

Iranian Elections Strengthen Rouhani's Hand

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The elections held in Iran last Friday have strengthened the faction of the Islamic Republic's bourgeois ruling elite that favours speedy rapprochement with Washington and has spearheaded the push for neo-liberal restructuring.

This faction is led by Iran's current President Hassan Rouhani, and by his longtime mentor, former two-term President Hashemi Rafsanjani. Making clear where its sympathies lie, the Western media invariably dubs this the "moderate" or "reformist" faction.

At stake in Friday's elections were the composition of Iran's 290-seat parliament and the 88-member Assembly of Experts. Membership in the latter body, which chooses and oversees the work of Iran's supreme leader, is restricted to Muslim clerics.

Because the current supreme leader, 76-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, is in poor health, it is likely the incoming Assembly of Experts will have to choose his successor at some point during its eight-year term. Consequently, the outcome of this year's Assembly election has been considered especially important.

The precise makeup of Iran's new parliament is not yet known, as there will have to be run-off elections in April to fill about 15 percent of the seats and because the politics of Iran's ruling elite is not organized on the basis of highly structured parties, but rather by means of looser factional groupings.

Nevertheless, the partial results do indicate that the Rouhani-Rafsanjani faction rallied substantial support from the more privileged sections of Iran's population, enabling it to make major gains in both Iran's parliament and the Assembly of Experts at the expense of its "hardline" rivals, the Principalists.

Comprised of staunch Shia religious conservatives and elements with ties to the Revolutionary Guards and their substantial business interests, the Principalists have voiced concerns and in some cases outright opposition to the nuclear deal that Rouhani, with Supreme Leader Khamenei's blessing, reached with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany. Under that agreement, Iran has made sweeping concessions, including dismantling much of its civilian nuclear program and submitting to the most intrusive-ever International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection regime, in exchange for the US and its European Union allies lifting the economic sanctions that have crippled Iran's economy.

The Principalists have also criticized the Rouhani government for its plans to auction off Iran's oil resources to the Western oil giants, advocating instead the continuation of a nationally focused "resistance economy."

The electoral gains for the Rouhani-Rafsanjani faction were especially pronounced in Tehran, which, with a population of some 16 million, is home to more than one-fifth of Iran's population. Running under the "List of Hope" label, it won all 30 of Tehran's parliamentary seats and 15 of Tehran's 16 seats in the Assembly of Experts. Prior to the elections, the Rouhani government had the support of just two Tehran MPs.

Rafsanjani topped the polls in the Tehran district-wide Assembly of Experts election, while Rouhani finished third. The defeated included Ayatollah Mohammad Yazdi, the outgoing head of the Assembly, and Mohammad Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, mentor and spiritual adviser to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—a populist, closely identified with the Principalists, who served as Iran's president from 2005 to 2013.

According to Western news reports, the middle class in Iran's capital city turned out in large numbers to vote, forcing voting hours to be extended in some neighborhoods up to three times. Meanwhile, the working class, centered in southern Tehran, was largely indifferent to the election, indicating its alienation from and hostility to both rival bourgeois camps.

On Monday, the Iranian government reported that the election turnout in Tehran was just 50 percent, a sharp contrast to the nationwide average of 62 percent.

In winning the presidency in 2005, Ahmadinejad tapped into widespread hostility to the pro-market IMF-endorsed policies Rafsanjani and his "reformist" successor, Mohammad Khatami, had implemented, and the resulting growth in social inequality and economic insecurity. Under conditions of rapidly rising world oil prices, Ahmadinejad during his first presidential term significantly increased social spending, to the dismay of much of Iran's clerical-bourgeois establishment. During his second term, which unfolded in the wake of the 2008 world financial crash and as the US ratcheted up sanctions and war threats against Iran, Ahmadinejad and the Principalist-dominated parliament turned sharply against the working class, slashing price subsidies and accelerating an already ambitious privatization drive.

The Rafsanjani-Rouhani faction improved its showing in other large Iranian cities, albeit less dramatically than in Tehran. Its Principalist rivals, however, have reportedly won most of the smaller towns and rural areas.

News organizations have provided different estimates of the relative strengths of the rival groupings in parliament. The BBC said "hardliners" won in excess of 150 seats and the "reformists" 111, while Reuters and Al Jazeera gave "conservatives" between 35 and 40 percent of the seats, "reformists" 30 percent and independents slightly more than 15 percent.

A significant factor in the Rouhani-Rafsanjani faction's strong electoral showing was its ability to draw support from other groupings. Former President Khatami lent support, as did many leaders of the "Greens," who, with Western encouragement, challenged the validity of Ahmadinejad's reelection in 2009 on the basis of unsubstantiated charges of ballot-rigging. Khatami's former first Vice President Mohammed Reza Aref was the biggest "List of Hope" vote-getter in Tehran.

The pro-Rouhani government slate also drew support from prominent figures, including noted social conservatives previously associated with the Principalists. Chief among these was the current parliamentary speaker, Ali Larijani, who hails from one of Iran's most

powerful clerical establishment families. Larijani's reelection was also endorsed by one of the Revolutionary Guards' most prominent leaders, Quds Force Commander General Qassem Suleimani.

Iranian business leaders and pro-market economists were ecstatic over the election results. "In economic affairs the next parliament will be much better," Saeed Leylaz, one of Khatami's former economic advisors, told Reuters. Ramin Rabio, the chief executive of Turquoise Partners, a large financial services company that specializes in managing foreign investments in Iran, said he expects that the new government will quickly implement a raft of pro-market "reforms," including gutting labour law restrictions on layoffs and updating the country's commercial code to make it more business-friendly.

A major objective of the Rouhani government is to rewrite the regulations governing the country's oil industry to entice Western investment. Its hope is that a flood of European and ultimately US investment, seeking to take advantage of Iran's abundant supply of skilled cheap labor and natural resources, will buoy the economy to provide it with sufficient political support and cover to eliminate the little that remains of the social concessions made to the working class in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah's bloody, US-backed dictatorship.

Iranian Supreme Leader Khamenei has pointed to the 62 percent participation in last Friday's election, which actually represented a 2 percentage-point decline from the 2011 elections, as proof of the Islamic Republic's broad popular support.

Khamenei has long sought to maneuver among the various factions of the bourgeois-clerical establishment. He authorized the shift to seek a nuclear deal with the US and ultimately prevailed on all sections of the state apparatus to rally behind it.

He has voiced no objection to the Rouhani government's full court press to woo European governments and transnationals. However, under conditions where the Obama administration and the US military-security establishment continue to threaten Iran, maneuver to overthrow its Syrian ally and lavish arms on the Saudis and Israel, and where the Republicans have vowed to scuttle the nuclear deal should they win the presidency, Khamenei has cautioned against rushing into closer engagement with Washington.

Rouhani and his foreign minister have been far less circumspect. Since concluding the nuclear deal they have repeatedly suggested that Iran could be a valuable partner for US imperialism in stabilizing the Middle East. In past pronouncements, Rafsanjani has been even franker in offering to tie Iran to US strategic objectives, suggesting, for example, in September 2013, as the US was contemplating a military assault on Syria, that Iran should withdraw its support for the Assad regime.

If the Obama administration chose to back off from its war drive against Iran and pocket major concessions instead, it was done in order to concentrate on US imperialism's military-strategic offensive against its more powerful adversaries, Russia and China. A second major calculation was that US diplomatic and Western economic engagement with Iran would enable Washington to better explore and exploit cleavages within the Islamic Republic ruling elite, so as to force it to unreservedly accept US hegemony over the Middle East, or lay the political groundwork for regime-change in Tehran.

Testifying before the Senate Foreign Relations committee last week, US Secretary of State

John Kerry counseled against the imposition of further sanctions against Iran in the name of “human rights” and argued as well in opposition to forcing Tehran to abandon its ballistic missile program, saying Washington should rather see how the implementation of the nuclear deal goes.

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