

Unconstitutional Coup Threatens Iran Election

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Unless a dramatic shift in the Iranian political situation is effected by the highest authority in the land, there will be no parliamentary elections worthy of the name held in that nation on Feb. 20. Due to illegal maneuvers by the Guardians Council, a 12-man arch-conservative entity charged with vetting candidates for office, conditions have been created for a totally rigged vote, which Iran's reformists vow to boycott.

The Guardians Council had originally excluded 3,600 of over 8,000 candidates, mainly reformists, and including 80 sitting members of the Majlis (Parliament). Forced by an order from the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to revise their cuts, the GC approved only one-third of the disqualified names; 109 Parliamentarians quit immediately on Feb. 1. Their letter of resignation stated, "They [the conservatives] are in the process of removing the republican aspect from the Islamic republic, and installing an Islam comparable to that of the Taliban. . . . An election whose result is clear beforehand is a treason to the rights and ideals of the nation." Calling the members of the Guardians Council who had disqualified the candidates "traitors," the letter also said: "We will not participate in this election. . . . Anyone who wishes well for the Islamic republic will not be ready to organize such an election."

The next day, Mohammad Reza Khatami, leader of the Islamic Iran Participation Front and brother of the President, said his party would not run any candidates because of the disqualifications. "We have no hope for the possibility of free and fair elections. All legal opportunities have been killed," Khatami said. He said the decision could be reversed, if the elections were postponed; but that his party was supporting the government's position "not to organize give-away elections." This created a total deadlock: if the Interior Ministry and governors, in charge of organizing elections, refused to do so, the conservatives would have to utilize the military to replace them. Such recourse to extraordinary, illegal measures would ensure that the electoral boycott would be overwhelming, and the resulting "victory" over the reformists would be seen as a cruel farce, internationally as well as domestically. Mohammad Reza Khatami warned the conservatives not to force the holding of parliament elections with the backing of the armed forces, and the revolutionary guards, saying such a step would amount to a "coup d'état."

Nothing could break the deadlock, except the intervention of Ayatollah Khamenei. On Feb. 3, President Khatami, Parlia-

ment speaker Karroubi, and Judiciary head Shahroudi, met with the Supreme Leader, who ordered that the elections be held on Feb. 20 as planned. Thereupon, Iran's provincial governors said in a statement posted on the Interior Ministry's website, that they would not hold the elections. Faced with the perspective of massive abstention, Khamenei seemed to modify his position on Feb. 4, when he ordered a second review of the disqualifications of candidates. Government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh said "We hope to achieve a final result as soon as possible that would allow us to hold an election with a huge turnout," Ramezanzadeh told reporters. "I think we can expect some positive results tomorrow," Feb. 5.

Conservatives' Unexpected Provocation

In a televised speech on Feb. 4, Khamenei attacked the reformists, but then added: "There have always been disputes. [But] there is no knot which cannot be untied. . . . There is no dead-end facing the Islamic system and the Iranian nation." He also acknowledged the importance of public participation in elections: "In the Islamic republic, we are servants of the people and take our prestige from the service to the people. People are not indebted to the officials of the Islamic Republic. Rather it is the officials that have a debt of gratitude to people. This spirit has been the key to the survival of the Islamic Republic over the past 25 years in the face of conspiracies of the enemies."

On Feb. 5, the government expected an "acceptable solution" to be presented, meaning a large number of excluded candidates should be reinstated. Instead, although the Intelligence Ministry, which had been tasked to review the names, endorsed another 600, the Guardians Council cut that down to 51. As Reza Khatami explained, handing the list over to the Guardian Council was "a legal formality, and the Council was required to forward that list to the Interior Ministry without intervention."

The intransigence and illegality of the GC action precipitated the crisis immediately, as 130 members of the Majlis confirmed their resignations. In a statement they said: "In the light of the news that this illegal process is continuing without fundamental change, we cannot take part in the Feb. 20 elections which will not be free but will be unfair and unjust. . . . We unmasked a parliamentary coup which had been in preparation for two years but the body which organized this coup is still hoping to carry it off by semi-legal means." Reza Khatami announced that his party, the Islamic Iran Participation Front, would definitely boycott the elections. He added that President Khatami had informed Khamenei of what had happened.

What will happen next is utterly unclear: Ayatollah Khamenei could revoke the action of the Guardian Council (which is appointed by him); or declare the disqualified candidates approved. Or, he could let things stand, and allow a de facto, unconstitutional coup.