

## **Implications of the 15 December Elections to the Assembly of Experts in a Democratic Theocracy**

The ambiguity of the political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran, embodying an incongruous mixture of democracy and theocracy is reflected in the institution of the Assembly of Experts. Elections in Iran on 15 December 2006 for the Assembly of Experts - the congressional body made up of 86 members that have clerical training and have passed certain tests of jurisprudential competence - are democratic by virtue of being selected by a direct vote.

At the same time, the elections can be deemed undemocratic because candidates are vetted by the powerful religious 'super-body', the ultra-conservative Guardians' Council, which ensures that candidates have the required religious, ideological and legal credentials. Thus far, the Guardian Council has essentially disqualified any major alternative candidates for the Assembly of Experts; thus, there is practically no competition. In 1998, the Guardian Council disqualified many of the reformist Assembly candidates. This feature of the electoral process has made the Assembly a non-competitive political exercise. And in the end, it is the Guardian Council rather than the populace that ultimately decides the composition of the Assembly.

Still, the Assembly can be considered a democratic institution in the sense that it performs the function of a regulatory agency, placing checks and balances on the power of the Supreme Leader who holds the position *velayat-eh faqih*, or 'custodian jurispudent' (which is ironically, the most undemocratic of institutions in Iran). However, paradoxically, only the Assembly has the authority to nominate the Supreme Leader in the event that the incumbent is removed or dies, not the people. In addition, only the Assembly has the power to interpret the Constitution.

While the elections will not have impact on the practical concerns of daily life, on foreign affairs or broader strategic issues, they have a major psychological bearing on Iranian political life. The elections are significant in three ways. First, the elections will be a litmus test for the reformists' viability and will answer the question of whether or not the reformists will be able to return to politics and unite various reformist factions into a coalition. Second, the elections will be a testing ground for the conservatives' ability to sustain their momentum and will reveal whether or not they will be able to survive and consolidate their power in the years before the next presidential elections.

Finally, voter turnout elections will indicate if the Iranian public has a genuine interest in domestic politics. It is obvious over the last few years that it has been a fairly disillusioned electorate. The reformists' lack of substantive transformation and the conservative heavy-handed approach has made political life very challenging.

The turnout will give an indication of whether the public is prepared to make a comeback; if it has any interest in political life; and if its energy could be reconstituted

for the next presidential elections. While the vetting process severely limits the number of reformist candidates, it is still an important election for reformists. If they manage to galvanise the public it suggests they still have a chance to go to the grassroots and remobilise themselves. If they fail at this point, it will have a damping effect psychologically on the hope for reform. In a democratic theocracy, speculation is futile; for the complicated network of political institutions, combined with diverse social forces can tip the scales either in favour of a democracy or a theocracy.

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