

◆ POLITICAL PARTIES

Political groups that participate in elections and are capable of electing candidates for public office have existed in Iran since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979. Although the Political Parties Activities Law of 1981 remained unimplemented until after the opening of the Third Parliament and the concomitant end of the eight-year war with Iraq in 1988, the laws governing multi-party electoral contestation within the newly defined confines of the Islamic Republic system had been enacted and put into effect in time for the second parliamentary election held in 1984. The 1984 procedural compact (the new Parliamentary Elections Law) excluded outright the regime opponents and the secular leftists from electoral politics and drove one tolerated opposition group, the Freedom Movement of Iran (*Nehzat-e Azadi-ye Iran*), into boycotting the election in protest. Nevertheless, during the 1984 parliamentary elections, four politically distinct groups—two conservative and two radical/pro-government organizations—in addition to the pro-system umbrella body Islamic Republic Party (*Hezb-e Jomhuri-ye Eslami*), formally competed for the thirty-seat capital district of Tehran. The June 1987 dissolution of the factionalism-stricken Islamic Republic Party did not alter the nature of the electoral politics, as the constituent groups of its two rival wings had already entered into open competition. During the first decade after the 1979 revolution, however, two factors inhibited the institutionalization of party-based electoral politics on a nationwide scale: the ban imposed by the then Leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Musavi-Khomeini on extra-district interferences in candidate selection, and the fact that 84% of the nation's then 193 electoral districts were single-seat ones in which candidates' personal traits, much more than their factional affiliations, seemed to have had impact on their electoral outcomes.

Under the 1981 law, political parties had been required to register with and obtain licenses for activities from the five-person committee called the Article 10 Commission of the Parties Law, composed of the representatives

from the Judiciary, the Parliament, and the Interior Ministry, and established within the Ministry. After the demand by some deputies of the Third Parliament, the Interior Ministry activated the Article 10 Commission for the first time in late 1988, and began accepting the applications from political parties and other groups and organizations. It granted its first licenses in July 1989. Certain prominent groups that regularly compete in elections—such as clerical establishments like the Tehran Combatant Clergy Association (*Jame'eh-e Rouhaniyyat-e Mobarez-e Tehran*), the Qom Seminary Teachers Association (*Jame'eh-ye Modarresin-e Houzeh-ye 'Elmiyyeh-ye Qom*), and the student group the Unity Consolidation Office (*Daftar-e Tahkim-e Vahdat*)—had never registered as political parties. A number of others, however, including the Tehran Combatant Clerics Assembly (*Majma'-e Rouhaniyun-e Mobarez-e Tehran*, established in 1988), the Executives of Construction of Iran Party (*Hezb-e Kargozaran-e Sazandegi-ye Iran*, established in 1996), and the Islamic Iran Participation Front Party (*Hezb-e Jebheh-ye Mosharekat-e Iran-e Eslami*, established in 1998) went on to do so under the framework of the 1981 law. The Freedom Movement had, by 1989, antagonized the dominant political factions so much so that it has never been allowed to register under the 1981 law. The number of the licensed parties grew slowly during the presidency of Akbar Hashemi-Rafsajani (1989–1997), reaching 10 in 1992 and 36 in 1996, then quickly expanded under Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), reaching 130 in 2001 and close to 200 by 2005.

In February 2001, the Sixth Parliament approved, for the first time, as part of the Budget Bill for Year 1381 (March 2001–March 2002) the provisions to political parties of funds to be distributed by the House of Parties (*Khaneh-ye Ahzab*), an umbrella organization newly created under the auspices of the Interior Ministry. In a rare legislative achievement for the pro-Khatami reformists, the Expediency Council approved the provision of funds, overriding the opposition by the Guardian Council. In year 1381, some 8 billion Rials were distributed among 80 parties; in the following year, as the membership of the House of Parties increased, some 6 billion Rials were distributed among 114 parties.

In addition to the parliamentary elections, multi-party electoral competitions also take place in the presidential, the Leadership Experts Assembly, and the city and rural councils elections, as political parties and groups similarly publish the name or the list of their nominated candidate(s). The nomination of a candidate by a political party, however, does not usually mean that he or she is a member of that particular party. As a result, it so happens that certain prominent candidates receive simultaneous nominations from rival political parties and/or *ad hoc* electoral coalitions, a characteristic that often confounds not only outside observers but also many local voters. Nonetheless, certain enduring politico-ideological differences do separate

those political parties and groups operating within the Islamic Republic system into several semi-permanent political currents, often called factions (*jenah-ha*), a fact that helps keen voters and observers identify the candidate's political orientations. To a certain degree, the existence of such overarching factions has also filled the gap created by the lack of established political parties active on a nationwide scale, a tendency that continued to be a norm even after the ban imposed by Ayatollah Khomeini apparently expired with his death in 1989.

During the first decade, the conservative faction comprising the powerful clerical establishments such as the Tehran Combatant Clergy Association and their lay allies such as the Islamic Coalition Society/Party (*Jam'iyat/Hezb-e Mo'talefeh-ye Eslami*) and the Islamic Society of Engineers (*Jame'eh-ye Eslami-ye Mohandesin*) stood against the oft-called radical faction comprising the left-leaning supporters of the Mir-Hossein Musavi Cabinet, such as the Islamic Associations of Students of the Universities of Tehran (the Unity Consolidation Office), the Labor House (*Khaneh-ye Kargar*), and those clerics who later formed the Tehran Combatant Clerics Assembly. Into the second decades of Hashemi-Rafsanjani's presidency, a centrist, pro-government faction comprising the newly formed Executives of Construction Party and the Labor House took shape after having quarreled for some time with the dominant conservatives. During the same period, the revitalized Islamic Revolution Mojahedin Organization (*Sazman-e Mojahedin-e Enqelab-e Eslami*, reestablished in 1991) led the Islamic left faction while the Combatant Clerics Assembly suspended its political activities after its defeat in the 1992 parliamentary elections. Despite the formation of a third faction, two consolidated lists of candidates each nominated by a rival ad hoc electoral coalition have, from time to time, appeared in several multi-seat districts, in both the parliamentary and the city and rural councils elections (first held in 1999), with the centrists joining either the conservative or the Islamic left faction.

Unlike the parliamentary elections in which electoral contestation has led to a radically different factional composition among the elected deputies almost every four years, the first several presidential elections (except for the very first held in 1980) were unaffected by the uncertainty that, in part, defines democratic election. The winners of these presidential elections were largely pre-determined due to the lack of serious competition among the candidates. Only in the seventh election, in 1997, and the ninth, in 2005, (especially during the second round of voting) did the two rival factions fight against each other, offering real choices to the voters. By contrast, the successive elections of the Leadership Experts Assembly (held every eight years since 1982) have been void of multi-party contestation in part because the

potential candidates of the Islamic left faction either lacked sufficient credentials (in 1982) or were excluded as the result of approbatory supervision exercised by the Guardian Council (in 1990, 1998, and 2006).

Despite their status as permanent fixtures during various elections and their apparent proliferation during Khatami's presidency, political parties remain nothing but loose coalitions among a relatively small number of like-minded politically active individuals and are still crucially disconnected from the body politic. The elitist tendencies of most of the parties, as well as the cadre mentality of their members, are inferable from the fact that no prominent post-revolutionary political party or group sought to seriously expand their membership on the general voter level. Even the Islamic Iran Participation Front Party, the most successful in terms of both organizational structure building and electoral achievements among the so-called Second of Khordad Front reformist parties, had no more than 500 party members nationwide before its fall from power in 2004. The relatively fragile and highly volatile voter-level support for the pro-Khatami reformist parties that became apparent after 2001 was attributable, at least partially, to the lack of focused efforts on their part to expand membership and/or build support structures on the general voter level when their popularity remained high.

If, as some argued, the dissipation of voter-level support for the elected reformist elite—not the well-expected resistance by the arch-conservatives power-holders *per se*—was the precipitating causal factor behind the political downfall of the pro-Khatami reformists and the resultant lack of promised democratic consolidation during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, the underdevelopment of political parties may well have been among the key factors that separated some of the successful consolidation episodes elsewhere from the case of Khatami-era Iran. Furthermore, the disconnected nature of political parties from the general voters under the Islamic Republic system is a reminder also of the fact that despite the far-reaching changes in the composition of political elite, the nature of dominant political discourse, and the significant expansion in voter participation in the elections, the institutionalization of political parties and a party system has remained highly elusive in the Iranian context throughout the century-long period from the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1909).

Suggested Reading

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YASUYUKI MATSUNAGA