

Iran Working Group: Implications of Iran's Parliamentary Election

Iran, Middle East, Islamic World, Elections

EVENT SUMMARY

Iran continues to pose a serious challenge for U.S. foreign policy. As a consequence, the domestic politics of the Islamic republic have acquired greater salience in the U.S. policymaking community. Effective solutions to the strains in U.S.-Iranian relations may come from acquiring a nuanced understanding of Iranian internal politics as they affect the Islamic republic's foreign policy. To address the existing and potential dilemmas at the core of U.S.-Iranian relations Saban Center for Middle East Policy and the U.S. Institute of Peace have jointly launched the Iran Working Group. The purpose of this high-level group comprised of policy analysts and U.S. government officials is to hold monthly discussions intended to enhance policymakers' understanding of the dynamics of Iranian domestic politics and to explore U.S. policy options towards Iran.

Event Information

When

Tuesday, March 18, 2008
12:30 PM to 2:00 PM

Where

Stein Room
The Brookings Institution
1775 Massachusetts Ave., NW
Washington, DC
[Map](#)

Event Materials

- [Prepared Slides by Dr. Mehrzad Boroujerdi](#)

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The inaugural session took place on March 18, 2008 at the Brookings Institution. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, Director of the Middle East Studies Program at Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, analyzed the implications of Iran's eighth parliamentary elections held on March 14, 2008. In his opening remarks Boroujerdi discussed notable features of the 2008 elections. In contrast to elections held in previous years, Boroujerdi observed a drop in the number of eligible voters resulting from the increase in the voting age from fifteen to eighteen years old. Nonetheless, Boroujerdi reported that the turnout was about the same as the sixty percent mean in all previous Majles elections. According to Boroujerdi, this trend is indicative of the effectiveness of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's propaganda in favor of electoral participation. It is also evidence of the Iranian public's fear of retaliation by the government against the citizens who do not vote. These factors, combined with the disproportionately high ratio of rural precincts (46.6 percent) to the rural population (30 percent), ensure a respectable turnout.

Boroujerdi also noted that 41.1 percent of the total number of candidates for the 2008 parliamentary elections were disqualified (compared to the average of 28.9 percent of disqualifications in previous Majles elections, and just 8 percent in 2000). While some of the eligibility criteria (including the new requirement of a master's degree) were justified, many other government imposed restrictions appear to be arbitrary. Regardless of these obstacles, Boroujerdi said that there has been an important increase in the number of candidates willing to run for elections. Boroujerdi confirmed that the number of candidates who registered to participate in the 2008 elections was, in fact, the second highest since the Islamic revolution. Boroujerdi explained this trend on the basis of a greater number of reformists and representatives of other opposition parties coming forward for the 2008 elections to prevent the solidification of the incumbent conservative bloc and to undermine the conservatives' radical policies.

Of greater significance, according to Boroujerdi, was that the factions critical of the government increasingly recognize that regime change within Iran will not come from external political or economic pressure. Therefore, by actively participating in the parliamentary elections, rather than boycotting the vote as occurred during the second municipal and the ninth presidential elections, reformists hope to prepare for the forthcoming presidential elections. Boroujerdi also drew attention to the success of independent candidates winning 23 percent of seats in the Majles in the 2008 elections.

Following the presentation, which drew on a study of 159 Iranian towns and cities, Boroujerdi highlighted the implications of the statistics. Boroujerdi started by commenting on the complexity of Iranian domestic politics. In particular, he contrasted politics in Tehran versus other parts of the country. Boroujerdi felt that the U.S. policy community was excessively focused on Tehran politics, whereas political dynamic in the provinces and regions, the speaker argued, was more convoluted due to the existing ethnic divides and tribal allegiances. As such, provincial politics have important ramifications for the overall internal political developments in Iran. To demonstrate this point, Boroujerdi observed that in provinces characterized by ethnically mixed populations—such as Khuzestan and Bushehr (with large Arab populations), western

Azarbayjan (with a large Azeri population) and Balouchistan —considerations of kinship and the ability of candidates to secure pork barrel projects for their districts typically dominate voter choices. In contrast, Boroujerdi argued that it is characteristic of Tehran residents to vote strictly for candidates' policies.

According to Boroujerdi, differences between constituencies in the capital and provinces also affected the votes given to women and clerics (groups facing insurmountable electability challenges in the context of Iranian politics). For instance, while on average women won 3.6 percent of votes nationwide, they won the average 12.6 percent of votes in Tehran. In a similar manner, clerics gained an average of 7 percent of the national vote, but an average of 11.6 percent in Tehran. Boroujerdi emphasized that an accurate interpretation of urban and rural politics, gender and religious issues, is essential to the thorough understanding of Iranian politics.

In conclusion, Boroujerdi offered projections deduced from his observation of the 2008 parliamentary elections. In Boroujerdi's opinion, the eighth Majles will witness increased factionalism within the conservative bloc. Persistent economic deterioration, he speculated, will likely intensify rivalries among conservatives, thereby centering the political debate primarily on domestic economic policies rather than on Iran's foreign policy.

In this context, former members of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—including Ali Larijani, the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council of Iran and the current Tehran mayor Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf—may become viable candidates for the next presidential elections. Boroujerdi was skeptical about the short-term prospects of the reformist bloc, particularly because in his assessment reformists lack strong charismatic leaders capable of mobilizing popular support. Commenting on the nuclear issue, Boroujerdi observed that if Ali Larijani, the former nuclear negotiator who represented the *Jebheye Motahed-e Oslugarayan* (the United Principalists Front) during the 2008 elections, assumes a leadership position in the Majles, he may adopt a relatively moderate approach towards the nuclear issue but it is unlikely he will initiate a significant policy change.

Boroujerdi projected that incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will nominate himself for the 2009 presidential elections. Other potential contenders to the presidential post, in Boroujerdi's evaluation, are Haddad-Adel, former speaker of the parliament Mehdi Karroubi, and former president Mohammad Khatami. Boroujerdi concluded his remarks by stating that while the Majles is not the most important institution of political power in Iran, elections to Majles are not meaningless either, because change is more likely to occur at the level of parliamentarians rather than at the top of the political pyramid.

PARTICIPANTS

Speaker

Dr. Mehrzad Boroujerdi

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Chair

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