

Iran's presidential election: a distorted western perspective?

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The election of a religious leader at the presidency of the Islamic Republic of Iran contradicts many of the analyses of western media and experts on Iranian politics. So-called neoconservative experts have been trying to portray the election's outcome as a direct consequence of the sanction policy officially designed to provoke a reversal in Iranian nuclear policy. Most western experts on Iran insisted on applying the 2009 presidential elections process' model to the 2013 contest, implying that the result would be engineered by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This conviction was crucial in presenting Saeed Jalili as the most likely winner of the presidential election. Nevertheless, beyond the Iranian case, the final result primarily indicated the methodological limit of any political analysis pretending to predict the result of an election process. Moreover, one of the problems with the western view towards Iranian politics is the ideological prism through which Iran is portrayed in western media, most particularly in France¹. This view insisted on the rise of the security apparatus inside the Islamic state and the manipulation of popular feelings by the political elite in order to enhance the state's authority. Without denying the importance of the security apparatus in the functioning of the Islamic state, especially after the protests of June 2009, it is important to note that the ruling elite was still confident enough to allow the election of the candidate most opposed to the increasing security atmosphere during the two mandates of Mahmud Ahmadinejad (2005-13).

A participative theocracy

Also, many western-based experts forget that despite the theocratic and

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ISBN : 978-2-36567-172-9
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¹ For instance, *Le Monde* covered the Iranian presidential election extensively insisting in its editing line on the insignificance of an election process in a religious dictatorship.

authoritarian nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran², a participative dimension still exists. The name of the reformist faction, “Participation” (*Mosharekat*), is worth mentioning in this regard. In other words, the Islamic Republic of Iran is neither a Republic nor an Islamic Democracy but a participative theocracy. The election of Hassan Rouhani is a reminder of the necessity for the Islamist establishment to rely on popular participation through an election process in an authoritarian framework (the Guardian Council vetting process). It is also a signal of the will of the majority of Iranian public opinion to be realistic and to use their vote as a means to influence the future of their country. This election is also a confirmation of clerical weight as a social corporation inside the Islamic state. The fact that Hassan Rouhani is a cleric confirms the limit of any analysis highlighting the evolution of the Islamic Republic towards authoritarian normalization through the rise of the Revolutionary Guard. Military forces remain under clerical control through the revolutionary superstructure: consequently, it is clearly an advantage for Hassan Rouhani to be a cleric in order to face the challenge of imposing the Presidency as an independent centre of power in front of the office of the Supreme Leader (*beyt-e rahbari*). Hassan Rouhani’s strong personality, in comparison to the mild character of former reformist President Khatami, his past experience as a member of the political elite since the revolution, and his previous position as a member of the main institutional body in charge of foreign policy (Supreme National Security Council) are also all assets in influencing the decision-making process at the top level of the Islamic state.

The narrative of the success of sanctions

After highlighting the meaningless dimension of organizing a presidential election in a religious dictatorship, the neoconservative view of Iran focuses on the role of western sanctions in influencing the election result. According to this narrative, sanctions were decisive in shaping the election results. It is surprising to hear this analysis from the very same analysts explaining that the election is meaningless given the specific nature of the Islamic regime. The dire economic conditions inside Iran are the result of both western unilateral sanctions and increased mismanagement during Ahmadinejad’s two terms as president. Therefore, Rouhani’s victory is best explained by his acknowledgment of the real state of the Iranian economy, breaching a taboo that on the one hand had the political elite embellishing the economic situation and, on the other, radicals who did not hesitate to deny the role of economic sanctions in the downgrading of the economic condition of the majority of the population. This is then the victory of the most realistic candidate rather than the direct consequence of economic external pressures.

Contrary to the regime change objectives promoted by the most radical supporters of the sanction policy against Iran in the West, the outcome of this presidential election is “not regime change in Iran – but it is a game-changer”.³ The hurdle of Ahmadinejad’s controversial personality is now removed and the new country’s

² Houchang E. Chehabi, “Religion and Politics in Iran: How Theocratic is the Islamic Republic?,” *Daedalus* 120 (Summer 1991): 69-91.

³ Vali Nasr, “Regime Change Obama Can Believe In”, *Foreign Policy*, 16 June 2013. Available: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2013/06/16/regime_change_iran_nuclear_weapons_deal?page=full

representative on the world stage is fully able to smartly defend Iranian interests. Additionally, Rouhani's election conveyed a popular message to the system (*nezam*) that there is a need to rethink the relationship between Iran and the world. In other words, a more realistic approach is required to save the country from further downgrading the country's economic condition. Economic issues are crucial in explaining the outcome of Rouhani's electoral success. Nevertheless, in my view, it is the result of a popular aspiration to a more realistic approach in balancing Iranian nuclear objectives and economic national interests. Indeed, this was Rouhani's promise as a candidate. His ability as a president to remove the two main hurdles hindering the transformation of Iran into a truly emerging country, namely the tightening of the sanction regime and the mismanagement of the economy, remains to be seen. The prospect of a paradigm shift in the relations between the West and Iran from confrontation to cooperation will depend on the ability of moderates and realists of both sides to reduce the influence of the radicals on the decision-making process.

The idea of “surprise” as a methodological shortcoming

There are two main factors underlying this recurrent idea of “surprise” in the analysis of Iranian politics. First, the impossibility of predicting the political future of Iran is a resilient fact 34 years after the (almost) unpredicted Islamic revolution of 1978-79. Second, one has to consider the inability of social scientists to apply permanent explicative models in order to explain the functioning of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In this regard, the first “surprise” for political analysts took its roots in the first election of Mahmud Ahmadinejad, a member of the principalist faction (*osulgarayan*), in 2005. This was a political event contradicting the analytical model applied to the contemporary history of the Islamic Republic based on the *ideal-type* of the French revolutionary process after 1789. Following this political model, the Islamic Republic of Iran should have been gradually moving from a period of terror to a Thermidorian phase. After the death of its founder, the Islamic Republic went through a Thermidor but the election of Ahmadinejad reduced the accuracy of the comparative approach between the two revolutionary processes. Indeed, it is more relevant to consider the Islamic Republic of Iran as a *sui generis* system. Attempts to apply a political label such as “Islamic Democracy”, “totalitarian regime” or “popular democracy” to the Islamic Republic can be fruitful from a theoretical perspective but will never provide a fixed narrative to understanding the political dynamics in contemporary Iran.

The issue of national reconciliation

Hassan Rouhani's election is both a systemic evolution – an attempt to turn the page of the 2009 so-called *Fitna*, and the manifestation of the will of the majority of Iranian public opinion in favour of the integration of their country in the globalized world. The new leadership will probably try to build a coalition from the pragmatic conservatives to the reformist factions. The political elite are aware of the need to address the lingering problem of internal divisions which have been hindering the system's efficiency since the death of ayatollah Khomeyni (1989) and reached their climax with the rise of the Green movement after June 2009. An indispensable condition to

the success remains a regime evolution from permanent internal infighting (factionalism) towards a more conciliatory decision-making process allowing the executive power to make positive decisions to favour Iran's integration to the "international community". The new president's political programme is based on Rafsanjani's interpretation of Khomeinist ideological tenets. The politics are based on developmentalist ideas: the defence of pragmatism in implementing foreign policy and in economic affairs in order to avoid any political and institutional democratization agenda. In this regard, Rouhani also opposed the so-called militarization of political activities in Iran following guidelines provided by Ayatollah Khomeini.⁴ After his electoral victory in the first round, Rouhani stated that his election was allowed by the Supreme Leader's speech the day before the election: "It is Supreme Leader's last speech which allowed such a victory for Iran".⁵ Indeed, the day before Election Day, the Supreme Leader, for the first time since he took office in 1989, acknowledged the fact that there is an Iranian opposition to the Islamic Republic of Iran: "It is possible that some do not support the Islamic regime but whatever their reasons, they should, at least, support their country".⁶

This is a new discourse highlighting the awareness of the participative theocracy of its own democratic shortcomings and weaknesses. Consequently, the mission of the new president is to enhance the legitimacy of the Islamic system (*nezam*) and to increase popular participation inside the country. Given the pragmatism of Hassan Rouhani, he will also have a difficult task in managing his personal relationship with the supreme leader while increasing popular adhesion to the system. Nevertheless, during the first month, the Supreme Leader will probably offer him some room to manoeuvre as a reward of his successful presidential campaign that brought people to vote. Therefore, it remains to be seen if the West is ready to compromise or if, as an Iranian ideological conservative candidate (Haddad-Adel) explained during the presidential campaign debate regarding foreign policy, the nuclear programme is only a pretext used by the West to promote regime change in Iran.

⁴ Rouhani stated that "The Imam further noted that the armed forces should not be involved in the activities of political parties." See "We Must Care for the World Public Opinion," Center for Strategic Studies, October 6, 2009, <http://www.csr.ir/Center.aspx?lng=en&subid=-1&cntid=2006>

⁵ Discourse of Hassan Rouhani giving thanks to his electoral team. Tehran, 22 June 2013.

⁶ Supreme Leader, ayatollah Khamenei's discourse, 12 June 2013.