



An Ominous Election In Iran

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On Friday, Iranians went to the polls to select new representatives for the country's legislature, known as the Majles, and its Assembly of Experts, the powerful clerical body that oversees the performance of Iran's supreme leader. The results reflect a stronger-than-expected showing from the country's so-called "reformist" camp, particularly the political circles surrounding Iranian president Hassan Rouhani.

Supporters of the recent nuclear deal between Iran and the P5+1 powers (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) are understandably eager to spin this electoral outcome as a beneficial by-product of international diplomacy. After all, for months before the nuclear deal's passage last July, the Obama administration and its diplomatic partners in Europe championed the agreement as a vehicle to moderate Iranian behavior and draw it closer to the West.

Yet it's safe to say that nothing of the sort has happened. As a new survey of Iranian public opinion by the University of Maryland's Center for International and Security Studies eloquently details, strikingly anti-Western attitudes continue to predominate throughout the country.

That study, based on recent opinion polling done within Iran, found that nearly three-quarters (71 percent) of the more than 1,000 people surveyed expressed unfavorable views of the United States. Negative ratings for the United Kingdom were similarly high (70 percent), while those of France were a bit better (only 51 percent), although still negative.

By way of comparison, Iranian attitudes toward the United States now are only nominally better than those found in a 2010 survey of Iranian opinion carried out by the International Peace Institute, while views of Europe have cumulatively worsened. In other words, attitudes toward the West seem to be hardening among Iranian conservatives and reformists alike.

Moreover, there's good reason to suspect that the new nuclear deal is to blame for this trend.

First, the agreement effectively undercuts confidence in the West among ordinary Iranians. Whatever the historic grievances, Iran's population has long looked to the West as a champion of human rights and democratic ideas in the face of repressive clerical rule.

But the nuclear deal has helped undermine U.S. and European credibility on those fronts. The sanctions relief inherent in the agreement has greatly strengthened Iran's current regime without compelling any meaningful change in its domestic behavior. At the same time, Western nations - worried about ensuring continued Iranian compliance with the terms of the accord - have systematically downgraded their concerns about the regime's internal deformities. As a result, to Iranians it appears as though the West has abandoned them.

Second, the nuclear deal has helped fuel a rising sense of Iranian nationalism. Just two years ago, Iran's leaders faced mounting domestic discontent as Western economic pressure steadily raised the costs of their nuclear ambitions. But the conclusion of a nuclear deal in a fashion overwhelmingly favorable to their interests has helped convey the sense that the Iranian regime has gotten the upper hand in its dealings with the West. As a result, the once-rickety political standing of the Iranian regime is now a good deal more stable, and its persistent anti-Western outlook is more and more accepted.

None of this can be what U.S. and European leaders intended when they were negotiating with Iran over its nuclear program. Yet a key byproduct of the new nuclear deal may just turn out to be a stronger domestic consensus in favor of the regime in Tehran - and a further drift of the Iranian polity away from the West.

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