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Iran between Gasoline Protests and Parliamentary Elections

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On February 21, 2020, Iran will hold elections for the Majlis (parliament). The elections, scheduled to take place only three months after the gasoline riots were waged across Iran in November 2019, are a significant test of strength for the two main political camps (the conservative right, and the pragmatic reformists), particularly prior to the presidential elections that are expected in the summer of 2021. The relative apathy of the reformist camp and a low voter turnout in view of the increasing frustration among the public may improve the chances of the conservative right in the elections. In addition, the targeted killing of Quds Force commander Qasem Soleimani stands to strengthen the hawkish stance among Iranian decision makers and weaken pragmatic circles led by President Rouhani even further. If the conservatives regain control of the parliament, this will likely strengthen the conservative trend in state policy and make it even more difficult for the President to advance his objectives during the final year of his term, both in internal affairs and in foreign relations. It is clear, however, that the conservatives too do not have the ability to provide an adequate response to the distress of Iran's population, and this may fuel additional waves of protest.

On February 21, 2020, Iran's citizens will go to the polls for parliamentary elections. The Majlis wields no substantive influence in determining Iranian strategy, especially in foreign affairs. However, the elections are attracting special interest due to the Majlis's influence on internal and economic policies, and because they are a significant test of strength for the two main political camps – the conservatives and the pragmatic reformists, particularly in advance of the Iranian presidential elections that are expected in the summer of 2021. In addition, voter turnout in the elections may provide a further indication of the Iranian regime's legitimacy following the gasoline protests across Iran in November 2019.

The protests, which broke out following a sharp increase in gasoline prices, were quashed by the Iranian regime in less than a week. As expected, the regime demonstrated its willingness and ability to use the many means of suppression at its disposal, even at the heavy price of hundreds killed. According to Iranian Interior Ministry data, the total number of participants in this recent wave of protests was between 130,000 and 200,000 in more than 100 different locations across Iran. This number is higher than the previous

wave of demonstrations in December 2017 and January 2018, but significantly lower than the protests in 2009 (the "Green Movement"), which broke out following the Iranian presidential elections and brought hundreds of thousands of demonstrators to the streets. It is also much smaller than the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which involved millions of people.

Iranian Intelligence Ministry data provided to the Majlis Foreign Affairs and National Security Committee show that most of those arrested in the riots were unemployed, underpaid, or poorly educated. These figures reinforce the assessment that similar to the previous wave of protests, most of the participants belonged to the weaker socio-economic layers of the population, and not the educated urban middle class that led the 2009 protests. Once again the middle class's absence in the recent protests made it impossible to form a broad, state-wide social coalition, which is a necessary condition for advancing political change in Iran.

Similar to the previous wave of protests, the gasoline protests reflected the increasing radicalization of the Iranian public. The regime's failure to provide solutions to the population's distress, and the sense that neither of the two main political camps is able to solve the fundamental problems of the Islamic Republic have in recent years increased the despair and contributed to increasing radicalization among the public. The calls heard during the protests, along the lines of "conservatives, reformists, the story is over," the shows of support for the monarchy that preceded the Islamic Revolution, and violent attacks against banks, public buildings, and even religious seminaries, are clear evidence of widespread frustration.

A recent public opinion poll in the Tehran district by the Iranian ISPA polling institute showed that only 15 percent of citizens are satisfied with the state of the country – a decline of 50 percent from a similar poll conducted two years ago. Just 16 percent of respondents said that they expected a positive change in their condition in the future, compared with 52 percent that expected the situation to further deteriorate. About 75 percent of respondents justified the most recent wave of protests, but most expressed the opinion that this protest as well would not generate a positive change in government policy. Fifty-four percent of respondents said that the protests would continue in the future.

Since the gasoline riots, prominent Iranian commentators, intellectuals, and academics have warned against deepening frustration, despair, and loss of public trust in the authorities. These warnings are heard among the conservative camp as well. For instance, political commentator and journalist Amir Mohebian, who is identified with the

conservative right, warned that the time period between waves of protest may become even shorter.

The fuel riots and the public despair may influence voter turnout in the elections. In the two most recent elections to the Majlis (2012 and 2016), voter turnout was over 60 percent. In the Majlis elections in 2004 and 2008, turnout was lower (slightly more than 50 percent), while turnout in the 1996 and 2000 elections was higher (about 70 percent). High voter turnout generally serves the pragmatic-reformist camp, which enjoys broader public support than the conservatives. However, low voter turnout may be a further sign of a crisis of legitimacy for the regime. There is increasing concern over low voter turnout in view of the calls by several senior reformist figures to boycott the elections.

More than 16,000 candidates are running in the elections (close to 90 percent of whom are men), but some have already been disqualified by the Interior Ministry, and others are expected to be disqualified by the Guardian Council. In the previous parliamentary elections, the conservatives suffered a serious blow and their absolute control of the Majlis was significantly undermined. Supporters of President Rouhani managed to significantly increase their representation in the Majlis, and went from being a relatively negligible minority to become a significant bloc of more than 100 representatives. Thanks to the composition of the Majlis, President Rouhani based his government over the past four years on a relatively comfortable coalition of moderate reformists, moderate conservatives, and independents.

Prior to the submission of candidacies for the elections, the current Speaker of the Majlis, Ali Larijani, announced that he did not intend to run for reelection, possibly due to his desire to compete in the coming presidential elections. In contrast, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the former mayor of Tehran who is identified with the conservative right, announced his participation in the elections. If he is elected in the Tehran province, Qalibaf will be considered a leading candidate to become the next Speaker of the Majlis. In such a case, he may present significant opposition to President Rouhani, particularly if the conservatives win a majority of the seats.

In view of the disappointment with President Rouhani's policies, the concern over disqualification of reformist candidates by the Guardian Council, and the frustration in the reformist camp, many politicians aligned with the pragmatic-reformist camp preferred not to run in the elections. A number of incumbent reformist members of the Majlis, led by Mohammad Reza Aref, the head of the reformist faction in the outgoing Majlis, announced that they will not run. Reformist Majlis member Parvaneh Salahshouri, who announced that she no longer sees any reason to run in the elections, aroused public and political controversy after using her final speech in the Majlis to attack the regime

bitterly. She blamed it for oppressing citizens and for ignoring their plight, and argued that concentrating power in the hands of institutions that are not elected by the public is a form of tyranny.

In view of the deterioration in President Rouhani's standing, and in an attempt to distance the reformist camp from him, a number of prominent reformist intellectuals, including Abbas Abdi and Sa'id Hajarian, openly called on the President to resign and schedule the presidential elections for an earlier date. They contend that Rouhani no longer has the power to carry out his promises to the public and to make improvements in the situation in view of the worsening economic crisis and the confrontation between Iran and the US. The decision of many reformists not to run for election, and the disqualification of other reformist candidates by the Interior Ministry and the Guardian Council, will further limit the reformist camp's abilities to put up strong candidates in all provinces, and will improve the chances of conservative candidates.

The targeted killing of Quds commander Qasen Soleimani may also influence the political balance of power in Iran in advance of the elections. The US action stands to strengthen the hawkish stance among Iranian decision makers even further and weaken pragmatic circles led by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif, who are seen as responsible for the failure of the diplomatic policy they led against the United States. Similarly, the growing conflict with the United States stands to impel the Iranian regime to increase domestic repression, in order to maintain its deterrence both at home and abroad, which was damaged by the killing of Soleimani.

The return of absolute control of the Majlis to the conservatives is expected to strengthen the radicalization in Iran in view of the external challenges the country faces, chiefly the “maximum pressure” strategy pursued by President Trump. These challenges put increasing pressure on the authorities to demonstrate internal unity and to increase internal repression. A conservative victory will make it even more difficult for Rouhani – whose status has in any case eroded over the past two years – to advance his policy objectives during the final year of his term in both internal affairs and foreign relations. However, it is clear that the conservative right also does not have the ability to solve the basic grievances facing the Iranian people, mainly the deepening economic crisis. Therefore, a conservative victory in the elections will not provide an adequate response to public demands, and this could fuel additional waves of protest.