



# In Iran, an Electoral Flop

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What if you held a national election and no one turned out? That's the situation currently confronting Iranian officials, who are grappling with the aftermath of a truly disastrous outcome in last week's parliamentary elections.

According to the official Fars News Agency, just 42 percent of Iranians voted in the country's latest parliamentary elections, which took place on Friday. That's the lowest percentage ever recorded in the 41-year history of the Islamic Republic. (By way of comparison: The turnout for Iran's last parliamentary elections, in 2016, was approximately 60 percent.) Yet there's good reason to believe that even those official numbers are inflated, and perhaps significantly so. Outside reports, relying on internal Iranian media sources, indicate that actual voting tallies fell far below the official 42 percent figure, forcing the regime to keep polling stations open longer than planned to scrape together even a minimum number of legitimate votes.

If you've been paying attention to events in Iran, that lackluster showing shouldn't come as much of a surprise. Over the past two years, persistent protests in practically every major Iranian city — and at virtually every stratum of Iranian society — have showcased a population that has become profoundly disaffected with the country's clerical regime. These protests have flared anew in recent weeks, following the Iranian government's accidental January 8 downing of a Ukrainian airliner amid heightened tensions with the United States. That event helped to convince many Iranians that their government is dangerously incompetent, and a real hazard to their own safety.

The regime in Tehran responded in predictable fashion: by trying to tighten its hold on political power. Ahead of Friday's parliamentary vote, Iran's government disqualified more than 7,000 applicants from running. That in and of itself is hardly new; Iran's religious institutions have long been used to weed out politicians deemed insufficiently loyal to the country's governing religious ideology. But this time, the ranks of those disqualified included dozens of parliamentarians who had previously passed clerical muster and were now standing for reelection. Apparently, Iran's ayatollahs are now unable to tolerate even a semblance of pluralism within the country's secular institutions.

The reasons for this tightening of the ideological screw have everything to do with the regime's growing fragility.

Economically, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" strategy continues to have a pronounced impact on the Islamic Republic's financial fortunes. Earlier this month, the official Statistical Center of Iran disclosed that Iran's gross national product declined by nearly 8 percent between March and December of 2019. That assessment is consistent with an earlier estimate by the Washington-based International Institute of Economics, which in January outlined how persistent U.S. sanctions pressure was leading to plummeting foreign-exchange reserves and driving the Islamic Republic "deeper into recession," as reported by Reuters.

Politically, meanwhile, Iran's continued rogue behavior has left the country increasingly isolated. Iran's botched handling of the diplomatic fallout from its accidental downing of the Ukrainian airliner last month has profoundly roiled Tehran's relations with the world, robbing the Iranian regime of much-needed international support. In the aftermath, the Islamic Republic is slowly but surely turning once again into an international pariah. On Friday, for instance, the Financial Action Task Force, the world's most important illicit-finance watchdog, formally blacklisted Iran for its failure to fall in line with international regulations designed to prevent the financing of terrorism.

Amid these setbacks, the question of legitimacy has loomed larger than ever for Iran's beleaguered ayatollahs. Last week's elections represented an important moment to demonstrate to the world that their regime remains stable, secure, and firmly in control. Unfortunately for them, Friday's vote ended up highlighting the exact opposite: that Iran's regime, facing fresh setbacks abroad, is also exceedingly unpopular at home.

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