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POINT OF VIEW

IRAN'S EUPHORIC PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS: Is Rapprochement Possible?

Dr. Gholam R. Vatandoust*

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has frequently remarked that Iran is among the most democratic countries, with open and fair elections since its inception thirty-four years ago. The claim that Iran is a vibrant democracy is based on the fact that Iranians have gone to the ballot box on multiple occasions, voting for presidents, parliamentarians and city council members. The presidential election of June 14th with nearly 73% of the electorate participating is a case in point. However, what makes the Iranian elections non-democratic is the vetting of candidates by the Council of Guardians, consisting of twelve members, six of whom are clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader while the other six are jurists selected by the Parliament.¹ All are conservatives and all profess their loyalty and allegiance to the Supreme Leader.

The Guardian Council vets the candidates on the basis of expediency or *masleha*. With the non-existence of political parties, candidates participate on individual platforms, or coalesce into factions, in their efforts to muster more votes.² In the present elections alone there were over 860 candidates registered. In less than two weeks the Council reduced the number to eight, eliminating among a number of highly qualified candidates both Mr. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mr. Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaie, the latter a relative and a close confidant of President Ahmadinejad. Disqualification of Mr. Rafsanjani came as a big surprise because of his past position and stature within the Islamic Republic. Rafsanjani was

*Associate Professor, American University of Kuwait

a close companion of the late Ayatollah Khomeini and one of the founding fathers of the Islamic Republic. He served as President for eight years (1989-1997), was the leader of Parliament (Majlis), head of the Expediency Council and held numerous important positions ever since. In the process he managed, according to Forbes Magazine³ to become one of the richest men in the world, earning himself the nickname of Akbar Shah.⁴

The Candidates and the Unexpected Elections

By international standards, Iranian elections are often referred to as “selections.” However, the cycle of elections is significant primarily because of the nature of politics in Iran. By no means can Iran be classified as a totalitarian state, though undeniably it is authoritarian. As such, elections become the only outlet for public expression of anxieties and aspirations, regardless of to what degree the election process is “engineered.” But sadly, the cycle of elections in the Islamic Republic has generated brief periods of hope followed by prolonged periods of dismay. The candidates often make numerous promises none of which are delivered, simply because the “engineered” presidents are in no position to change policies. At one point former reformist president Mr. Khatami referred to the presidency as a second rate “managerial” office with very little authority behind it. The Power is with the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards who control the guns and the country’s immense wealth. They are almost always beyond the reach of the President and the judicial system. In fact, the head of the judiciary is also appointed by the Supreme Leader himself which leads to further inbreeding and prohibits the rise of an independent judicial system.⁵ Over the past thirty-four years, the power of the president has continued to decline while the powers of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards have increased.

The other mediocrity of the electoral system was the candidates themselves. They all had to profess their “absolute” and total commitment to the Supreme Jurisprudent, the Vali-e Faqih. To varying degrees they imply to have molded into the Vilayat, meaning they were wholly immersed into this peculiarly esoteric Shi’a phenomenon of the Vali-e Faqih.⁶ A new information which has thus emerged indicate that the President Elect, Mr. Rohani,⁷ wrote a letter of allegiance to the Ayatollah ten days prior to the elections reiterating his total commitment to the the Supreme Leader.

In more practical terms, all candidates claimed they will proceed with the nuclear negotiations and will push forward with their “just” demands to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes. They promised to resurrect not only Iran’s failing economy, but also its international stature and credibility. However, despite what seemed to be unanimity of consensus among candidates, there were deep seated differences, which became more apparent as the election day drew near.

Among the eight candidates approved by the Council of Guardians, two stepped aside, Haddad-Adel whose daughter is married to the Supreme Leader’s son, and Mohammad Reza Aref, who was the vice-President under the reformist President Khatami (1997-2005). The latter was perhaps the only genuine reformist candidate who stepped aside after Khatami recommended that only one should represent the combined moderate-reformist coalition, in which case Hassan Rohani seemed to have had broader appeal.

To the far right of all candidates was Saeed Jalili, who had presented himself as an independent. He was very popular among the Baseij, the ad hoc militia that continues to support the Supreme Leader. Jalili had his own vision of the “present world order.” His “new” theory of “generating doubt” (tardid), was based on his deep belief in conspiracy the-

ories, which stem from his years of service for the notorious secret police, the Etella'at. In this he was no different from Ahmadinejad, although unlike Ahmadinejad, he did not shoot from the hip. In one of the three televised debates he mentioned that the US government had commissioned films like *Argo* and *Lincoln* simply to denigrate Iran's international reputation. How and why he reached this conclusion is difficult to ascertain. However, one can assume that Mr. Jalili believes that Hollywood is directed by the US government, the CIA and Israel. This view is common among the present Iranian ruling elite and the Supreme Leader.

In outlining his foreign policy Jalili proudly announced that he would continue to maintain the existing "pressure" vis-à-vis the west, that he would create "waves" in the international system in order to be able to ride high, that "he would graft world economics, regional security and international politics with Iran's security," all this while trying to create a positive international image abroad.⁸

In fact, Jalili's controversial remarks on women only provoked Iranian women to turn out en masse and vote for Mr. Rohani who would have otherwise boycotted the elections. For Jalili, women's role is best served as "mother, teacher, preacher."

Jalili's utopia is indeed simplistic, demarcated in black and white, with no shades in between. According to him, we can either follow the teachings of the Sharia or reject it altogether. He has a medieval vision of the Islamic world, the choice between the righteous paths of Dar al-Islam (The World of Islam), or the world beyond the Islamic realm, the Dar al-Harb, the world of apostasy and kufur. The choice, according to Jalili, is robustly clear. One has only to choose.

Beyond these two main candidates were Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Ali Akbar Velayati, Mohsen Rezaie and Mohammad Qarazi, all of whom were closely tied to the Supreme Leader.⁹ However, the candidate that surprised everyone was Hassan Rohani, who seemed to lag behind only a week before the elections. He came to the forefront when he managed to present himself as one who would uphold the sensibilities and civility of the leaders of the Green Movement, Mir-Hosseini Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, who were under house arrest. When he was endorsed by the moderate leader Mr. Rafsanjani and the Reformist leader Mr. Khatami, his popularity increased further.

On the other hand, the conservatives were unable to agree on a single candidate. This allowed Rohani, the only representative from the centrist-reformist camp to emerge as the popular leader and the voice of the opposition. Thus a vote for Rohani was an expression of discontent against Ahmadinejad, and by association against Jalili. Although this was not a free and fair election by western standards, it was neither "engineered" nor was it a conspiracy. Instead within the limited options available to the electorate, Iranians came out to vote for the candidate representing the voice of moderation.

The Supreme Leader and the President-Elect

The Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei bent backwards to display his neutrality on June 14th. The 2009 Presidential election and his outright support for Ahmadinejad backfired and did not reflect well on his overall stature. Many lost faith when they saw him directly engaged, supporting Ahmadinejad and discrediting the Green Movement.

While it was speculated that the Supreme Leader would prefer Jalili as the next president simply for his devotion and total commitment, yet following the third round of presidential debates, when Velayati severely criticized Jalili and his nuclear negotiating team for

its failure to move forward, one can only conclude that perhaps Jalili was not necessarily the Leader's favorite choice.¹⁰ In a televised address the Supreme Leader made it clear that he had one vote to cast and no one would know his personal preference.¹¹

The Supreme Leader's main concern was to draw large crowds to the ballot box. In his final speech prior to election day on June 14th he called upon all Iranians, including those who do not support the Islamic regime to come forward and vote for the country, thus appealing to Iranian nationalism. After the elections he referred to the high turn out as a demonstration of public trust in the Islamic Republic, even by those who do not necessarily endorse it.¹² Such statements had never been heard before. Perhaps the Supreme Leader had been made aware of the pressing political and economic problems, and wanted to avoid another major domestic crisis like the Green Movement of June 2009. Beyond the political problems, the Supreme Leader was aware of the dire economic issues facing the country. The value of the Iranian Rial depreciated over 70% in the past year and 40% of the Iranians live below the poverty line.¹³ It was probable that the Supreme Leader was now ready to negotiate, but without losing face. Circumstances had compelled him to yield to domestic and international pressures.

However, despite the outcome of the elections, the Supreme Leader continues to have full control and support of all the major institutions and centers of power, none of which have publicly questioned or criticized his authority. Among these are the Guardian Council, Assembly of Experts, Parliament, Revolutionary Guards, Basej Paramilitary, Intelligence, and the Military. Over the years the unelected office of the Supreme Leader has built up shadow ministries that have veto power over the official ones represented by the elected President, a situation that will make the decision making process a difficult one to overcome.

The candidate that surprised everyone, referred to as the "Sheikh of Diplomacy," is Mr. Hassan Rohani. All the disenchanting groups and factions determined to boycott the elections switched over and fell in line to show their support for Mr. Rohani. He had served as the chief nuclear negotiator under Mr. Khatami from 2003-05 and had managed to keep the sanctions at bay during the negotiations.¹⁴ Rohani campaigned under the slogan, "government of proficiency and hope," frequently displaying a symbolic key indicating that he holds the key to solving Iran's problems¹⁵. He even promised to work towards lifting the house arrest on Mr. Mousavi and Mr. Karrubi and to work for the gradual release of all political prisoners.

The President-Elect will be working against numerous odds and his policies could easily be derailed. He will have to work with the shadow cabinet of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who has tremendous power and influence and is accountable to no one. The conservatives control practically all branches of government, including the judiciary, the Majlis and the media. Rohani's promise was and continues to be the voice of moderation, but the odds are difficult to overcome.

The other candidates, the so called "Principalists," or Conservatives, closely tied to the Supreme Leader, were divided among themselves. They had not been able to reach a consensus to step down in favor of the other. Earlier, Velayati, Qalibaf and Haddad-Adel had formed a coalition of 2+1 to precisely bow out on behalf of the best candidate. However, only Haddad-Adel kept his promise. On the other hand, Rohani, who was more moderate, had now been pushed to the forefront by the former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami to represent the moderates and the reformists. In the absence of a better candidate and by default, Mr. Rohani (a Centrist) had come to represent the voice of the opposition. What emerged was a new coalition of the Centrist with the Reformist. This Reformist-Centrist Alliance in Iranian politics was a new development which could be disconcerting to the Principalists (The Conservatives).¹⁶ Jalili's harsh statements of continued

resistance against the west had further helped improve Rohani's candidacy.

Mr. Rohani's supporters consisted of two groups, those who saw him as the only candidate who had come across with a measure of independence and who was cautiously critical of events of the past eight years and those who wanted change, particularly economic ones. Perhaps the Supreme Leader and his apparatus retreated tactically by deciding not to interfere in the electoral process, allowing Rohani to win in the first round. With only a slight manipulation however, the electoral process could have been dragged into the second round in which case the conservative candidates would have been reduced to a single individual, most likely Qalibaf, and through a small feat of engineering, he could have surfaced as the president-elect. This was exactly how Mr. Ahmadinejad managed to win the runoff election of 2005 against Mr. Rafsanjani.

Rohani's Prospects for a Rapprochement

Foremost, expectations about Mr. Rohani's ability to affect significant change within a short period of time should be tempered. Popular optimism runs high, while the task that lies ahead is immense. Rohani has vowed to pursue national reconciliation and to change the public image of the country internationally. Under Ahmadinejad the country was sanctioned six times by the UN. Certainly Rohani would try to prevent future sanctions and a change of course.

Unquestionably Rohani is a regime insider who has managed to operate and survive the system for the past thirty years. Like Khamenei himself, he is deeply committed to sustaining the Islamic Republic. However, he belongs to the "pragmatic conservatives" to which Rafsanjani belongs. Thus his policy is one of compromise and moderation. As such, Rohani is not expected to act significantly different from the previous presidents. Instead of democracy, moderation will usher in, opening the door for further negotiations.

Iran's power structure is complicated. It effectively has two presidents, and two cabinets. One is elected and the other is in the shadows. As Vali Nasr noted, "the way the government runs is that you deal with the president with the supreme leader sitting in the background. But you still have to deal with the president; you are negotiating with the supreme leader through him."¹⁷

Rohani's immediate problems are overwhelming. He will have to stabilize the economy and the markets, control the galloping inflation and the devaluation of the currency, reduce unemployment, assist the 40% that fall below the poverty line, and increase the degree of trust and hope that is now lacking. As Milani puts it, he won the presidency "precisely because he promised to bring a measure of rationality to Iran's chaotic politics. He pledged to improve Iran's deteriorating economic condition, respect human rights, release political prisoners, and replace Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policy with one of reengagement with the world."¹⁸

It is doubtful that Rohani can implement measurable change in the existing foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. Iran's foreign policy has gradually been molded over the past three decades. However, the President-Elect can begin the process of détente with the US, Europe and its regional partners almost immediately.

While Rohani may not have much influence over the nuclear program, he was elected on a mandate to moderate Iran's nuclear program. Public expectation of Rohani is to solve the nuclear standoff. He must introduce new negotiating techniques that would move diplomacy forward. It remains to be seen how adamant or flexible the Islamic Republic continues to be in opposing the US hegemony, particularly in the region, how much will Iran insist on denying Israel the right to exist, whether it will continue to support

Hezbollah and the Islamic Jihad openly and will it insist on training and providing arms to the Bashar Assad regime. These will continue to be the major foreign policy issues for Iran and if a change does take place, they will continue to be gradual and with discretion.

Yukiya Amano, director general of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), expressed his concern on the possible military dimensions to Iran's nuclear activity. What the west fears most is Iran's ever-growing number of efficient centrifuges and the soon-to-be operational plutonium separation facility at Arak. Amano expressed his impatience by stating that "Iran is making 'steady progress' in expanding its nuclear program despite international sanctions."¹⁹

Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a close associate of Mr. Rohani and a former diplomat, provided his advice to the future president of Iran. He wrote: "I suggest accepting the maximum level of transparency in cooperation with the IAEA and offering assurances to the P5+1 on 'no breakout' toward nuclear weapons."²⁰

The government was seeking a high turnout in order to create a "political epic" that the Supreme Leader had repeatedly called for²¹. A high turnout would reflect positively on the legitimacy of the regime. In all non-democratic systems, elections serve as a means of political endorsement and Iran is no exception.

There was hardly any tampering with the ballot box in this round of elections, though not because of a rising sense of honesty. The government knew very well that it was sitting on a powder keg of public frustration and dissent. With a galloping inflation of over 30%, rising unemployment, monthly loss of over five billion dollars in oil revenues, and a growing civil unrest,²² the regime was fearful of mass protest and did not wish to see a repeat of the Green Movement of June 2009.

Will Rohani succeed as the next President? Not without the tacit approval and support of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary guards who hold the true reins of power. The theocratic state needs a follower to follow, not a President to lead. In the past, the Supreme Leader had the final say in Iran's nuclear and foreign policies. At best the President can administer the domestic affairs and the economy. Even that would be a difficult task since there is no transparency, accountability or meritocracy within the political structure. What exists is a system of political and personal loyalty. The new President will have to make his debut with discretion, and approval of the Supreme Leader as well as the watchful eyes of the public. The Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards are mindful of anyone who makes waves. All in all, a smooth transition of power and an obedient president are called for.

Iranians voted because they wanted to see a system that was accountable to them and not one that created myths to obscure their choice. They voted for the candidate who seemed to reach out broadly to all groups and layers of society and who seemingly placed people above the nuclear issue.

The current Rohani euphoria won't last long. Rohani's victory is unlikely to alter immediately the conditions needed for a rapprochement with the west. His victory is perhaps the best possible outcome for the Islamic Republic to pull itself out of a gridlock and pursue a gradual policy of détente with the United States and the world. Whether the US will follow suit and engage in a process of dialogue and confidence building remains to be seen. The liberal democrats in Washington have already been referring to Rohani as "Ayatollah Gorbachev,"²³ perhaps hoping that he will do what Gorbachev did for the former Soviet Union, bring change, perhaps an implosion, from within. Hopefully US will also display a gesture of good will by allowing Iran to participate in the Geneva Conference on the future of Syria. US could begin unraveling the sanctions that have been imposed over

many years, thus assuring the Supreme Leader that it does not intend to bring about regime change, and that it does recognize Iran as a legitimate regional player.²⁴ According to Ali Vaez, “the Iranian people have opted for change, and the Iranian regime has now countenanced it. The ball is in President Obama’s court.”^[25] Both sides need to work for a détente. Perhaps a rapprochement is possible after all. But it will take time and requires concerted efforts on both sides.

R E F E R E N C E S

1. See Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran. Roots and Results of Revolution*. Yale University Press, 2003, p. 248.
2. In the 11th Presidential elections there were at least six identifiable factions that competed with one another that broke the unity vote among the Principalists. It included those who rallied behind the Supreme Leader (2+1), The Perseverance Front, the Committee of Five referred to as the Conservative Principalist group, The Ahmadinejad faction, the Rafsanjani faction, and the Reformist faction supported by Mr. Khatami and the remnants of the Green Movement.
3. "Millionaire Mullahs," (21/07/2003) http://www.forbes.com/free_forbes/2003/0721/056.html
4. <http://www.spiegel.de/international/spiegel/0,1518,360535-2,00.html>
5. Hadi Ghaemi, "The Islamic Judiciary," *The Iran Primer*. United States Institute of Peace. <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/islamic-judiciary>
6. See Ali M. Ansari, *Modern Iran*. Pearson Education Limited, 2007, pp. 282-3, 303-4.
7. The President-Elect spells his name as Rohani. The other two popular versions are Rouhani and Rowhani.
8. Pew Reports has just published overwhelming negative views on Iran across the world. See the full report on www.pewglobal.org
9. Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf had a long service career in the Revolutionary Guards and the police force. He is currently the Mayor of Tehran and is noted as a capable technocrat with total dedication to the Supreme Leader. Dr. Ali Akbar Velayati, on the other hand, was Iran's Foreign Minister for sixteen years. Most of the assassination abroad took place during his term as Foreign Minister. There is a warrant issued against him by the Interpol. Mohsen Rezaie was also the head of the Revolutionary Guards during the eight years of Iran-Iraq war. He too is popular among the older leading members of the Revolutionary Guards. Mohammad Qarazi was a former oil minister and a minister of telecommunications.
10. Yasmin Alem, "Jalili a shoe-in for Iranian president? Not so fast," (13/06/2013) <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/13/jalili-a-shoe-in-for-iranian-president-not-so-fast/>
11. Omid Memarian, "Khamenei Loyalists Slug It Out Over Handling of Nuclear Diplomacy," <http://iranwire.com/en/blogs/omid2/943>
12. Reuters, "Iran's Khamenei says nuclear talks easy if enemy not stubborn," June 26, 2013.
13. Gholam R. Vatandoust, "End in sight to the Iranian nuclear quagmire?" (April 7, 2013) www.yourmiddleeast.com/.../gholam-r-vatandoust-end-in-sight-to-the-nuclear-quagmire...
14. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, *Iranian Nuclear Crisis, a Memoir*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012, pp.105-106.
15. "Iranian Candidate's Documentary Sets Him Apart," *Al-Monitor* <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/w013/06/hassan-rouhani-ir...>
16. Farhi, "Why the Reformist-Centrist Alliance in Iran is Important." See <http://www.lobelog.com/why-the-reformis-centrist-alliance-in-iran-is-important/>
17. "Will Rouhani Be Enough? 12 Questions for Vali Nasr," <http://iranwire.com/en/projects/1131>
18. Mohsen Milani, "Rouhani's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Affairs*, p. 2.

19. "Iran nuclear program advances despite sanctions: IAEA chief,"
<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/06/17/us-iran-nuclear-iaea-idUSBRE95G0N720130617>
20. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, "Iran's Next President and The Third Nuclear Strategy: <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/iran-next-president-nuclear-strategy.html>
21. <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/06/iran-elections-polling-vote-tally-guardian-committee-counts.html#ixzz2WCywnVui>
22. Salehi-Isfahani, "Economic Issues Remain Murky as Iranians Go to the Polls," <http://www.lobelog.com/economic-issues-remain-murky-as-iranians-go-to-the-polls/>
23. The reference to Rohani as Ayatollah Gorbachev is in essence a comparison with the Reformist President Khatami who was first referred to as Ayatollah Gorbachev by Thomas L. Friedman of the New York Times for Khatami's political reforms which practically broke the regime from within, very much like what Gorbachev did with his perestroika and glasnost reform policies in the former Soviet Union. See: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/09/08/.../waiting-for-ayatollah-gorbachev.html>
24. Omid Memarian, "Rouhani's Victory: A Game Changer or the Same Old Game?" (23/06/2013) <http://iranwire.com/en/projects/1174>
25. Ali Vaez, "Time Ripe for Iran Reset," (24/06/2013) <http://globalpublicsquare.blogs.cnn.com/2013/06/24/time-ripe-for-iran-reset/>

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