The Ninth Parliamentary Elections in Iran: Challenges and Perspectives

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Introduction

There is a humorous story that some Iranians tell each other when they talk about elections. They say an American, a Japanese and an Iranian were engaged in a heated discussion about elections in their own respective countries. Each boasted about the speed of counting the votes and announcing the election results in his country. The American said, we use such an advanced technology in the electoral process that, forty-eight hours after the polls close, we can announce the results. The Japanese responded, we have an even more cutting-edge technology and people would know who has won and who has lost only 8 hours after the polls close. The Iranian said, what you say is nothing. We have made such great leaps in this field that we require neither forty-eight hours nor 8 hours after the polls close to announce the results. Even forty-eight hours before the election, we already know the results and who has won and who has lost.

Humorous stories of this sort have been circulating in Iran throughout the life of the Islamic Republic in the last three decades. Nonetheless, it is interesting to know that according to official statistics, on average 65 percent of people have participated in presidential elections and 60 percent in parliamentary elections during the last three decades.

Even if all these numbers are fabricated, one of the most pressing questions about the future parliament is whether the people who tell these stories will also crowd the polls to vote in the same numbers as the past. And if they do not participate, will the government still announce a high voter turnout? In other words, will the announcement of results follow the same pattern that has been the norm in the last three decades, or will it resort to the tactic which triggered widespread protests after the 2009 presidential election? Apart from the important topic of the voter turnout, will the approaching election encounter serious challenges with respect to competition? Have the members of Parliament, as the humorous story has it, have been selected in advance and is the existing competition just an electoral show?

Whatever the answer, the truth is that Iran's parliamentary election in March of this year has assumed a significance that is unparalleled in the history of the Islamic republic. Even Iran`s Supreme Leader some time ago warned about the occurrence of probable security challenges in this election. Iran's Intelligence Minister has also suggested that this election is the most crucial

election in the lifetime of the Islamic Republic. All this exists if we do not take into account the deteriorating condition of the political system in the face of foreign pressures and threats and the turbulent situation of national economy. In any case, all signs point to the special circumstances of this election and the anxieties that it has caused for the system. I will try to shed light on the reasons and magnitude of these anxieties from the two perspectives of participation and competition. In addition, in light of examining these challenges, I want to look briefly at the future developments of Iran's political stage in the wake of this election.

The Challenge of Participation

The Islamic Republic has always utilized the high voter turnout as a proof of its own legitimacy against its enemies. It is interesting that the regime's political propaganda is not focusing on these objective statistics that range from 60 to 65 percent. Instead, by evoking a vague and yet exciting and epical vision, this propaganda tries to create a lively and passionate picture of the people's broad participation as if the participating voters were representing a very strong majority. (I must add as an aside that this propaganda, in terms of its structure and function, resembles the Nazis' political propaganda in the Hitler era and, to a certain extent, the propaganda that dominated in the Stalin era). The people who buy into such ceaseless propaganda usually imagine that participation and voter turnout in elections are quite high.

In addition, this propaganda produces the notion that the size of the people's participation in Iran's election is unique and unrivalled in the world. The leaders of the Islamic Republic refer to this unique quality an evidence of their political system's unmatched popular legitimacy. Because it seems that this picture, at least until the presidential election of 2009, was accepted by many people as the truth, and even had some currency among the dissidents, we can understand one of the causes behind the participation of more than half of the population in elections. Grasping the complexity of this cause and the way it operates will help us better understand the people's collective psychology. This cause necessitates a circular process. This means that these people are in effect the consumers and buyers of a picture of reality that, on the one hand, is made and perfected by their own actions and, on the other hand, results from their belief in and consumption of the political propaganda with which the regime feeds them.

This story was repeated in all the elections of the Islamic Republic until two years ago. But after the presidential election of 2009, an important event took place that, to a certain extent, cracked this picture. According to the same official statistics, 85 percent of Iranians went to the polls in that election. But when the results were announced, some people took to the streets in protest. For a week at least, it felt as if the protesters had taken control of the streets -- the streets which were previously a stage for the demonstrations of the regime's supporters and the proof of its popular legitimacy. Now these people who had taken to streets felt they were too many, a massive multitude which was even greater than the demonstrations that the regime's supporters had held all these years to show off their strength to their opponents. This belief was

magnified abundantly in the media and virtual space. (Here I must add that I do not intend to assess the truth of these claims because, from a sociological perspective, what matters more than objective reality is the way individual and collective actors understand and evaluate reality). As a consequence, the apparent legitimacy that was based on such images began to crack.

Now, the Islamic Republic wants to hold an election that is the first election after those protests and the cracks that have damaged the pictures it had been creating for the last three decades. That is why the Islamic Republic senses the danger of any decline in the voter turnout. In fact, it even needs to show that the people's participation has increased. Iranian rulers want to convince everyone that those protests were just a passing incident and a plot of their enemies and not the result of the people's disaffection with Iran's political regime. Therefore, they need to show that not only have the people not abandoned the political system, they even stand behind it more resolutely than ever. This task has assumed urgency particularly because the opposition, from the reformists inside the country to the dissidents outside, has asked the people to boycott the election. In this way, the existing political regime wants to make it clear that its opponents and critics have no influence among people.

Not only does the Islamic Republic need to show its enemies and bystanders that it has the people's broad support, a fact that will solidify its legitimacy, it also needs to sell this idea to its supporters. The Islamic Republic needs to restore the faith of those who became somehow disillusioned with its rhetoric after the street protests. It wants to convince them that the regime still has the support of the masses. It wants to show that its moral credibility is intact. It needs to paint this picture because it should also show foreign powers that, despite their pressures and threats, it draws its power from vast popular support.

Thus, the voter turnout in the future election is loaded with political significance that is different from the voter turnout in an ordinary election. In fact, we can conclude that the size of the peoples' participation in this election will:

1) Express the consequences of the battle between the political regime and its opponents;
2) Reveal the ability or inability of the political system to reconstruct the psychological confidence of its supporters; and
3) Turn the election into a stage for the people's reaction to international pressures.

But the likelihood of these occurrences als on another factor: the announcement of the election results, which should also include a high voter turnout that is believable to others. But the precedence of tampering with the votes in the 2009 presidential election on the one hand and the pressing need of the political regime to display a high voter turnout on the other hand, have made the Islamic Republic, more than ever, suspected of trying to rig the election. In the absence of impartial and independent institutions, this suspicion will not go away. In my view, in such conditions, what will express the size of the peoples' participation and its political meaning will not depend on objective statistics; rather, it will depend on the images that will emerge out of a propaganda war between conflicting sides.

The Challenge of Competition

To better understand the character of the challenge of competition in this round of parliamentary elections, it will be useful to speak briefly about three important periods in the short history of the Islamic Republic. Without looking at these three periods, we cannot explain the broader picture that will elucidate the meaning and character of the election for the next parliament.

In the three decades of its life, the Islamic Republic has experienced three periods of rearranging its makeup or reshuffling its political boundaries. The objective of these reshufflings was to determine the territory or the dividing line that separated the inside and outside of the political regime.

The first instance of this rearrangement occurred in 1981 when the Iranian Parliament impeached and removed Mr. Banisadr, the first Iranian President, from office. Afterwards, and through the bloody purges of 1980s, the boundaries between the political forces inside and outside the political system shifted.

The second instance of this reshuffling of boundaries took place eight years later in 1989 when, close to the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, the first leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Montazeri was dismissed as the designated heir to the Supreme Leader.

The third period of rearranging the boundaries was carried out 20 years later in 2009 by the demand of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. In this period, and with the presidential election of 2009, the Supreme Leader actualized and put into effect his decision to eliminate the so-called reformists from Iran's political scene.

After every period of reshuffling the boundaries, parliamentary elections have been held within the scope of a more limited competition. This means that the only candidates who could compete in the election were the ones who had remained within the boundaries of the political system. This group in Iran's political culture is called "us." Now, it is expected that the candidates who will participate in the next parliamentary election are those who, not only from their own perspective, but from the regime's viewpoint, are regarded as belonging to the currents inside the political system.

In the present condition, and in the aftermath of reshuffling the boundaries after the 2009 presidential election, two political currents were expelled, or are being expelled, from the political system. The members of the first current are the remainders of the 1990s reformists who have become famous as the current of "fitneh" or sedition in Iran. The members of this current have expressed their solidarity with the Green Movement and its leaders and supporters in one way or another. The famous figures of this political current are Mr. Khatami, Mr. Mousavi and Mr. Karubi. The second current consists of the supporters of Mr. Ahmadinezhad who are called the "deviant current." This group has made evident its lack of allegiance to the Supreme Leader and has stressed its distance from him; or at least, the Supreme Leader and his supporters suspect its intentions and feel threatened by it. In this election and from the perspective of the regime's various segments, the "deviant current" is being regarded in absolute terms as an

outsider, expelled, and "not us." But the "deviant current" is in the process of being expelled, and this is the first step to push them out into the insecure margins of the regime's boundaries.

But apart from these two currents, there are three other main currents which exist inside the boundaries of the Islamic Republic:

1) The extremist right, which supports and is supported by the Supreme Leader;
2) The moderate right, with which the Supreme Leader still works and from which he benefits, but is not his real choice;
3) The traditionalist right, which is weakened and plays a symbolic and declining role.

At the same time, these three currents, which try to overtake each other in supporting the Supreme Leader, are competing fiercely for gaining a larger share in the circle of ruling elites. One of the fields of this competition is the parliamentary election. Since in Iran's political tradition, the makeup and formation of the parliament's political identity has serious impacts on the next presidential election, competition in this election is viewed as a prelude to the next presidential election. Thus, not only has the control of the election and the political identity of the next parliament assumed an unprecedented importance for the political system, it has also taken on a vital significance for the above-mentioned currents.

The internal competition between these three currents and their battle with the deviant current, which still fights to survive in the system, will determine the political competition on the national level in the future election. (I have overlooked the competitions on the local level which, in their own right, are important but lack the political meaning on the national level). What can turn this competition into a security threat for the political system is to allow it to intensify, especially between the extreme right and the moderate right on the one hand and between these two currents and the deviant current on the other.

That is why it seems that the political system will adopt three different strategies to control the election of the future parliament:

1) It will try to continue the elimination of the reformists from the political system by expelling their last remains;
2) It will try to prevent the election of Mr. Ahmadinezhad's supporters (the deviant current) to the parliament; and
3) It will try to control the competition between the remaining forces inside the regime to reduce the costs of an uncontrolled competition.

Iran's Political Scene at the Time of Election and Afterwards

Earlier, I mentioned three periods of reshuffling of boundaries in the Islamic Republic. What has made the most recent rearrangement of boundaries in the Islamic Republic different from the two previous periods is its meaning and objective. With this rearrangement of boundaries,

the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, by the method of holding the 2009 election and announcing its results, wanted to send a clear message to both supporters and opponents that they would now deal with a different Islamic Republic. In this Islamic Republic, no force or current could exploit elections as a tool to change internally the political regime or threaten the position of the Supreme Leader. That is why the political system must decisively eliminate any political force which is suspected of trying to change the regime internally by penetrating into its internal boundaries. In other words, the Supreme Leader wants to tell his supporters and opponents that he will not tolerate any reform in the regime by the efforts of some of its factions if these efforts aim to reduce his powers and increase his responsibilities. Thus, the meaning and function of elections for the reformists have changed until further notice. In fact, because of the disfunctionalization of elections - as a tool to penetrate into the regime's fortress- the reformist forces are not able at the moment to actualize their goals through elections.

Despite all this, the challenge and internal conflict between the forces that now exist inside the system (the three currents of extremist right, moderate right and traditionalist right) over more power in the next parliament, and the collision of these currents with the deviant current - which itself was an offshoot of the extreme right- will probably cause limited turmoil in Iran's political scene. This turmoil will create opportunities for the reformists and other opposition forces. But considering that they may lack preparation to mobilize socially and politically, whether they will seize these opportunities is not quite clear. What decides the outcome is the character of the events that these future opportunities set in motion, the events that will be revealed only after they have happened.

In addition, it can be said that if the makeup of the future parliament is determined by the will of the Supreme Leader, Ahmadinejad's government will be subjected to more pressures in the next two years. In fact, he will be the main accused for numerous disarrays that have culminated these days in the rise of the price of gold and foreign currency. At the same time, the unpredictability of Mr. Ahmadinejad's behavior and the hostages that he has taken from the existing factions make the future events both momentous and vague.

If the Supreme Leader does not succeed in the political control of the next parliament (a situation that is not too probable in current circumstances) and the relatively independent forces, which are inclined either toward the reformists or the deviant current, seize power in the next parliament, we must witness the rise of other challenges until the next presidential election, a process that will drag into that very election itself. At this point, we cannot really measure the magnitude and range of these challenges.

Conclusion

As you can see, there are many vague points in assessing these conditions. In order to show the essence of these uncertainties, I quote a short article from my weblog. I published this article in my weblog three days after the controversial election of June 12, 2009. Its title was "After June 12, Iran will be another Iran."

I had written: "When, during the election debates, Mr. Ahmadinejad hit the regime's trip-let towers with his explosive airplane, it was not possible to guess what would be the outcomes of this suicide attack and how far it would go; just as it was impossible to predict clearly what would be the outcomes of the September 11 suicide attacks at the Twin Towers. Nevertheless, everybody knew that the world after September 11 will not be the same. With Ahmadinejad's suicide attack, we can also foresee that Iran will change after June 12. The dusts of these attacks have not settled yet for us to see who will come alive out of the debris and who will die or injure under them, what will be destroyed and what will survive. Iran's face is still being sketched out after June 12…In any case, whatever is in store in the future, when the dust of ruins is settled on the ground of reality, when the illusions of the dust-clad pictures of events scatter, we may see a different reality, we may realize that Ahmadinejad's move has not been a suicide attack at all. Perhaps, when the dust settles, we will realize that the pilot and his co-pilot are still alive. And when they come out of the caves and brush the dust off their faces, we will see that Ahmadinejad has only performed the role of the co-pilot and not anything more!"

Now we can see better that in this period of reshuffling of boundaries, Mr. Ahmadinejad has only been a co-pilot, a co-pilot who is now on the verge of dismissal or forced retirement. But this co-pilot has shown that the movements of his airplane are unpredictable, even when the pilot is someone else. And now that he views himself as a unique and singular pilot, the situation is even more complex. If we add this unpredictability of one the major players to the general unpredict-ability of Iranian society, you would agree that in this cloudy, vague and foggy atmosphere, and with these untrustworthy pilots, we cannot speak of future with certainty, something that I have also tried to avoid!

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