

## Post-election Analysis

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#### **IRAN**

#### **Legislative elections 21<sup>st</sup> February 2020**

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## *Introduction*

On February 21<sup>st</sup> 2020, 57,918,000 Iranians were called to vote in the first round of the 11<sup>th</sup> Legislative Elections since the establishment of the Iranian Islamic Republic in 1979. Among the voters, 2,931,000 were first-time voters, as they were over the minimum age of 18 established by the electoral law. The posts in dispute were the 290 seats of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (Majlis), which represents the 31 Iranian provinces, divided among 208 electoral districts (174 single and 34 multiple).<sup>1</sup> Amongst the multiple districts, the most important can be found, due to the number of seats and political weight of them in the national context, which includes the municipalities of Tehran, Ray and Shemiranat, and appoints 30 MPs.

The fact that these 30 elected seats in the former elections of 2016 were for the "Hope List", which supported the political project of the current president Hassan Rouhani,<sup>2</sup> has boosted the hopes on these election results as a referendum on his administration management, especially due to the few benefits of the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and the protests caused by the economic shortage, mostly since the reimposed sanctions by the USA in May 2018.

## *The candidates*

The complex Iranian electoral system, with the existence of factions and electoral lists, but no formal political parties,<sup>3</sup> always adds confusion elements, but also important details to the legislative elections, mostly in Tehran, where the competition among the conservative, ultra-conservative, pragmatic, and reformist groups is more visible than in other minor districts. The existence of multiple 'lists' proposed by the factions and alliances, reflects the constant inter-elite fight to control the elective institutions, mainly among the two principal tendencies, conservative and pragmatic-reformist, and the legislative elections are the main scenario of this dispute.

In this case, the doubts on the 'competitiveness' of the elections have been heard again, as in former years, because the Guardian Council<sup>4</sup> has been the responsible for the parliamentary candidates veto since 1980. In this case, 16.145 people registered their candidacy, but only 7.148 were accepted by the Council – barely the 44.3%- after the appealing round. Although it is true that this proportion has been the lowest in the republican history, it is also true that the amount of approved candidates has been the largest since 1980 (900 more than in 2016), as has been the amount of applications (4.000 more than in the former elections), as

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<sup>1</sup> Among the 290, 5 correspond to the minorities recognized by the Iranian constitution, 1 to the Jew minority, 1 to the Zoroastrian, 1 to the Assyrian-Chaldean, and 2 to the Armenian Christians. All are voted for in the same electoral process.

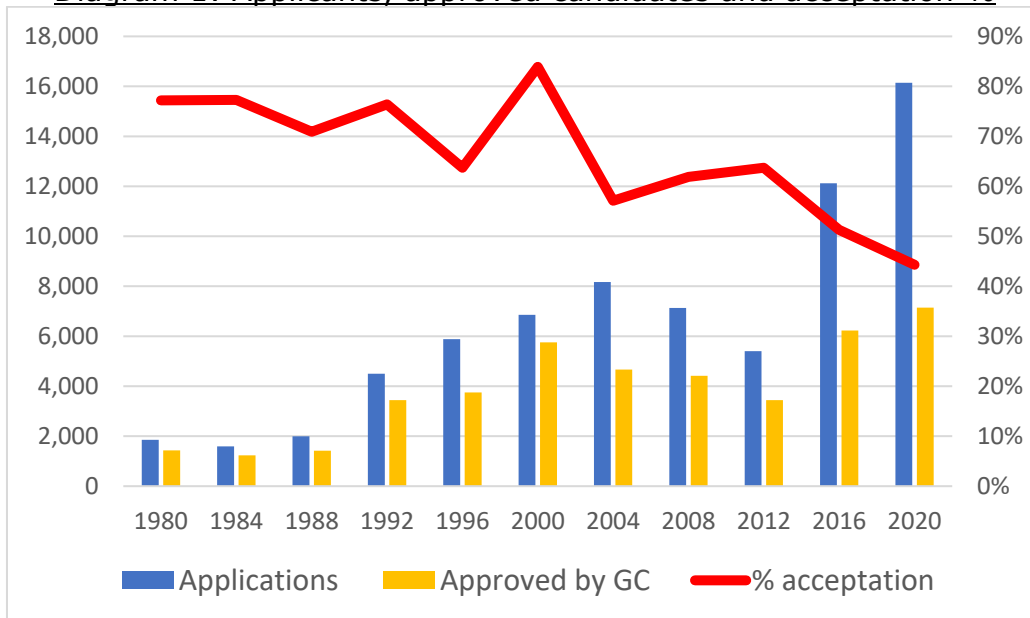
<sup>2</sup> See Luciano Zaccara, "Who won the Iranian elections?" March 2016, [http://www.qu.edu.qa/static\\_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/Who%20won%20the%20Iranian%20Elections.pdf](http://www.qu.edu.qa/static_file/qu/research/Gulf%20Studies/Who%20won%20the%20Iranian%20Elections.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> See "Elections and democratization in Iran", in Mahmoud Hamad and Khalil Al-Anani (Eds.), *Elections and Democratization in the Middle East: The Tenacious Search for Freedom, Justice, and Identity*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 153-179, [https://www.academia.edu/6612063/Elections\\_and\\_Authoritarianism\\_in\\_the\\_Islamic\\_Republic\\_of\\_Iran](https://www.academia.edu/6612063/Elections_and_Authoritarianism_in_the_Islamic_Republic_of_Iran).

<sup>4</sup> The Guardian Council of the Constitution, formed by 6 religious jurists appointed by the Republic Leader and 6 non-religious jurists nominated by the Majlis and approved by the judiciary, it works as electoral tribunal, reviewing and approving the candidacies of all the candidates for elective posts in Iran.

shown in Diagram 1. According to it, it is not the 'competitiveness' that is in question but the 'representativeness' of the available candidates, given that a big proportion of the almost nine thousand rejected applicants belonged to the reformist and pragmatic groups. That, together with the volunteer withdrawal of some present parliament members from the electoral race, like the reformist Reza Aref, the pro-Rouhani conservative Ali Motahhari, and the moderate-conservative Ali Lariyani, current Majlis president, left Rouhani's supporters without many options to renew the chamber.

Diagram 1: Applicants, approved candidates and acceptance %



Source: Own elaboration with Ministry of Interior data

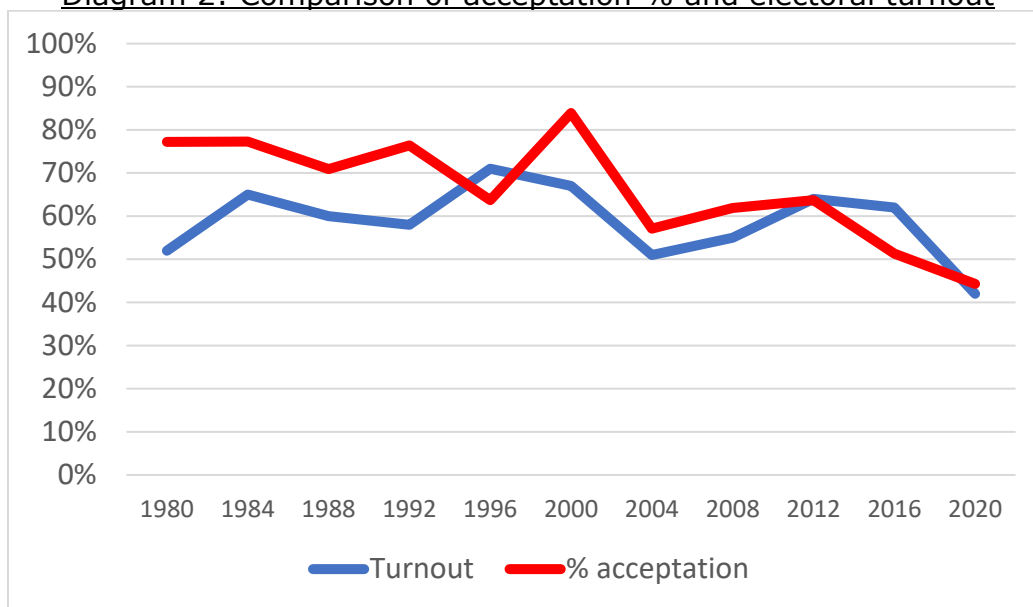
### Participation and results

Therefore, it is no surprise that the electoral participation was, as foreseen, the lowest in all legislative elections since 1980, barely reaching 42.6%, dropping almost 20 points from the 62% of 2016. Nor it was surprising that the participation in Tehran province was the lowest within the country, with barely a 26.2% facing the 50% in 2016. Tehran, together with the outskirts of the country districts, as Azerbaijan, Kermanshah or Kurdistan, often are places in which the reformists always obtain good numbers, and the supporter candidates shortage undoubtedly promoted a drop in electoral participation, although this has not been the only reason.

An almost direct relation between the rejected candidates' proportion and the shortage in electoral participation is identifiable in Diagram 2, where it can be clearly observed how the evolution in participation rate has been going along (and even lower) with the rejected by the Guardian Council candidates' rate. Only in two occasions the participation was over the rejection, in 1996 and 2016, and in both the reformist and pragmatic sectors could obtain a relative majority of seats in the Majlis. Therefore, it is evident the relation among the high participation and the reformist relative majority in the Majlis. Also, it is evident that the 'relative' scarce number of reformist and pragmatic candidates in 2020, together with the scarce participation, determined the number of seats obtained by these groups which has been negligible, with hardly twenty, compared to the 120-150 they would have obtained in 2016.

It is worth stressing that the relativity of the data in relation with the number of candidates and conservative or reformist seats is supported by the electoral lists system itself, in which candidates that appear in one or another list do not necessarily have to be affiliated to particular political group. In certain occasions, especially in Tehran, the groups want to propose 30 names without having enough supporter candidates, inviting then candidates without known political affiliation or preference to become part of their lists. This does not mean that they are conservative or reformist, simply that they use these lists to obtain votes thanks to a 'dragging effect'. Interviewed in Iran confirm that in four legislative years it was never known for sure how many "reformists" *stricto sensu* were in the outgoing legislature.

Diagram 2: Comparison of acceptance % and electoral turnout



Source: Own elaboration with Ministry of Interior data

### Conclusion

With a parliament clearly controlled by the conservatives, who claim they have obtained in the first round 219 of the 285 seats in dispute, the parliamentary politics will take a significant turn in its orientation, moving away from the postulates, especially those related with foreign policy, of the administration of Hassan Rouhani. The latter still has a year mandate which is foreseen as difficult, although it is not expected a presidential dismissal by the Majlis, in spite of being allowed by the Constitution and the number of conservative seats would make it possible.

It is still to be revealed who will the chamber President be, and all points to Baqer Ghalibaf –conservative former major of Tehran and with strong connections with the Revolutionary Guard Corps, considered by some as a 'technocrat' and by others as 'ultra-conservative'–, as the one who will get that spot. However, the Iranian parliamentary policy is not linear, and sometimes the majorities obtained by certain groups is not reflected in the decisions taken in the Majlis core, as the election of the former chamber presidents' show and the voting during the endorsement of the cabinet ministers or their destitution. Anyhow, we will have to wait for the second electoral round in mid-May to find it out.