

# Iranian moderates win Parliament elections

by Hussein Al-Nadeem

On Feb. 18, Iranians cast their votes to elect the sixth Majlis (Parliament) in Iran. Voting rates were as high as in the Presidential elections in 1997, when Seyyed Mohammad Khatami won a landslide victory to become President of the Islamic Republic. The electorate, a majority of whom are youth, voted in favor of the reformist candidates who represent the young leadership who have rallied behind President Khatami and the political and cultural openness he has achieved in the past two years. It was obvious from the beginning of the election campaign, that the traditional conservative forces were losing their grip in the Majlis, which they have controlled for the past two decades.

The results showed that the moderate factions will control more than two-thirds of the seats in the next Majlis. These factions include the Islamic Iran Participation Party (IIPP), Islamic Iran Solidarity Party, and the Executives of Construction Party (ECP). These factions compose the 2nd of Khordad Front (the umbrella group containing all reformist factions). The conservatives were represented by the Imam and Leadership Line.

The most successful group was the IIPP, headed by Mohammed Reza Khatami, M.D., the younger brother of President Khatami. The IIPP won a great majority of the 30 Majlis seats allocated for Tehran, the capital, in the first round. Even in cities which have been regarded as strongholds of the conservative clergy, such as Qom and Mashhad, the moderates achieved significant advances.

Six female candidates in Tehran, included in the reformist lists, succeeded in qualifying for the 30 seats in the first round. (The elections are organized in two rounds. Candidates who win more than 25% of the vote in their respective districts qualify automatically to seats in the Majlis.) A run-off in March will determine who will win the remaining seats.

This is the first election in which political parties have contested. In the past two decades, the Majlis was dominated by two loose blocs dominated by religious personalities. This reflects the big change in the structure of civil society in Iran. However, secular and nationalist parties that do not embrace the Islamic Republic System of Velayeti Fagih, such as the Azadi (Freedom) party, were not permitted to participate in the elections.

The real surprise was the extremely poor performance of former President and current Chairman of the Expediency

Council Hashemi Rafsanjani. Despite the fact that he topped the list of the conservatives in Tehran, the consensus in the country was that he would constitute the link between the moderates and conservatives. He was promoted in the media as the next Speaker of the Majlis even before the voting started. Members of the moderate ECP tried unsuccessfully to persuade the other factions in the 2nd of Khordad alliance to include Rafsanjani in their lists, to secure his election.

The importance of this lies in the concern among the elites in Iran that a flight forward by the young reformists to abruptly detach the society from its previous structures, will create a dangerous schism.

## The conservatives' power

Such concern emerges not from fear of modernization, but the fact that the extremist conservatives continue to wield enormous power in un-elected institutions of government, such as intelligence and security, and the paramilitary Basij groups. Two examples emphasize this fact: the serial murders of Iranian intellectuals in 1998 to destabilize President Khatami's government, which were revealed to be the work of conservative factions within the intelligence agency, and the recent revolutionary trial of former Interior Minister Abdullah Nouri, a close friend of Khatami who was sentenced to three years in prison by a religious court for uttering "pro-Western" statements.

Rafsanjani, who was below 25% in the days before the final results were announced, suddenly jumped to 28% on Feb. 24, thereby qualifying, when all votes were counted. Certain media claimed that this result was "arranged," to ensure Rafsanjani's election to become Majlis Speaker.

At any rate, the elections represent a continuation of the social-political developments which brought Khatami to power. It is a manifestation of the popularity of the President and his promise to create a civil society adhering to the "rule of law."

The factions in the moderate alliance have all openly expressed differences on domestic and economic policy issues, but nonetheless, they all have stressed their support for Khatami's policy of reform, for a dialogue of civilizations, and openness to the West in general and the United States in particular, on the basis of "equality and respect for the sovereignty" of each state, as was recently emphasized by Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazmi.

Meanwhile, Russia and China regard Iran as a pivotal strategic power in the unstable region comprising the Persian Gulf, Central Asia, and the Transcaucasus. The recent signing of a strategic cooperation agreement by China and Iran, and Russia's commitment to increased cooperation with Iran in economic and technological areas, show that these two major powers, which are being targeted for destabilization by the Anglo-American ruling powers, are focussing on Iran's strategic-economic importance.