

Opinion – Iran 2020: Election Polls, Panics and Predictions

Written by Ramesh Sepehrrad

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RAMESH SEPEHRRAD, FEB 20 2020

On February 21, 2020, Iran holds its 11th parliamentary elections. These elections are devoid of any legitimacy since no real pro-democracy or opposition groups takes part in them. Elections in theocratic Iran are neither free nor fair and primarily staged to provide a deceptive show of popular legitimacy. While the regime attempts to portray a functioning democracy, the timing offers an opportunity to measure the regime's political, economic and strategic health index and its trajectory. At the micro level, the parliamentary elections are a barometer of the balance of power between vying factions in the regime's internal structure. Already, the selections are set to shift the parliament more in favor of hardliners given the elimination of the so-called reformers. Yet, beyond the mafia-style factional fights, hardliners and reformers are equally committed to the regime's survival, domestic repression, terrorism and regional drive for hegemonic expansion through proxies and wars in the region. At the macro level, elections are also an indicator of the regime's assessment of the gravity of the internal and external conflicts posed to its survival. The entire Iranian leadership is already in panic in anticipation of Friday's election. The current situation is so dreadful for the struggling regime that it cannot tolerate even the slightest degree of internal deliberations. To that end, Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, has embarked on a campaign to close ranks and unite his forces against the popular uprisings.

Acknowledging his unpopularity, on February 7, 2020, Khamenei said "some may not like me, but they should vote for the sake of the country's prestige and security." Again, a week later, he pleaded for voters' turnout and said elections are "a matter of dignity for the establishment." The Iranian president, Hassan Rouhani, has also echoed his deep concern and pleading for public turnout on Friday to maintain the facade of legitimacy for the entire regime.

One can argue the factional panic is a direct result of Khamenei overplaying his hand to "engineer" another electoral win for his preferred faction. Beyond the factional feuds, these elections are taking place in the backdrop of three transformative and consequential realisms that has significantly threatened the regime. One is the escalating and expanding popular protests across the entire nation denouncing both the hardliners and reformers. Slogans such as "down with Khamenei", "down with Rouhani", and "our enemy is here, they lie and say it's US" are the signature message of these protests in Iran. The second development is the growing international isolation of the regime. On the eve of Iran's parliamentary elections, the Trump administration announced sanctions against five Iranian officials responsible for preventing "free and fair" elections. "Tomorrow, the Iranian regime will stage an event euphemistically called elections," Brian Hook, the State Department's special envoy for Iran, said at a briefing announcing the sanctions. "Unfortunately for the Iranian people, the real election took place in secret long before any ballots were even cast."

With all the sanctions and pressure mounting on the regime, both faction have lost the ability to maneuver and create distractions from the domestic turmoil are now confronted with rebellion population demanding change and freedom. Equally important, is the elimination of Khamenei's number two, Qassim Soleimani, who represented his regime's 'strategic depth' in the region and expansion of its hegemonic foreign policy.

Add to this potent mix, the growing impact of the main opposition, the Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) and its internal network of Resistance Units. The unifying message of the alternative, as outlined by Maryam Rajavi 10-point plan

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describing a secular republic based on gender equality and an end to all religious or ethnic discrimination continues to organize the public across the country with a vision of a free Iran. Rajavi has called for a full boycott of the elections. The semi-official poll indicated that 82% of people will boycott the elections. Social media platforms, activists are writing graffiti on walls and distributing pamphlets with slogans such as “my vote is the regime’s overthrow.” In Rajavi’s view the complete purge of the rival faction’s candidates is a “clear sign of the ruling religious fascism’s retrenchment in the face of surging protests.”

Maryam Rajavi’s impact on the Iranian society is increasingly more pronounced in recent years. In March of 2018, she described the uprisings as “a nation that wants regime change.” She clearly articulated how the protests “showed the rejection of all factions within the regime and the determination of the Iranian people to overthrow the regime in its entirety.” Today, the impact is seen in the nationwide boycott by all sectors of the society. In December 2019, Rajavi called women as the “force of change” and she recognized the growing role of women in leading the rallies and protests across Iran. In recent weeks, Iranian people have carried an unmistakable message for the future as they chant “death to the oppressor, be it Shah or the Supreme Leader” and “no to crown, no to turban, the mullahs’ time is over” in their protests. Rejection of monarchy of the past and theocracy of the present is an indicator of how the Iran protests has embarked on its next phase of defining its future and women continue to be on the forefront of such movement. Rajavi’s alternative plan with transitional roadmap for free and fair elections where the people can elect their leaders in a post-theocracy Iran is well received among the women and youth of Iran. Her banners and messages are hung in major highways and center cities across Iran.

By all indications, even if Khamenei shifts the elections in his favor, deeper crises awaits the entire regime. A member of Khamenei’s faction, Hamid Rouhani, predicted that people may “repeat the same scenario as the 2009” where millions poured into the streets denouncing the fraudulent elections. Iran’s parliamentary election is best understood as one held by a regime in fear of its unraveling in the hands of Iranian people, paralyzed with international isolation, but the future of Iran should be examined through its promising and a woman-led alternative.

About the author:

Dr. Ramesh Sepehrrad is Adjunct Faculty at George Mason University, teaching courses on Global Conflict Analysis and Gender; and a scholar practitioner from School of Conflict Analysis and Resolution (SCAR) – also at George Mason University. She has served as conference director, moderator and panelist at various academic institutions, congressional seminars. Her work has been published in *The Brown Journal World Affairs*, *The Washington Post*, *The National Interest*, *The Washington Times*, *Women e-news*, *United Press International*, *Feminist Voice*, and others.