

Event Report:

Iran's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: Slogans and Stakes

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Background

Two principle bodies oversee elections in Iran. The Interior Ministry is responsible for administering the election and the Guardian Council supervises voting and deems candidates qualified to run. Elections are centrally regulated and electronic voting machines could be introduced in the next election. There is universal suffrage for voters over 18 years of age.

Candidate Qualification

All individuals seeking election must first be certified to run by the Guardian Council. Candidates must be between 30 and 75 years old. Candidates must possess at least a Master's degree or have served two terms in the parliament. On average, there are 10 candidates for each seat in parliament. The conservative leadership in Iran has sought to shape Guardian Council criteria in order to qualify more conservative-oriented candidates than progressive or reform-oriented candidates while maintaining credibility and legitimacy in the process. The Guardian Council disqualifies between 30 and 50 per cent of people seeking to be candidates. The basic rule of the Guardian Council under Khamenei is to disqualify opponents without undermining the legitimacy of elections. Voter turnout above US-levels is cited source of pride in Iran.

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Significance of Parliamentary Elections

All political camps have accepted the upcoming elections and a boycott is unlikely. A high number of centrist candidates are running in 2008. The centrist movement and its support among the electorate reflect a rejection of Ahmadinejad's inflationary and expansionist economic policy. The parliamentary elections may serve as a referendum on Ahmadinejad's policy and foreshadow the 2009 presidential election. Both conservatives and centrists are calling current policies into question. Factions have formed within the camps and there is competition for placement on the electoral lists. Fights center around the top placement on the conservative list in Tehran. The person in this position will likely challenge Ahmadinejad in the presidential elections in 2009. Ali Larijani is considered the most likely challenger.

Campaign Slogans

Moderation is a frequent slogan heard in connection with economic policy. The electorate is dissatisfied and demands a change in fiscal and budgetary policy. Candidates cite competence and economic experience as a key qualification for parliament. A discourse on enhancing the role of the parliament vis-à-vis the executive is emerging. Change and hope are both used in the campaign and should be understood as dissatisfaction against the backdrop of the Ahmadinejad presidency. Conservatives are touting foreign policy success- especially on the nuclear issues- as an example of resistance to US pressure. Conservative candidates are casting the reform-oriented candidates as willing to appease US and Western countries in the foreign policy arena. The presentation of Ali Larijani as a more "moderate" conservative alternative to Ahmadinejad demonstrates a collective shift to the right side of the political spectrum in Iranian politics.

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