



مركز الدراسات الاستراتيجية  
الجامعة الأردنية

Center for Strategic Studies  
University of Jordan

[www.jcss.org](http://www.jcss.org)

هاتف : ٥٣٥٥٦٦٦ (٩٦٢ ٦)  
فاكس : ٥٣٥٥٥١٥ (٩٦٢ ٦)

Tel.: 962 6 5300100  
Fax: 962 6 5355515

[css@css-jordan.org](mailto:css@css-jordan.org)

# CSS Papers

*The Eighth Majlis  
(Parliamentary) Elec-  
tion - Where is Iran  
Headed?*

*Edited by  
Mahjoob Zweiri*

*Contributors  
Giti Sorayyapour  
Mahjoob Zweiri*

*Center for Strategic Studies  
University of Jordan*

*March 2008*

## *Introduction*

The purpose of this study is to analyse the facts and circumstances that surround the upcoming Eighth Majlis elections in the Islamic Republic of Iran, scheduled to take place on the 14th March 2008. We endeavour to look at the different dimensions surrounding legislation, laws, the electoral process, candidacy, female participation and the internal debate within Iranian politics. This paper also discusses the matter of disqualification, the ongoing conflict between Iranian factions and the impact and effect that international politics and hard play has on the Iranian domestic scene. Our main concern is to explore the dynamics within Iranian internal politics, and to make sense of the power struggle within the Iranian political system. As a pre-election report, our intention is to merely observe the developments running up to the election and make forecasts as to its potential outcome.

The legislative branch will be the focus of this paper, for it is within this branch that two potent institutions reside: the Majlis (the Iranian Parliament, also referred to as the Islamic Consultative Assembly) and the Guardian Council. The Majlis is comprised of 290 members who are elected by the direct vote of the people for four years, while the Guardian Council consists of twelve members, six of whom are Islamic clerics and six others who are civilian jurists; they serve a term of six years. All legislation must first be approved by the Majlis and then be ratified by the Guardian Council; they are then signed into laws by the President. The powers and functions of the Majlis are specified by Articles 71-90 of the Iranian constitution.

The Guardian Council is, in effect, an upper house of parliament with the power to vote out the lower house's (i.e. the Majlis's) resolutions. The Guardian Council is assigned to check the laws passed by the Majlis, compare them with the provisions of the Islamic canon and the constitution, and ratify them, or return them to the Majlis for amendment. The Guardian Council can be seen to flex its muscles not only while an elected Majlis is in session, but also in the run-up to the election of a new Majlis. This is indeed apparent in this month's approaching Eighth Majlis election, most notably surrounding the Guardian Council's disqualification choices.

A second publication will be later published, which will deal with the outcome of the Eighth Majlis from a post-election perspective. It will deal with the political map of the new Majlis, assess the direction of future domestic politics of Iran and will also study the international reaction to the electoral result.

## *Nature of Iran's Electoral System - from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Republic:*

The Majlis (Parliament) of Iran, first convened in 1906, was a creation of the Constitutional Revolution. The central idea of the Constitutional Revolution in the turn of the twentieth century was the demand for a 'House of Justice' (Edalat Khaneh). Justice was seen as synonymous with curbing monarchical power, for the monarchy had become associated with arbitrary rule and injustice. Thus the term constitutionalism was translated as Mashrutiyat (setting conditions), which implied placing conditions on absolutism<sup>1</sup>. The Constitutional Revolution was therefore not an antimonarchist movement, but an anti-absolutist one.

The Constitutional Revolution was not the result of an effort made by only one sector of society, but of the unification of a force of different social classes (which is also said of the 1979 Islamic Revolution). In the initial phases, the role of the ulama (clergy) was indispensable, essentially legitimising the cause and providing a sanctuary inaccessible by the government. However, after the inauguration of the first Majlis, tensions began to arise.

Anti-government agitations turned into organised movements, largely co-ordinated by the Anjomans (secret societies led by Reformers, who believed their first and foremost function to be the 'awakening' of people to the evils of despotism, and to the benefits of 'freedom')<sup>2</sup>. The Anjomans continued to grow. These societies retained their Islamic credentials for pragmatic reasons, chiefly to appeal to more broad-based groups, including the ulama. Rapidly in time, the Reformist agenda had evolved from appeals for a House of Justice to a Parliament, i.e. a National Assembly.

The Constitutional Revolution had achieved a legacy of constitutionalism, yet failed to fulfil the political goals it originally set out to achieve: a unified democratic system. The most important outcome of the Revolution was that it forced the Shah to yield to public pressure, thus allowing for a constitution and a parliament. Its most tragic conclusion was that the process of constitutionalism and participatory politics was arrested, leaving the country with splintered alliances.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Gheissari, A. 1998. *Iranian Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

<sup>2</sup> Bayat, M. 1991. *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909*. New York: Oxford University Press.

From its inception right up until the Islamic Revolution which brought about the demise of the Pahlavi dynasty some seven decades later, the Majlis was formally known as the Lower House of the Iranian legislature, while the Upper House performed the role of the Senate. After the Islamic Revolution, however, the Senate was abolished and in the 1989 revision of the constitution, the National Consultative Assembly became the Islamic Consultative Assembly, as it still stands today.

Elections in the Islamic Republic remain significant and momentous exercises in bureaucratic as well as popular mobilization, because they are considered exercises in its legitimization. The electoral system in use in the Islamic Republic of Iran is a Two-Round System (TRS) which means that the election is completed in two rounds to fill all the seats in a constituency if enough candidates do not get the required level of support in the first round. In Iran, each elector has one vote and there are a varying number of seats to be filled in each constituency. After the first round of the election the votes are calculated and the candidates who have received the highest number of votes and at least a required minimum percentage of votes get a seat in the Majlis. How many candidates get a seat in this round is therefore restricted to how many seats there are in the constituency (for example, there is a thirty candidate slate in the Tehran constituency) and how many candidates have reached the minimum percentage level of votes. The candidates for March 14th will be fighting it out in 207 constituencies. An absolute majority is not required to acquire a seat in this first round, but a plurality of 25% is sufficient. If there are still seats to be filled after the first round there will be a second round, a runoff, between twice as many candidates as there are seats left to be filled in the constituency. In this round only a simple plurality of the votes is required to be elected. The President is also elected through this Two-Round System.

### *Who is in Charge? The Majlis Electoral Process:*

Iran is governed by a set of elected and unelected individuals and institutions, including the Supreme Leader, the President, the Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, Parliament, Expediency Council and an immense array of security forces. A parallel government is seen to exist at the same time as the visible government, interceding by what measures it feels necessary to preserve the unique Islamic Republic of Iran. In the words of one Western diplomat stationed in Tehran, "there are so many centres of power the system was designed not to let anyone be in total control"<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Daraghi, B. 2007. Iran's Inner and Outer Circles of Influence and Power. *Los Angeles Times*. 31st December.

What is interesting about the Iranian arrangement is that the Majlis is only a consultative assembly. First of all, those who wish to run as candidates in an election have to go through thorough scrutiny. They have to fulfil a number of criteria: e.g. be a practicing Muslim, hold at least one higher degree, have no 'bad' reputation in the respective constituency and be of good physical health. (If all the above boxes are ticked then in order to apply, candidates are required to register their application within one week - registration having taken place between the 5th and 12th January 2008. For first-time applications, candidates can do so online via the Interior Ministry website)<sup>1</sup>.

A large number of candidates are rejected before each election. Though much controversy surrounds this, it must not go unnoticed the purely procedural issues which are also responsible for bringing disqualification about. The sheer number of people registering as candidates (more than 7,200 in the present elections for the 290-seat Islamic Consultative Assembly), means that even with a substantial percentage of that figure disqualified, there are still far more candidates than is really necessary, or the system can properly screen, thus giving the whole process a somewhat disorderly facade.

In the former Seventh Majlis election of 2004, the volume of barred hopefuls belonged predominantly to the Reformist camp, including the then President Khatami's own brother.

This year, aside from Reformists and Independents, scores of prominent personalities not aligned with the main factions and even some hard-line activists also fell to the Interior Ministry's axe. The ministry rejected the candidacy of virtually all well-known Reformists, including several former cabinet ministers and officials who had served under Reformist former President Mohammad Khatami. Among those rejected were a number of current lawmakers, clergymen (supposedly axed because they were not devout enough). Even Ali Eshraghi and Seyyed Hassan Khomeini, two grandsons of the late Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (founder of the Islamic Republic), were initially excluded from March's parliamentary elections, supposedly on the grounds of insufficient loyalty to the principles of Khomeini's 1979 Islamic Revolution. Ali Eshraghi was, however, later reinstated. Another example is Hojjet Islam Seyed Mohsen Mousavi Tabrizi, from a theology faculty in Qom, who was approved to run for the Experts Assembly (that selects the leader), and yet his bid for a Majlis seat was denied on grounds of "lack of allegiance to Islam and the constitution"<sup>2</sup>. Asked how it is possible that a cleric is disqualified for violating the Islamic rules, *Guardians Council spokesperson Abbas-Ali Kadkhodaii has said that such professions do not guarantee a person's innocence*<sup>3</sup>.

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1 Cf. <http://www.moi.ir>

2 Afrasiabi, K. L. 2008. Iran Votes: Factions and Friction. *Asia Times*. 16th February.

3 No Rejection for Political Persuasions: GC Spokesman. *Mehr News Agency*. 2nd February, 2008.

## *8th Majlis Election: Who Is and Who Is Not Eligible to Run? New Legislations*

The Majlis election set to be held on the 14th March will be the twenty-eighth set of elections held since the Islamic Revolution on 1979. Out of the Majlis' 290 members, five seats are represented non-Muslim religious minorities (Jews and Zoroastrians each occupying one seat and Christians occupying three, two being allotted to the Armenians, and one seat to the Chaldean and Assyrian Catholics)<sup>1</sup>. The Majlis can force the dismissal of cabinet ministers by no-confidence votes and can impeach the president for misconduct in office. Although the executive proposes most new laws, individual deputies of the Majlis also may introduce legislation. Deputies also may propose amendments to bills being debated. The Majlis also drafts legislation, ratifies international treaties, and approves the national budget. Held every four years, elections in the Islamic Republic are crucial exercises in bureaucratic as well as popular mobilization. These will not only be a critical test of Iran's political direction in a context of significant domestic, regional and international tensions, but also serve as a prelude to the Presidential elections in the summer of 2009.

According to the Iranian National Register, forty-three million people are eligible to vote. New legislative articles passed by the Seventh Majlis relating to the electoral process for the Eighth Majlis elections, stipulate that the age of voters eligible to vote is eighteen years old plus (where it was previously fifteen), while that of candidates must now be between the ages thirty and seventy-five. This is an important factor to take on board, for it means that the number of voters and the number of candidates will be immediately affected on account of the age restrictions alone.

Concerning qualifications required of candidates, where previously one was required to obtain the minimum qualification of a Diploma, eligible applicants are now required to hold a BA in addition to having five years experience in government. If candidates have previously served as Members of Parliament with only a diploma, Article Twenty-Eight of the electoral legislation newly states that serving a term in office (i.e. four years) is regarded as the equivalent of holding a degree.

Previously, people who wanted to apply for candidacy were required to resign two months prior to their application. The new regulation now stipulates that they need to submit an official resignation letter six months prior, and within that period are obligated to abstain from any involvement in government activity whatsoever. Sources indicate that around 150 officials have resigned within this stipulated six months in order to participate in the forthcoming elections.

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<sup>1</sup> Election Law. *Pars Times*. February, 2000.

Seventeen entrants are from Iran's minority population. Almost six hundred candidates are women, 667 are married men while 501 are single. Two contenders are 74 years old while 201 are thirty years old. 40% are between thirty and forty years old; 39% are between forty and fifty years old; 16.8% are between fifty and sixty years old; 218 candidates are sixty years old and over. 40% of candidates partaking of the Eighth Majlis elections hold BA degrees; 31% have an MA; 14% possess a PhD; while 2.6% are graduates from the Hawza (religious seminaries). To compare these figures with present parliamentary members of the Seventh Majlis, 54% hold a BA, 17% an MA, 12% a PhD, while 4% are Hawza graduates<sup>1</sup>.

### *Disqualifications:*

By the beginning of February 2008 it became clear that nearly ninety percent of Independent and Reformist candidates wishing to run for the Parliament had been disqualified by members of the Supervisory and Executive Election Boards, charged with vetting candidates. There is much significance attached to this. In early December 2007, Iranian Reformists announced a coalition of twenty-one moderate parties, to win back parliament in the March elections; the mastermind behind this was ex-President Mohammad Khatami. Such forward planning forced Conservative forces to sit-up and realise just how formidable a force they were dealing with. The greater the threat, the greater the come-back, and for this reason we can make sense of why the Reformist disqualifications for the Eighth Majlis elections this year are so high.

Although practically everyone across the political spectrum had expected large-scale disqualifications, the scope of rejections surprised even the most hardened observers. Although 7,200 prospective candidates registered for the parliamentary elections, over 2,200 -- most of them Reformists -- were disqualified last month by the vetting officials<sup>2</sup>. Of those disqualified, twenty included current sitting MP's<sup>3</sup>. Prominent Conservative and Reformist figures had complained bitterly about the number of original disqualifications. Reformist former president Mohammad Khatami decried the decisions as "tragic", saying that rejections had effectively "pre-determined" the election's outcome, labelling the move a "catastrophe"<sup>4</sup>. That said, Reformists are adamant not to boycott the elections. In the words of Yadollah Tahernejad, spokesman for the Servants of Construction Party, "no one leaves his own home"<sup>5</sup>.

1 Cf. 21 January, 2008. *st* بهمن اعلام صلاحیت های 5806 نفر داوطلب نما بنده کی مجلس ششدند . خبرگزاری مهر .

Cf. *مجلس ایران اطلاعاتی در باره داوطلبان نمایندگان*. BBC Persian. 138612) 22 *مهر* January, 2008).

Cf. Official Website of the Interior Ministry of Iran - <http://www.moi.ir>.

2 Another 300 Rejected Candidates Reinstated. *Mehr News Agency*. 16th February, 2008.

3 MP Urges Guardian Council to Restore Hopeful' Rights. *Mehr News Agency*. 10th February, 2008.

4 Pouladi, F. 2008. Iran reinstates more reformist candidates for election. *AFP*. 16th February.

5 Friday Prayers not a Venue for Election Campaigning. *Mehr News Agency*. 6th February, 2008.



During Friday prayers, Iran's influential former President (and former Speaker of the Iranian parliament during the Iraq-Iran war) Hojatolislam Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani urged the hard-line electoral watchdog to reinstate moderate candidates to enable them to stand for election<sup>1</sup>. However, Reformist leaders have said that even if the Guardian Council reinstates many more candidates their chances have already been ruined because they have lost valuable time in preparing their campaigns. The Guardians Council plans to announce the final list of candidates who have been approved to stand in early March, leaving one week of official campaigning before polling day.

At first, the government and the Guardian Council (GC) - the principal entity with oversight powers - stood their ground, rejecting any suggestions that they had disqualified people unfairly. Ayatollah Ali Janati, head of the Guardian Council, claimed that both the spirit and the letter of the law had been upheld in deciding who was qualified and who was not.

In response, Grand Ayatollah Assadollah Bayat Zanjani, a great source of emulation from the holy city of Qom (who sits on the supra-governmental Committee for the Revision of the Constitution), wrote an unprecedented strongly-worded letter to heavyweight clerics, two former chief executives Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Sixth Majlis speaker Mehdi Karroubi, regarding this extensive disqualification of hopefuls. In this letter he attacked the disqualifications as "a dangerous precedent." He warned that such blatantly discriminative rejection of candidates would jeopardize the Islamic establishment, thus calling the trio of clerics' alliance a redeemer for the Islamic Republic. In fulfilling their duty, the trio met separately with the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. It is not clear what was exchanged between them but according to several Reformist activists, Khatami and Karoubi presented the Supreme Leader with lists of tens of "legitimate" Reformists that they believed deserved to be reinstated, including presumably several former ministers and officials<sup>2</sup>. Khamenei, according to these Reformist activists, proceeded to write unspecified but supporting words under those lists.

While this is regarded as a step forward, that still leaves the most prominent Reformists disqualified. Now the Guardian Council has the last word on eligible candidates. For the Council to decide which Reformists to reinstate much depends on how many lists the right will run, how names will be repeated on various lists and what their candidates' relative strength compared to Reformists will be. Subsequent to the Supreme Leader's gesture, the Guardian Council reinstated 831 «less controversial» candidates who had been disqualified in the first stage of the vetting process by either interior ministry executive committees or the Guardians Council supervisory committee<sup>3</sup>. Technically, the Guardian Council has another two weeks to finish its arbitrations, upon which it will unveil a final list of candidates on March 4th before the start of one week's campaigning.

<sup>1</sup> Rafsanjani Calls for Moderation in Governing the Country. **Mehr News Agency**. 4th February, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Iran: Khatami, Rafsanjani, Karrubi Negotiate over Banned Candidates. **Mehr News Agency**. 27th January, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Iran's Vetting Body Reinstates Candidates. **Financial Times**. 19th February, 2008.



## *Osoolgarayan (Neo-Traditional Conservatives), Etedaltalaban (Centrists), Eslahtalaban (Reformists):*

Similar to the way in which different political groups are assembled in Western government, i.e. between the Conservative ('Right'), Liberal ('Centre') and Labour ('Left') parties, there too exist similar camps in the Iranian set-up. These are commonly referred to as Osoolgarayan, the Conservatives or Hardliners ('Right'), Etedaltalaban, the Centrists ('Centre') and Eslahtalaban, the Reformists ('Left'). On the whole, the Osoolgarayan (Conservatives) have occupied some 220 seats in the present Majlis, with roughly half of them known as ardent supporters of Ahmadinejad. This group is led by the deputy Majlis speaker, Mohammad Reza Bahonar<sup>1</sup>. In stark contrast, the Reformists, led by Mohammad Reza Tabesh, a close confidant of former president Khatami, have a minority presence of some seventy members in the current Majlis, and have thus been disabled to make much effective input.

What makes these political divisions intricately complex in the Islamic Republic is the result of two particular obstructions. The first is the fact that even within each political fold therein lays a mosaic of differences, which conflict in both areas of intention, practise and goal. Political divisions are so widespread that there are 240 political parties registered by the interior ministry. But the danger is that this 'hyper-fractionalization', i.e. plethora of political forces, reduces the effort and impetus of those in power or competing for it, to form coalitions<sup>2</sup>.

This fractionalization not only between camps but also within camps has meant that 'when Iranian officials make public pronouncements, it is often unclear whether they are expressing established policy or fighting among themselves – speaking for their own faction or just themselves'<sup>3</sup>. For instance much of the internal challenges facing Ahmadinejad's tenure in office is emanating not from the Reformists, but rather from within the old faction of the Conservative camp itself, who feel that they are being pushed aside by the ascent of a new guard in Iranian Conservatism, whom they accuse of following a populist agenda for short-term political gain. Along with Ahmadinejad's presence came the arrival of a new generation of Conservatives commonly termed the 'middle-generation Conservatives', also referred to as Neo-Traditional Conservatives<sup>4</sup>. Ahmadinejad, as well as Majlis speaker (and an in-law of the Supreme Leader) Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel, are core proponents of this 'wing' - they are faithful to the Islamic Revolution's values and grew up under the establishment apparatuses, but unlike some in the old guard, are not clerics.

1 Afrasiabi, K. L. 2008. Iran Votes: Factions and Friction. *Asia Times*. 16th February.

2 Farhi, F. 2008. Iran's March 2008 Parliamentary Elections: Slogans and Stakes. *Woodrow Wilson International Centre for Scholars*. 25th January.

3 Daraghi, B. 2007. Iran's Inner and Outer Circles of Influence and Power. *Los Angeles Times*. 31st December.

4 Zweiri, M. & A. Ehteshami. 2007. *Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives*. New York; London: I.B.Tauris.

Initially, all Rightist factions and groupings had agreed to run on a single slate in the election with unified lists presented in each locality. Presumably that would have minimized the chances of a split vote and/or a Reformist victory. As time went by, it became clear that the various strands comprising the Right were unable to bury their differences. Ali Larijani who is now fighting the Conservative corner from Qom, not Tehran, argued that contrary to the view of pro-Ahmadinejad supporters, their presence was a liability not a blessing<sup>1</sup>. Larijani has been meeting regularly with Mohamad Bagher Ghalibaf and Mohsen Rezai and toying with the idea of creating a new coalition party, in essence a rightist technocratic party<sup>2</sup>. It is interesting to note that these three right-wing dissenters, Larijani, Ghalibaf and Rezai, are all former Revolutionary Guard commanders. Potentially however, this stands to jeopardize gravely the electoral outcome to the Conservatives as a whole; the more individuals or groups transgress towards separate paths (what Afrasiabi coins “a dizzying revamping of political line-ups”<sup>3</sup>), the less likely the guarantee of a concrete overall victory.

The second obstacle facing the Republic is the differing priorities of each camp. For example, while indeed no homogeneity as such exists within the political frameworks of each different Western party, they all nonetheless generally focus (albeit from a different angle) on areas of economy and politics concurrently. Where the Islamic Republic distances itself from this trend is in its focus on just one area of polity within its manifesto, rather than considering both equally. In the current administration, this is generally conceded as the following: Conservatives – economic reform, Reformists – political reform. Outlining his priorities in the draft budget bill for the Iranian fiscal year of 1385 (21st March 2006 – 20th March 2007), Ahmadinejad emphasized the popular underpinnings of his administration. The President conceded that political reform has virtually no role to play; instead, his repeated focus lies in serving the needs of the mostazafin (the ‘downtrodden’, i.e. poor). His vision was that what people in Iran needed was “focus on growth and jobs”, in contrast to Khatami’s agenda of political reform<sup>4</sup>.

Another way in which Conservative strength is demonstrated is in foreign policy concerns. The successes the Conservatives have had in defending Iran’s ‘national sovereignty’ and standing rigid on the nuclear issue is reinforced by a constant reference, in contrast, to those who are ready to give in on the question of enrichment out of fear. The issue of American support for some groups in Iran’s elections and the attack on moderate forces being associated as the ‘party of appeasers’ and ‘implementers of George Bush’s policies’, was brought up in a speech given by Grand Ayatollah Khamanei on January 8th. Despite repeated sanctions, hard-line Conservatives led by Ahmadinejad have managed to convince many Iranians that immoderation in Iranian foreign policy has paid off in comparison to the conciliatory and dialogue-orientated foreign policy of Khatami’s Reformist era.

1 Larijani to Run from Qom Constituency. *Press TV*. 6th February, 2008.

2 UFF Finalises its Candidate List for Tehran. *Mehr News Agency*. 4th February, 2008.

3 Afrasiabi, K. L. 2008. Iran Votes: Factions and Friction. *Asia Times*. 16th February.

4 Ehteshami, A & Zweiri, M. 2007. Iran and the Rise of its Neoconservatives: the Politics of Tehran’s Revolution. New York; London: I.B.Tauris.

## *Female Participation – Closing Down of Zanan and its Effects:*

There are more than forty-six million eligible voters in Iran, of which at least half are women. More than 60% of the votes that brought President Khatami to power in 1997 for two consecutive terms came from women. The female vote was also instrumental in the parliamentary elections in 2000, which gave the Reformists a sweeping majority in the parliament. It is women, therefore, that may hold the key to the Reformist come-back<sup>1</sup>.

The closing-down of the prominent women's periodical, *Zanan*, by the Conservative camp will no doubt affect the result of the parliamentary ballot considerably<sup>2</sup>. *Zanan* has been accused of painting a black picture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and constituting a psychological threat to society. Many women say that since Ahmadinejad came to power, institutionalised discrimination against them has increased. At present, there are two women in secondary cabinet positions and 11 in parliament. Regarding the forthcoming March elections, of the 7,200 candidates which have registered, almost 600 of these are women.

## *Will History Repeat Itself?*

The figures below show the percentage of eligible voters who cast their ballots in previous polls. They are as follow:

1980 – First Majlis: 52.14% (10,871,645 voters)  
1984 – Second Majlis: 64.64% (15,822,070 voters)  
1988 – Third Majlis: 59.72% (16,714,281 voters)  
1992 – Fourth Majlis: 57.81% (18,767,042 voters)  
1996 – Fifth Majlis: 71.10% (24,717,088 voters)  
2000 – Sixth Majlis: 69.23% (26,808,423 voters)  
2004 – Seventh Majlis: 51.15% (23,709,201 voters)

From this we can clearly see since the inception of the Islamic Revolution up until the Sixth Majlis elections, that the turn-out of voters steadily increased. When, however, the Conservatives cemented their momentous victory in the Sixth Majlis elections, by a 54% majority, and continued to monopolise the power bases in Iran (upon which the role of the military was central), voter turn-out for parliamentary elections saw a sharp decrease.

1 Torfeh, M. 2008. Iranian Women Crucial in Majlis Election. *BBC News*. 30th January.

2 Badran, M. 2008. Equality at Half Mast. *Al-Ahram Weekly*. 14th – 20th February.

The victories of the Neo-Conservatives (who we may also call Neo-Traditional Conservatives) in the Seventh Majlis election of 2004 and then in the Ninth Presidential election of 2005 gave total control of the state institutions to the Conservative camp. Hand-in-hand with the Conservative camp securing their grip on power came with a mounting militarization of politics, with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the security forces emerging as the most independent, and prevailing over all other centres of power in Iran. The Corps is estimated to have between 120,000 and 350,000 members<sup>1</sup>. Essentially we can say therefore that the election of Ahmadinejad is an alias for the election of the Revolutionary Guards.

Suspicion surrounding Iran's nuclear programme has grown concurrently with the creeping militarization of politics in Iran. Furthermore, in addition to the fact that dozens of ministerial positions are now occupied by former military commanders<sup>2</sup> (the IRGC displaying a strong presence on the Supreme Council for National Security), last November the Conservative Interior Minister Mostafa Pourmohammadi chose the former head of the Basij, General Ali Reza Afshar, to serve as the president of the election oversight committee<sup>3</sup>. Among other things, Afshar took it upon himself to stack the Election Executive Board with people connected to the Basij militia or other similarly hard-line elements. (The Election Executive Board runs the local elections and is technically empowered to disqualify candidates with questionable pasts). Commenting the day after the joint commander of the Revolutionary Guards and Basij explicitly voiced his and the military's support for hardliner candidates, Seyyed Hassan Khomeini said, "the presence of military forces in politics means that the Republic has abandoned the path of the Imam". Nothing is a clearer affirmation that Ayatollah Khomeini was opposed to the military's intervention in politics.

Significantly, of the 7,200 hopeful candidates registered to take part in the Eighth Majlis elections, 31.5% had participated in the eight-year long Iran-Iraq War. It is worth noting that the brunt of the Iran-Iraq War had been borne by the ideologically committed Pasdaran (IRGC, the Revolutionary Guards) and the Basij volunteers (the mobilization force). Not only were those who fought in the Iran-Iraq War heartily influenced and supportive of Revolutionary Guards' efforts, but so too were whole family units, whose loved ones had either returned from the war field or had been martyred in the name of the eight-year long struggle. President Ahmadinejad himself was a former Revolutionary Guards commander, as too was Ali Larijani, Iran's former top nuclear negotiator and a current member of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, who is now standing for a Majlis seat in the Qom constituency. The Revolutionary Guards and the Mobilization Forces created after the Shah's downfall added to Iran's military strength in spite of the potential for a division between the regular and the paramilitary forces. The IRGC added an unprecedented element of ideological commitment to the armed forces. This military baggage has been woven into the fabric of contemporary Iran. Whether Iranians desire this trend to continue will be visible in the outcome of the election after March 14<sup>th</sup>.

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1 Revolutionary Guards Back Conservatives for Iran Poll. **AFP**. 10th February, 2008.

2 Commanders Voice Support for Hardliners. **Rooz**. 4th February, 2008.

3 Nazer Yasin, K. 2008. Election Fever in Iran. **ISN Security Watch**. 14th February.

## *Ahmadinejad's 2005 Election Promises – Have They Been Met?*

As discussed previously, one of Ahmadinejad's persistent election promises was to boost the economy, and by doing so improve the quality of work and increase efficiency. Another priority which he repeatedly emphasized to his electorate as being the core of his administration surrounded the question of economic development as fuelled by Iran's oil income – of an estimated \$75 billion in oil reserves, \$25 billion was to be used inside the country. Failing to meet this promise, however, was evident in the petrol station riots that ensued last year. The rationing of oil in June 2007 to a mere 100 litres per driver compelled drivers across the country to set fire to petrol stations in protest. This issue has still not as yet been resolved as oil rationing continues. Since December right up to present day, people are given a coupon for 120 litres (26 gallons) per month (which equates to 4 litres per day); the allowance for bus and taxi drivers and emergency services, however, is slightly greater. The government is encouraging people to use clean natural gas instead. Such restricted purchase power means that more and more Iranians are turning to the black market to substitute this deficit. It is my estimation the upcoming Eighth Majlis elections may be used as a battle ground for this failure to deliver in Conservative economic polity alone. Further afield, it is notable to consider that the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance, compounded by the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 2005, and further still by the recent car-bomb assassination in Damascus of the senior Hezbollah commander, Imad Mughniyeh, may affect the vision of the Iranian electorate and the future regional role they endeavour to play.

Still looking to the international arena as a conduit determining the Eighth Majlis outcome, we must look to at regional elections coming to pass, most notably in Pakistan and Lebanon, for their outcome may be seen to increase the tension surrounding the Iranian electoral process. The international focus on Iran is already intense. Since the assassination of Benazir Bhutto, the run-up to Pakistan's parliamentary vote has seen widespread unrest and turmoil from protesters fighting election credibility, with the election process seen to be wholly flawed. The escalating series of bloody attacks during election rallies is having a sorely debilitating affect on the country, as well as her regional neighbours, i.e. Afghanistan. The fact that Lebanon's elections are residually postponed is also a menacing concern. Only time will tell its effect on the greater Middle East.

## ***Conclusion:***

Throughout this paper we hope to have unveiled that many new forces with resilient roots, have entered into the political fabric of Iran. Their presence has been sown internally so intricately that it becomes hard to ascertain the extent to which these new forces are intrinsic, or rather, addendums to the Islamic Republic. The Guardian Council has demonstrated itself to be the dominant player behind the entire Majlis election process. Furthermore, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), also referred to as the Pasdaran or Basij, has proven itself to be a virtual pseudonym for the current Conservative administration.

Upon observation, it seems apparent that the Guardian Council is using its far-reaching authority to marginalise the Reformist platform. This said we have also discerned considerable discord within the Reformist (*Eslahtalaban*) camp. Karroubi's public statement calling for a distancing between himself and the party of Reformist fellow, Mohammad Reza Khatami's, Islamic Iran Participation Front (younger brother of ex-President Mohammad Khatami), is testament to this. Internal fragmentation is not a feature of the Reformist party alone; the Conservative (*Osoolgarayan*) assemblage is also demonstrating alarming dissension. Most notable is the front emerging between Larijani, Rezai and Ghalibaf in opposition to pro-Ahmadinejad forces.

Concerning female participation in the parliamentary race, we can see that this has decreased when compared to the run-up to the Seventh Majlis election. The initial figure of candidates registered in 2004 was 8,300, 820 of whom were women. Once disqualifications had been carried out, the Guardian Council had officially approved 4,552 candidates, with 420 women left standing. Weighing this up against the current Majlis elections, of the 7,200 candidates who were initially registered, 600 were women. Candidacy across gender has dropped considerably, by approximately 1,000 applicants. With women totalling sixty-four percent of Iran's population, they are indeed a considerable challenge to Iranian politics in their sheer volume alone.

The Eighth Majlis election is taking place within the parameters of new legislation. The age of both candidates and voters has been adjusted, which logistically affects the electoral outcome.

It is our prediction that the result of the Eighth Majlis election will represent a milestone in the existence of the Islamic Republic. Whether it will lead to peaceful cooperation or rather advance down a path of greater fragmentation and aggression within Iran's political space remains to be seen. If the latter proves more probable, there is immense danger that this will be exploited by international political players. Through so doing, they may feel empowered to criticise Iran's political system and worse still, to justify confrontation against the regime on grounds of its perceived illegitimacy.

### *About the contributors:*

\* Giti Sorayyapour is a former freelance researcher for Al-Jazeera International, in London. Research assistant at Center for strategic Studies.

\* Dr Mahjoob Zweiri, is a Specialist in Iran and Middle East Politics, Head of Iranian Studies Unit at the Center for Strategic Studies, University of Jordan. He has published recently (with A. Eshami) is 'Iran and the Rise of Its Neoconservatives: The politics of Tehran's Silent Revolution' October 2007, I.B. Tauris. His New book (with A. Eshami) Iran's Foreign Policy: from Khatami to Ahmadinejad, March 2008, Ithaca Press, London.