



IRAN IN FOCUS

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Iran's Election Did Not Signify Reform

The Iranian people on Feb. 26 voted for the candidates they perceived as the least extreme in elections for the Majlis and Assembly of Experts. Sadly, however, neither moderates nor reformers won last week's elections; they were barred from the ballot. The central divide among candidates was their positions on economic reform, not the liberalization of Iranian society. Today, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains in firm control. And despite the election of the more pragmatic President Hassan Rouhani in 2013, the regime has expanded human rights abuses and stepped up destabilizing regional actions. Iran's government should earn no praise and gain no benefit from this election.

Iran is not a true democracy.

- Iran has a theocratic government controlled by a clerical supreme leader. The Iranian Majlis (parliament) and Assembly of Experts—the body responsible for choosing the next Supreme Leader—have little actual day-to-day power.
- Iranians were able to vote only for preapproved candidates, and chose the ones they believed were the most pragmatic. Well over 90 percent of reformist candidates running for the Majlis and 60 percent running for the Assembly of Experts were not permitted to run. Fifty members of the current parliament were disqualified as too moderate.
- These restrictions were identical to those in the 2013 Iranian presidential election, about which the State Department noted, "Candidate vetting by unelected bodies based on arbitrary criteria, as well as restrictions on the media, limited the freedom and fairness of the election."

Many of the winning candidates are "moderate" in name only.

- The massive disqualification of candidates left the reformist parties with few options. To fill their lists, these parties were forced to look for the most pragmatic of available hardline candidates.
- Oddly, many conservative politicians appeared on both the lists of moderate and hardline parties. For example, Kazem Jalali, who has called for the death of Green Movement leaders Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, appeared on a reformist-endorsed list.
- Other politicians endorsed by so-called "moderate" parties include:
 - o Mostafa Kavakebian, the General Secretary of Iran's Democratic Party, who said in 2008, "The people who currently reside in Israel aren't humans, and this region is comprised of a group of soldiers and occupiers who openly wage war on

the people.”

- o Mohammad Reyshahry, a former Intelligence Minister, who is believed to be responsible for the mass killing of leftists in a 1988 massacre.
- o Ghorbanali Dorri-Najafabadi, a former Intelligence Minister, who is believed to be responsible for a series of murders in the late 1990s.
- o Ali Larijani, a key Rouhani ally and the current Speaker of the Parliament, who gained the endorsement of Iran’s number one terrorist leader—hardline IRGC-Quds force commander Qassem Soleimani.

Iran’s extremism will likely persist.

- The central divide in the Feb. 26 election was between candidates who supported and those who opposed the opening of the Iranian economy to external investment and trade. Unfortunately, the election was not about the liberalization of Iranian society or moderating Iran’s regional conduct.
- Iran’s malign behavior at home and abroad has only worsened since the 2013 election of President Hassan Rouhani, despite being seen as a moderate.
- During Rouhani’s tenure, Iran has witnessed a spike in executions and increased repression of women, minorities, journalists, and political dissidents. Iran has escalated its involvement in Syria’s brutal civil war and its support for terrorist proxies throughout the region.
- As election results began coming in, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said in an interview that Iran would continue to develop its missile program in violation of U.N. Security Resolution 2231. “We will not get permission from anyone for our missile and defense capability,” he said.
- Iran’s government should earn no praise and gain no benefits from this unfree election. The world must continue to push back against Iran’s malign regional behavior, and swiftly penalize Iran for any violations of the JCPOA or other international obligations.
- The international community must also continue to press Iran to improve its human rights record and sanction those individuals and entities responsible for ordering and carrying out abuses.