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An Assessment of Iran's New Parliament: Conservatism Wins Back

Hamideh Dorzadeh and Mehran Kamrava

An Assessment of Iran's New Parliament: Conservatism Wins Back:

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Hamideh Dorzadeh and Mehran Kamrava

Mehran Kamrava heads the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research. He is also Professor of Government at Georgetown University Qatar. He is the author of a number of journal articles and books, including, most recently, *A Concise History of Revolution and Inside the Arab State*.

Hamideh Dorzadeh is the Coordinator of the Iranian Studies Unit at the Arab Center for Policy Studies and Research. She received her Bachelor's degree from Georgetown University and is currently pursuing her MA in Women, Society and Development program at Hamad Bin Khalifa University. She supports the Head of the unit and is the focal point for communication between the Iranian Studies Unit, other departments and external entities. Hamideh is in charge of coordinating all the logistical needs of the unit and oversees the unit's online newsletter.

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The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies

Al-Tarfa Street, Wadi Al Banat

Al-Dayaen, Qatar

PO Box 10277, Doha

+974 4035 4111

www.dohainstitute.org

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As in almost all other hybrid authoritarian states, the Iranian parliament, the Majles, serves as one of the key institutions in the Islamic Republic, helping it retain its authoritarian hold on power while also maintaining a semblance of democracy. Since its earliest days, the Majles has served as a training ground for the recruitment and training of political elites and policymakers. It has been a bastion of political and ideological conservatism, or, alternatively, and ineffectual bunker from which “reformists” have sought to democratize the system from within. This report assesses the conduct of the Iranian parliament in light of the coronavirus pandemic, especially in reference to the newly elected eleventh Majles. It argues that with presidential elections scheduled exactly a year after the eleventh parliament’s inauguration, the Rouhani administration is likely to have a tumultuous final year in office due to the challenges faced by the rise of the hardliners in the new parliament and their unabashed ideological conservatism.

The Tenth Majles Wraps Up

In its final weeks in office, the Tenth Iranian parliament, Majles-e Shoura-ye Eslami, was shut down on 25 February 2020, for a period of forty-four days after the novel coronavirus continued to spread in more than 23 provinces. At the time of closure, several MPs, some of them newly elected to the Eleventh Majles, were reportedly infected with the virus. The closure was hotly debated by many parliamentarians, who cited the pandemic as a critical time when the people’s voices needed to be heard and their concerns addressed. Others applauded the shut-down, maintaining that the closure would help contain the spread of the virus as large gatherings of people from different provinces in one space is risky and could potentially increase infection rates.⁽¹⁾ Despite the continuation of the pandemic, with cases having spread to all of the country’s 31 provinces, the Majles opened on 7 April 2020. Approximately 23 members of Tenth Majles were reportedly infected with the virus, including the out-going Speaker, Ali Larijani.⁽²⁾

Attempts were made, meanwhile, to continue the work of the Majles during the closure. Asadollah Abbasi, spokesman for the Majles’s presiding board, reported to the Islamic Republic News Agency (IRAN) that while the public meetings of the parliament had been suspended, as recommended by the National Security Council, meetings of the Board of Directors and some specialized parliamentary committees were held, and that review of the national budget for the 1399 (2020-2021) fiscal year had commenced.⁽³⁾ Attempts were also made to hold parliamentary sessions online through video conferencing, though the effort was less than successful as most virtual sessions failed to reach a quorum.

The first session of the parliament following the closure, held on 7 April, was headed by Masoud Pezeshkian, with two-thirds of MPs attending, along with the Minister of Health and Medical

1 “Che Kas Majlis R Ta’til Kardah? Pusht-i Pardah-i Ta’tili-i Jinjali Majlis Bih Rivayat-i 3 Nam yandah (Who Closed the Majles? Behind the Scene of the Closure as Told by 3 MPs),” *Hamshahri Online*, 08/04/2020, accessed on 14/04/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/2zkiGkW>.

2 “Iran’s Majlis Speaker Tests Positive For Coronavirus,” *IRNA*, 02/04/2020, accessed on 13/04/2020, at: <https://en.irna.ir/news/83736684/Iran-s-Majlis-speaker-tests-positive-for-coronavirus>

3 “Majlis Ta’til Nist (Majles is not closed),” *IRNA*, 14/03/2020, accessed on 13/04/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30v9Pgg>.



Education, Saeed Namaki, Head of Plan and Budget Organization, Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, and the Minister of Interior, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli. The legislators heard reports from the Health and Interior Ministries on government measures to combat the pandemic. Other heads of commissions discussed the economic impacts of the outbreak on vulnerable groups, challenges to the education sector, and the importance of social distancing and quarantine. Nobakht announced the allocation of 12,400 billion tomans (over \$100 million) for medical supplies and equipment, test kits, and protective equipment for healthcare workers.⁽⁴⁾

After photos of the first session of the Majles appeared in the media, many MPs were criticized by the general public for failing to practice social distancing during the session. Measures were then taken to observe social distancing in subsequent sessions. A motion to quarantine the Majles building until the end of its term in May was defeated, and the remaining sessions were held with a revised work schedule.

Under the Islamic Republic, the Majles has been notoriously unpredictable in its efficacy in relation to the other institutions of the state and within the larger system. Nevertheless, through wars, assassinations, and even a global pandemic, the state has ensured that the Majles carried on with its work, presenting it as an indispensable part of the system. The public, meanwhile, seemed, and continues to seem, only marginally interested in the work of the Majles. Under the ominous clouds of the coronavirus pandemic, the Tenth Majles concluded its term with a whimper, many of its sitting MPs barred from running again and its long-time speaker, Ali Larijani, not even contesting his seat again.

Iran's Eleventh Parliament

With the inauguration of the Eleventh Majles on May 27, 2020, the Iranian parliament appears poised to take yet another turn, this time, evidently, a hard right. The consequences of such a turn for the Iranian system are likely to be both important and long lasting.

Having only just been inaugurated, it is difficult to reasonably predict with what policies and agendas the new Majles may pursue. Nevertheless, certain preliminary conclusions can be drawn based on what we know about the affiliations and the backgrounds of newly-elected MPs. Compared to the Tenth Majles, the current assembly starts its term with somewhat lower popular legitimacy based on voter turnout, with only 42.6 percent of Iranians going to the polls in February 2020 compared with the 61.6 percent that voted for the previous parliament in 2016. Compared to its immediate predecessor, in a reversal of trends from past elections, the current Majles has nearly twice as many clerics, many with known conservative and hardline views. Other conservative MPs also dominate, with the number of reformists having been greatly reduced thanks to the draconian vetting of candidates by the Guardian Council.

⁴ "Nukhustin Jelas t-i Alni-i Majlis Dar Sal-i 99 Chegunah Guzasht? (How did the first open sessions of the parliament go in the Persian year 1399 (2020-2021))," *IRNA*, 09/04/2020, accessed on 13/04/2020, at: <https://bit.ly/30wox6T>.



Table 1: Composition of the Tenth and Eleventh Majleses

Majles	Year	Voter Turnout %	No. Female MPs	No. Cleric MPs	No. of MPs with IRGC Background	Main Parties/ Factions (No. of MPs)	Other Parties/ Factions (No. of MPs)	
10	2016	61.6	17	17	N/A	Pervasive Coalition of Reformists 121	Principlists Grand Coalition 83	People's Voice Coalition 11
11	2020	42.6	17	31	11 ⁽⁵⁾	Conservatives 221	Independents 38	Reformists 19

Source: Data collected by the authors.

A preliminary assessment of the Eleventh Majles points to four, interrelated areas to watch. To begin with, we are likely to see increased tensions between the legislative and the executive branches of the Islamic Republic, reminiscent of the final years of the Ahmadinejad presidency. One of the major accomplishments of President Hassan Rouhani has been his ability to foster a loose consensus among the Islamic Republic's notoriously divided factions over some key political, economic, and security issues. More specifically, Rouhani appears to have struck a consensus between the IRGC, the Tenth Majles, technocrats and senior policymakers, and, most importantly, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, through a series of trade-offs and concessions. In return for acquiescence to his diplomatic initiatives and his reversal of Ahmadinejad's populist economics, he supported the IRGC's security pursuits domestically and in Iran's near-abroad; he worked with Majles Speaker Ali Larijani and was able to placate the usually ruckus parliament; and he has had a level of support and confidence by Khamenei that Ahmadinejad could never have. The consensus has not been iron-clad and has had occasional setbacks. But it has largely held.

That is, until the new Majles. In his first speech to the MPs, the newly elected speaker of the Majles, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, launched a full-frontal assault on the Rouhani administration, accusing it of being "dysfunctional" and calling instead for a "jihadi management" of the country's affairs. Ghalibaf's speech points to a second aspect of the Eleventh Majles to watch, namely the

⁵ This is a rough estimate, based on publicly available sources. The actual number of MPs with background in the IRGC is likely to be much higher.

2021 presidential elections. In many respects, Ghalibaf's speech kicked off his presidential campaign. The former mayor of Tehran, also former commander of the IRGC Air Force, has made no secret of his presidential ambitions, having run unsuccessfully on three previous occasions in 2005, 2013, and 2017. Since its establishment in 1980, every single speaker of the Majles has become a candidate for the presidency at one point or another, although so far only the late Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani has succeeded in transitioning from one office to another. Larijani, the speaker of the Tenth Majles, is also often touted as a potential candidate again. How Ghalibaf, and no doubt others, use their seat, or manage to position the whole Majles, in order to serve their presidential ambitions, will be one of the key developments to watch in Iran in the coming year.

A third feature of the Majles involves the continued penetration of the various institutions of the state with individuals closely affiliated with the IRGC. Elections to the Eleventh Majles saw the deepening of a trend that has characterized the politics and the institutional composition of the Islamic Republic in recent years, namely the increasing normalization of the IRGC into ostensibly civilian domains. From the earliest days of its establishment, of course, the IRGC has been integral to the security of the Islamic Republic's domestic institutions. Since Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's election to the presidency in 2005, however, and especially after the suppression of the Green Movement in 2009, Iran's domestic politics have undergone increasing securitization, and the IRGC has become a more prominent force in the country's political landscape. Figures within the IRGC of course resign or retire from active duty before embarking on business, political, or parliamentary careers. But they frequently retain robust networks and contacts with active or former officers and commanders, thus further facilitating the IRGC's growing influence across the system. The Majles now serves as an even more important institutional ally for the IRGC.

The fourth, related feature is the steady, though precipitous, unanimity in the Islamic Republic's ideological orthodoxy. The death of the state's founder Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989 exposed fissures in the postrevolutionary state's ideological reference point. By 1997, when the reformist Mohammad Khatami was elected president, those fissures were beginning to seem like unbridgeable chasms. Ahmadinejad's rabid embrace of what came to be called Principalism was tempered beginning in 2013 by the self-declared "moderate" Rouhani. But Rouhani has been unable, or perhaps unwilling, to stop the indiscriminate purge of the "reformist" camp from the Majles by the Guardian Council. The latest Majles elections only solidify the increasing ideological conservatism of the Iranian body politics. More specifically, given the ideological profiles of the MPs, the Eleventh Majles is likely to emerge as one of the key institutions facilitating the on-going Khameneization of the Islamic Republic's politics and ideology.

Since its establishment in 1979, the Islamic Republic has consistently defied predictability, and there is no reason to expect that it will suddenly start behaving in a predictable manner. Authoritarian systems have an uncanny ability to make even the most sound of analyses speculative, and Iran's Islamic Republic is no exception. With these caveats in mind, at least in the short term, Iran's Eleventh



Majles is likely to be a growing thorn in Rouhani's side, a launch pad for Ghalibaf's presidential aspirations, an institutional ally of the IRGC, and a source for the growing Khameneization of the system. Whether Ayatollah Khamenei, aged 81, will live long enough to see the Eleventh Majles through, is a different story.