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## ELECTION RESULTS FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS AND LOCAL COUNCILS: PRELIMINARY APPRAISAL

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On December 15, elections for both the assembly of experts and municipal councils took place throughout Iran. Only 165 candidates ran for 86 seats at the Assembly of Experts, which according to the constitution is responsible to supervise the Supreme Leader, appoint his successor and even dismiss him if he is found incapable to fulfill his responsibilities. Some 230,000 candidates ran for more than 110,000 seats in the urban municipalities and village councils.

The elections for the Assembly of Experts were the fourth to take place since its establishment in December 1982. Despite the Assembly's significance as the sole body entrusted with the task to select and depose Iranian Supreme Leader, the majority of the Iranian public takes no interest in these elections. The apathy results from the Assembly's lack of involvement in daily political life, as well as the fact that most candidates not identified with the main conservative faction, which until now hold about two thirds of the seats in the Assembly, were disqualified. The Guardian Council, charged with "supervising" the elections, approved only a third of the nearly 500 initial candidates. Among those disqualified were almost all the reformist candidates, but also some ultra-conservative candidates associated with Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah Yazdi, who is

considered to be the spiritual patron of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Elections turn-out was estimated at over 60 percent, which is higher than that of previous elections for the Assembly and Local Councils. The turn-out of the last two elections for the Assembly in 1990 and 1998 reached 37 and 47 percent respectively, while the turn-out of last two elections for the Municipal Councils in 1999 and 2003 reached 64 and 49 percent.

Results of the elections for the Assembly of Experts indicate that most prominent members held their seats and that the traditional conservatives managed to preserve their hold over the Council. Former president, 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was defeated by Ahmadinejad in the 2005 Presidential elections, won first place in the elections for the Assembly in Tehran. Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi only succeeded to hold to his seat.

The results were anticipated, due to the disqualification of most candidates not identified with the traditional conservative faction supporting Supreme Leader, Ayatollah 'Ali Khamenei. The conservatives' success in preserving the *status-quo* at the Assembly demonstrates their capacity, at least for the moment, to maintain their position *vis-à-vis* their

two main political rivals: reformists and ultra-conservative. Following the recent victories of the neo-conservative in the 2004 elections for parliament (Majlis) and presidency (2005), it was assumed that followers of President Ahmadinejad and Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi would try to seize control of the Assembly of Experts as well, so as to restrict the power of Khamenei and at some stage even to influence the appointment of his successor. Yet the neo-conservatives' failure to expend their presence in the Assembly reflects the success of traditional conservatives to maintain their status, at least for the upcoming eight years until the next elections. Supreme Leader Khamenei proved that he is capable of holding back the aspirations of Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi's followers to become the major factor in shaping the image and deciding the future of the Islamic republic. Khamenei's suppression of Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi's ambitions mirrors the manner in which he succeeded in limiting the reformist backers of former President Mohammad Khatami, who tried to lead political reforms.

Municipal elections were held for the third time since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The first elections took place in February 1999 at the initiative of Khatami, who wanted to use those elections to strengthen the rule of law and the political awareness of Iranian citizens. Reformist candidates then won a decisive victory, especially in Tehran, where they won a firm majority of the capital's City Council. Four years later, however, the reformists suffered a major defeat when Neo-conservatives gained full control of the Tehran City Council and nominated Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as its Mayor.

As in previous years, the elections for the Tehran City Council drew most public attention. While most reformist factions were joined under a 15-member list, the conservatives failed to form a unified list and ran three main lists. Parvin, the President's sister, led one of them representing Ahmadinejad's supporters, while a second list backed the current Tehran's Mayor, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. Despite their ideological closeness and common background (they both served as officers in the Revolutionary Guards) a bitter personal and political rivalry exists between these two leaders, preventing their followers from putting forward a joint list. In addition to these two lists, "The followers of the Imam's line front" ran a third list.

The results in Tehran give the list of Qalibaf's followers ("Usulgarayan") eight of the 15 seats, the reformists' four and Ahmadinejad's followers two. Another seat went to an independent candidate, close to Qalibaf. These results reflect a certain achievement by the reformists, following a series of setbacks in the last elections for Municipal Councils, Majlis and Presidency.

However, the reformists failed in their hope of winning back Tehran City Council. Unlike their previous political defeats, which could be partially explained by the divisions within their camp and low turn-out rate, this time, the reformists will find it difficult to explain their relative lack of success under the same pretexts. It seems that the main difficulty the reformists faced in this round remained the same as it was during the last Presidential elections: their inability to gain the support of most voters coming from the lower layers of Iranian society and their continuous reliance upon the support of middle and educated classes. The reformists in Tehran ran for elections under the slogan: "Bringing democracy to the people's dining table". This was an act of defiance against President Ahmadinejad's elections campaign's slogan, still to be fulfilled, "Bringing the oil revenues to the people's dining table". Tehran elections results, most likely reflecting the general mood of the Iranian public, might indicate that the economic and social agenda - rather than the struggle for political reforms - still dominates the voting of most Iranian citizens.

Still, the results represent a major setback to Ahmadinejad's followers in Tehran and other cities. The failure of their list, which emphasized throughout the campaign its support for the President's government and its policy, represents also the failure of President Ahmadinejad, who has already lost many of his supporters during the last few months. Criticism of Ahmadinejad's policy - especially following his inability to fulfill his promises to improve the economic situation of Iranian citizens and to fight corruption - is no longer limited to his political rivals, such as former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami.

During the last few months, Ahmadinejad has faced growing criticism from members of his own political faction against his populist and irresponsible economic policy. Even

if Tehran elections results do not fully reflect the general mood of Iranian public, they should be considered as a warning sign to the President, especially towards the upcoming elections for Majlis in 2008 and the Presidential elections in 2009.


The results of Tehran City Council elections might lead to establishing a coalition, especially before the council can nominate a Mayor. Forming a coalition between reformist representatives and neo-conservatives followers of mayor Qalibaf will not be an easy task, but it might serve the political interests of both parties. The reformists will be able to regain part of the municipal government after having been excluded from it in 2003. They can use this achievement to promote their efforts to rehabilitate the reformist camp, before the critical upcoming elections to Majlis and Presidency. In return for their participation in his coalition, Mayor Qalibaf will be able to maintain his current position – one that has already been proven itself a comfortable springboard for the Presidential election. Such a coalition will

probably not be able to overcome the deep ideological gaps between the two camps regarding the Islamic republic's political direction and foreign policy. Yet, it might open the door to a potential new set of alliances in Iranian politics towards future elections campaigns.

Finally, this latest campaign may serve as another indication of the maturity and vitality of Iranian political system. In less than two months the Iranian regime will celebrate its 28th anniversary. During this period, not only has it succeeded to survive an eight-year war with Iraq and the death of its founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1989. It has also witnessed more than twenty five successful elections. Those who put their hopes in the so-called unstable roots of the Iranian regime in seeking to topple it and bring about a more pragmatic regime should give the matter a second thought following these last elections.



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