

Iran's Election Crisis Flanks the One in Iraq

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

Each Iranian election brings the simmering institutional conflict between the conservative Guardian Council (GC), and the reformist wing in Parliament with its supporters in the population, to the boiling point. With elections for the Majlis (Parliament) scheduled for Feb. 20, the crisis has assumed unprecedented contours, and could lead to significant changes in Iran's political landscape.

The crisis broke out on Jan. 11, when the GC announced that it had disqualified over 3,605 of the 8,200 candidates who wanted to run for office. According to the Islamic Republic's constitution, the GC has the authority to vet candidates, and to disqualify those who, in its view, are not working in the interests of Islam, or the nation. This time, the conservative, unelected body of 12 clerics and jurists went overboard. Their drastic slashing of names, which included 80 sitting members of Parliament, was seen rightly as a frontal attack on the reformists, and an open attempt to sew up the elections for the conservatives. So many reformists were purged from the lists, that in 190 of the 290 electoral districts, no reformist candidates would have made the ballot.

Reformists Go On Counter-Offensive

The Interior Ministry issued a statement Jan. 12, expressing regret over the extensive disqualifications, and stressing that such moves must be backed by legality. According to the news agency IRNA's paraphrase, the ministry said that during the "highly sensitive" electoral period, "All responsible bodies and personalities should have focussed efforts on further raising public confidence in the system and attracting the highest possible number of voters." Indeed, the conservatives consider their best hope to defeat the reform majority in the Parliament at the upcoming elections, is to ensure low voter turnout. Their extreme provocation may have been intended

to demoralize the voters. The Interior Ministry also declared that it would defend the rights of voters and candidates.

Meanwhile, the reform members of Parliament staged a sit-in, demanding the GC approve all candidacies. On Jan. 13, President Mohammed Khatami met with the governors general of Iran's provinces, who opposed the disqualifications. It was reported that Khatami had threatened that he and his reformist colleagues would resign *en masse*, unless the GC rescinded its blacklist. "We will leave together [or] we will stay together," he was quoted saying. "We have to remain firm. If one day we are asked to leave, then we will all leave, together." He added, "At this stage, my historic mission is to prevent the illegal seizing of the levers of power." He later denied that he had threatened to resign.

On Jan. 14, the reformist speaker of the Majlis, Mahdi Karroubi, issued a harshly-worded attack on the GC, demanding it reverse its decision. "They have made it so that we know in advance who is elected and who is not. . . . They have moved their pawns to control the Majlis," Karroubi said. At the same time, the first reports circulated that several deputy ministers and provincial governors general had declared their intention to resign. Interior Minister Abdolvahed Musavi Lari wrote to the governors, insisting that all measures taken in the crisis must be peaceful. He also stated that no resignations would be accepted.

As it became clear that the reformists, including the President himself, would not sit back and accept the GC's attempted coup, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, intervened. On Jan. 14, he—the ultimate arbiter in such cases—urged the Guardian Council to review the disqualifications of the prospective candidates. Meeting with the GC, Khamenei told them, "Since distinguishing the qualification has different stages, we

should not go far in confirming the qualification of the members of Parliament.” He said that the Islamic Republic of Iran believes in democratic elections, adding that high voter turnout has had a positive impact internationally. On the disqualifications of the 80 incumbent MPs, Khamenei said that if their qualifications had been approved in the last parliamentary elections, they should be approved now unless good reason were given for doing otherwise. Khamenei emphasized that the law should be observed in all stages of elections, adding that some people were seeking to resort to illegal and complicated procedures instead of legal and simple approaches.

Prior to Ayatollah Khamenei’s remarks, the secretary of the Guardian Council, Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, an arch-conservative, had presented a report on the different stages of the upcoming general election, adding that the body had received complaints against the disqualifications, and would re-examine them.

Khamenei’s intervention, in effect, acknowledged that the Guardian Council had overstepped its bounds, and committed a tactical error. Since he is literally the Supreme Leader, there is no way that the GC can dodge his directives. The question was: How would the Guardian Council “interpret” Khamenei’s words? The GC went back to the drawing board, and, step by step, started approving disqualified candidates; first 200, then 650. The reform front remained committed to its demand that *all* who wish to run for office, should be allowed to do so.

The Tug of War

The crisis heated up again on Jan. 21, as reformists, frustrated by the slow pace of the GC, escalated their mobilization. Vice President Mohammad Ali Abtahi announced that several government officials had turned in their resignations in protest. To be binding, the resignations would have to be approved by President Khatami, who was in Davos, Switzerland at the World Economic Forum. Abtahi did not say how many, or who, the officials were. “A number of Cabinet ministers and a number of vice presidents have resigned. Naturally, they are waiting to see how things go,” Abtahi said after a Cabinet meeting. “The Cabinet ministers are very serious in their resignation.” He added, “Such disqualifications of prospective candidates is against democracy. The 1979 Islamic revolution was based on democracy, and such methods damage our Islamic democracy and turn elections into sham elections.” Interior Minister Lari reported to the Cabinet during the meeting, that he believed the hard-liners wanted to secure at least 180 seats in the 290-seat Parliament.

From Davos, President Khatami made known that he would not accept the resignations. On Jan. 26, the reformers upped the ante further. Government spokesman Abdollah Ramezanzadeh told the student news agency ISNA, that the government “cannot organize an election which is uncompetitive, unhealthy, and not free. This means that the government will only organize an election which is competitive, fair, and

healthy; meaning that in all constituencies there should be real competition, and not a staged one, of all the people who are willing to compete legally and within the framework of the constitution.” He called this the “only condition of the government.”

The following day, Parliament Speaker Karroubi predicted that by the evening on Jan. 29, the Guardian Council would reinstate many of the disqualified candidates. President Khatami told reporters he was “confident that such elections will be held on the appointed date.” The shift occurred, apparently, as a result of a long meeting held Jan. 26, among Khamenei, the chief of the judiciary Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, President Khatami, and Karroubi. Four ministers—Intelligence Minister Ali Yunessi, Oil Minister Bijan Namdar Zanzagheh, Commerce Minister Mohammed Shariatmadari, and Industry Minister Eshaq Jahangiri—had been tasked to examine the reformists’ protests and come up with answers by Jan. 29. Karroubi proclaimed, “We will witness a good understanding between the government and the Guardian Council in the next two days.”

Clearly, President Khatami had driven a hard bargain. On Jan. 28, he told the press, “In the end, it is not clear whether what they [the Guardian Council] approve will be acceptable for us. Even if one person is disqualified unfairly, I won’t accept it.”

And in fact, as of this writing, the crisis was continuing. The deadlock between the Guardian Council and the reformers was still unbroken on Jan. 30, after an announcement by the GC that it would approve at least 960 of the candidacies previously rejected. On that date, Interior Minister Mussavi-Alari proposed to the GC that the elections be postponed.

How Flexible Is the Rubber Band?

Speaking to *EIR*, one high-ranking Iranian official characterized the electoral clinch as a big rubber band that can be stretched very wide in one direction, and then bounce back to the other. Only if it is forced, is there the danger that it will snap, he said.

What is at stake in Iran is the entire system which has reigned since the revolution of 1979. Since the 1997 Presidential elections, when reformer Khatami was swept into power with a landslide vote, the reformers have striven to put through changes in the democratic order as well as in management of the economy, but have been blocked at every turn by the conservatives. Each time the Majlis, with its reform majority, has attempted to introduce legislation, the Guardian Council, which also has the authority to vet bills, has intervened to shoot it down. This happened to two bills introduced by Khatami for greater powers for the Presidency; and to a bill to reform the election process, by members of Parliament. Although Khatami was re-elected with another landslide in 2001, his support has been waning, as he has appeared incapable of delivering on his reform agenda.

The question this raises is an institutional one: Given the

system as enshrined in the Islamic Republic's constitution, how can a government, backed by a majority in Parliament, implement fundamental changes in economic, social, and foreign policy? Some intellectuals in the reform camp, who could not be accused of mindless radicalism, have suggested that the rubber band be stretched to its limit. Their view is that the only way in which the informed will of the majority of the population, which has lawfully elected its President and legislators, can exert the power it is endowed with, is through direct mass action.

In short, promoters of this viewpoint would rather see Khatami and his reform colleagues take to the streets at the head of a popular movement, than accept the conservatives' blackmail. In the current crisis, some reformers are clearly bringing such pressure to bear on the President, as they estimate that the time for compromises has passed. They are also fully aware of the international prestige which Khatami enjoys.

Such a perspective of mass confrontation is fraught with dangers, as everyone—first and foremost, President Khatami—knows. The conservative faction controls not only the judiciary, but also the police, intelligence sectors, and the military and para-military units which could be deployed in a bloody confrontation no one wants.

The Neo-Con Factor

No one, that is, except a clique of neo-conservatives perched in Washington, who are gambling precisely on this scenario to destabilize Iran, and open the way for their "opposition" figures, like the young Shah, to make a bid for power.

The Iranian crisis—both the ongoing electoral strife and the more fundamental institutional clinch—can be solved only by the Iranian institutions and people themselves. Any attempt to intervene from the outside will only exacerbate the tensions internally, and brand the reformers falsely as "agents of the West."

There is good reason to believe that the Iranian leadership will succeed in dealing with the crisis in such a way as to maintain social peace, while curbing the power of the conservatives. For all their reputed strength, the conservatives have limited maneuvering room, particularly considering the international context. Were the elections to be sabotaged, or so manipulated that the masses of voters boycotted them (as is being threatened), or that the government resigned *en masse*, then the credibility of the Islamic Republic would be undermined.

Not unrelated to this question, is the ongoing fight over elections in neighboring Iraq. It would be very difficult for the Iranian "establishment" to continue supporting free and fair elections in Iraq, as demanded there by Shi'ite religious leader Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani, against the dictate of U.S. proconsul Paul Bremer of the Coalition Provisional Authority, while elections in Iran were being sabotaged. Surely, this irony has not escaped the attention of the arch-conservatives in Iran.