

Survey Says Iranians Favor Free Election Of Their Top Leader

By Robin Wright
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As Iran's brief election campaign for parliament heats up, a new public opinion poll shows that the vast majority of Iranians would like to directly elect their supreme leader in a free vote -- and be able to replace him.

The power of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has long been at the heart of political debate in Iran, because the supreme leader can veto legislation, presidential actions, judicial decisions and candidates for office. Iran's top political position has basically become a lifetime job, even though a panel of 86 religious scholars elected every eight years has the right to dismiss him. Khamenei has held the job since 1989.

But now, almost nine out of 10 voters surveyed want the top political position to be accountable to voters, the poll found.

The survey shows limited interest in the current political choices for parliament, with about one-third of voters preferring neither reformists nor hard-line conservatives. Among those polled, only 8 percent favor conservatives, and 22 percent want to vote for reformers. One out of four voters surveyed in all 30 provinces said they did not know who they would vote for in the election on March 14.

Although more than 80 percent of those polled said they would vote, Iranians are not inspired by any of the candidates, the poll concluded.

The poll was carried out last month by the nonprofit Terror Free Tomorrow and D3 Systems Inc., an international polling and research group.

"The most interesting result is that Iranians are expressing a desire for a more open and democratic system. The fact that they are not enthusiastic or inspired by the ballot choices shows a level of discontent," Kenneth Ballen, president of Terror Free Tomorrow, said.

Conservatives are expected to win the parliamentary contest, in part because hundreds of reformist candidates were disqualified from running. The poll found that more than two-thirds of Iranians believe all reformist candidates should be

allowed to run, with 10 percent supporting the decision by a religious council to bar them.

"This survey confirms what any visitor to Iran notices right away, and that is people's utter lack of inspiration with their political system and political candidates," Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace said.

Iran's parliamentary election is a harbinger of the presidential election next year. The United States and the European Union have increased diplomatic and economic pressure on Iran partly in the hope that Iranian voters would turn against hard-line President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who faces reelection.

Terror Free Tomorrow is a nonprofit advocacy group whose advisory board members include the former 9/11 Commission co-chairmen -- former Democratic congressman Lee H. Hamilton (Ind.) and former Republican governor Thomas H. Kean (N.J.) -- as well as Republican presidential candidate John McCain and former Senate majority leader Bill Frist (R-Tenn.). The organization undertakes public opinion polls to determine what policies could be most effective in countering extremism. It is funded by independent, public and family foundations, such as the Rockefeller Brothers Fund.

D3 Systems, based in Vienna, Va., has been polling in Iran since 2004. It carried out the survey of more than 1,000 Iranians by telephone from within the region. The two groups conducted another poll in Iran last June.

Ahmadinejad gets a boost from the new poll. On the economy, 42 percent of Iranians polled believe the economy is headed in the right direction, up from 27 percent in June. The Iranian president's populist economic policies have elicited criticism from parliament and other hard-liners.

More than three-quarters of Iranians polled favor normal relations and trade with the United States, but Iranians are less supportive of concessions to the West than they were in the 2007 poll by the same groups.

The three most important steps Washington could take to improve relations with Tehran are withdrawing its forces from Iraq, increasing visas for study and work in the United States, and a trade deal between the two countries, the poll found.

"The previous poll . . . showed that people were more open to the idea of Iran offering concessions" in exchange for abandoning a nuclear weapons program, Ballen said. "That's dropped from 80 percent to 70 percent."

Just over half of the Iranians polled favor developing nuclear weapons. Since June, the proportion of Iranians who believe that that goal is "not at all important" has dropped from one-third to one-fifth.

At the same time, 70 percent of Iranians told pollsters that they favor an arrangement in which Iran would receive aid and investment in return for allowing inspections and guaranteeing not to develop nuclear weapons.

About six out of 10 Iranians also said they support the Iranian government's military and financial assistance to Lebanon's Hezbollah, Iraq's Shiite militias and the Palestinian militant movements, the survey reported.

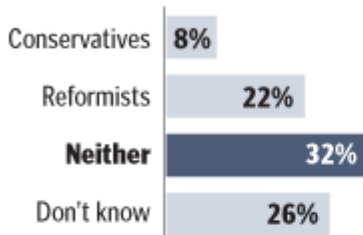
Fewer than one in four Iranians polled said they are willing to recognize Israel even if the Palestinians get full statehood, while 45 percent said they would support the recognition of Israel as part of a broader deal with the United States, down from 55 percent in June.

Iranian Opinion Poll

Results of a nationwide public opinion survey of Iran before the elections next Friday:

On Elections and Government

Q: Who will you vote for in parliamentary elections?



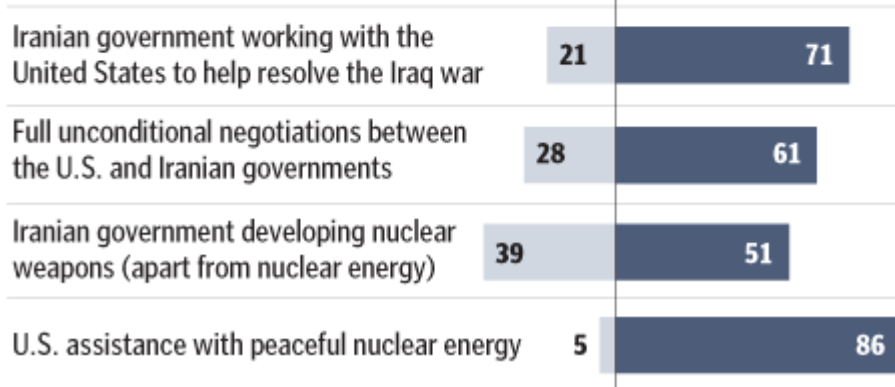
68%
Say all reformist candidates should be allowed to run
(10% support exclusion)

86%
Favor a government in which the supreme leader and all other leaders are elected.
(9% oppose)

On the United States and Nuclear Technology

Asked if they favor or oppose . . .

◀ OPPOSE | **FAVOR** ▶



SOURCES: Terror Free Tomorrow and D3 Systems Inc. | GRAPHIC: The Washington Post - March 9, 2008