ABSTRACT

Following the classification elaborated by Levitsky and Way (2002) and Diamond (2002) it is possible to approximate the Iranian political system to the definition of “competitive authoritarian regime”. These regimes can be perfectly differentiated from democracy and absolutism because they combine authoritarian and democratic characteristics, like a certain degree of electoral competition in order to define the composition of executive and legislative bodies.

The Iranian electoral system is a perfect study case to observe how elections are useful to legitimize or delegitimize the government, and how seriously the political elite pay attention to the electoral procedures and final outcomes, encouraging the electoral participation, despite the fact that the irregularities and misinformation in electoral procedures and results publications are quite common in all the republican history, and in spite of the strong limitations for electoral participation.

Our hypothesis is that the function of the elections is to solve institutionally the differences among the political elite, and a way to gain legitimacy between the Iranians. The elite in his struggle for power is organized in semi-formal political, professional and religious associations and flexible electoral alliances that can change their support depending on the various electoral contests, or according to specific positions on issues mainly in the economic and political debates in the Majlis. Through this associations the elite participates in the electoral and institutional disputes. However, there is an informal mechanism of power behind the institutional network, structured around economic and political groups, mainly the mullahs from Qom, the bazaaris and more recently the sepah-e pasdaran. Most of the members of the elite are connected through familiar or regional links between them.

One of our conclusions is that the survival of these groups depends on their capacity to accumulate all kind of power resources. The State is the main power resource in Iran since the revolution. It controls the military power, the oil income, the mass media and the ideological and religious legitimacy (Izquierdo, 2009). With this scenario, the control of the elective institutions is one of the main battlefields in the zero sum power game among the different elite groups.

This is an on-going research project which preliminary results were presented at MESA 2010 in San Diego.