamene'i, should the 76-year-old leader pass away in the next eight years. The elections might not substantively alter Iran's core regional policies, which are set primarily by Khamene'i and the hardliner Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC); likewise, the issue of basic freedoms, which is strongly influenced by hardliners in the judiciary. Still, the elections appear to have strongly endorsed the JCPOA and resulting sanctions relief—the centerpiece of Rouhani's presidency to date. Rouhani might feel emboldened to push forward on economic reform, in particular to curb the economic influence of parastatal corporations, *bonyads* (cleric-controlled foundations), and conglomerates (some of which are at least partially controlled by the IRGC) that have marginalized traditional trading families and young entrepreneurs. Opening the economy is crucial to attracting the foreign investment required to derive maximum benefits from sanctions relief; however, substantial economic reform could incur resistance from the IRGC, Khamene'i, and other hardline power centers. Finally, reformists in his coalition might press Rouhani to try to achieve the release of the imprisoned reformist leaders Musavi and Karrubi; however, Rouhani has thus far shown no inclination to buck hardliner opposition on this issue.