



ROWHANI'S CHALLENGE

Electoral Authoritarianism in the Islamic Republic

By Nader Hashemi

In the lead up to Iran's 2013 presidential election, Ali Khamenei, the country's all-powerful supreme leader, declared that this election was the most important in the history of the Islamic Republic. He predicted that it would be a "political epic" (*hamaseh-ye siyasi*) unlike any other.¹ Now that the election is over and the ballots have been counted, it is clear that Khamenei's prediction was correct. It was a milestone of sorts, but not in the way that he and his hardline supporters had hoped for. The surprise win of Hassan Rowhani—who campaigned on a platform of "wisdom, moderation and awareness over extremism,"² and who offered a vision of the future that contrasted sharply with the current policies and political trajectory of the Islamic Republic—has stunned Iran's political establishment and baffled Iran watchers, while rejuvenating the country's opposition Green Movement in the process.³

Immediately after the results were announced, the streets of Iran's major cities were filled with Rowhani supporters, who celebrated all night. A massive and spontaneous countrywide street party unfolded. Defiant and jubilant slogans filled the warm summer night's air: "Moussavi we have redeemed your vote," "Political prisoners must be released," "Ahmadi, Ahmadi, the Green Movement is alive," "Salutations to Khatami, Greetings to Rowhani." According to one report, "images of Moussavi were more prominent even than those of the newly elected Rowhani."⁴

Leaders around the world to varying degrees have cautiously welcomed these election results. The departure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad from the international stage is arguably a key reason for this response, but what has also been reassuring is Rowhani's campaign pledge to reduce regional and international tensions and to pursue a new Iranian foreign policy based on reconciliation, mutual trust, transparency and peace. Only Canada and Israel took a different view. Canadian Foreign Minister John Baird described the election as "effectively meaningless,"

◁ Hassan Rowhani at his office, Tehran, April 24, 2013. *Meysam/Demotix/Corbis*

while Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lamented Rowhani's victory, pointing out that it would now be harder to rally the world against Iran's nuclear program.⁵

How can we best interpret Iran's recent presidential poll? How does this election compare with other elections that have taken place in post-revolutionary Iran, and what does it tell us about the internal politics of the country? What does Rowhani's victory mean for the future of the country and for the myriad domestic and foreign policy problems confronting the Islamic Republic? It is relevant to address these questions in the context of the debate on political legitimacy in Iran today. Iran's 2013 presidential election is an example of "electoral authoritarianism," whereby ruling elites elaborate a façade of democratic competition in order to address a crisis of legitimacy, pacify reformists, conceal the coercive mechanisms of state power, and ultimately to reproduce their hegemony over the domestic political sphere.⁶

While Hassan Rowhani's win is an important development, by itself it does not alter the basic structure of power inside Iran. On all the key issues that matter to the international community—the nuclear question, Iranian foreign policy in the region, respect for basic human rights and democracy—the final decision remains in the hands of a narrow group of actors whose power remains undiminished. Skepticism that a single presidential election will change the political trajectory of the Islamic Republic is certainly warranted. There are many unknowns, however, that might lead to surprises down the road.

Fair, but Not Free

Elections have always been important events in post-revolutionary Iran. Since 1979, regular presidential and parliamentary elections have taken place and, as of 1999, city and village council elections have also occurred at regular, four-year intervals. These elections have had high voter turnouts by both regional and international standards. Elections have been used by Iran's clerical leaders to showcase to the world its domestic legitimacy and to offset criticisms of Iranian foreign and domestic policy. Elections have become more important for the Iranian regime as its international isolation has increased over the years and its confrontation with the West has deepened. A host of issues have been controversial, foremost among them Iran's nuclear program. The message from Tehran to the West has been straightforward: "criticize us all you want but our policies are supported by our people," or so the regime would have us believe.

Elections have also served a domestic purpose. They have helped to stabilize the regime by balancing factional conflict among ruling elites. This conflict has only deepened and expanded with the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. Today, deep divisions exist among prominent members of this group over the future direction of the country. More importantly, elections have played a critical role in channeling, managing, and deflecting rising social discontent among a wide cross-section of

society. This applies especially to the urban middle class and Iran's burgeoning youth population, whose demands for real and substantive democracy are increasingly difficult to suppress or ignore.

Despite the frequency of these national polls, for most of Iran's post-revolutionary history, elections have generally been fair *but not free*. All potential candidates are carefully vetted by an unelected Guardian Council for ideological loyalty to the regime. True, after this process is complete, there has usually been a close correlation between the number of ballots cast and the final announced results. But this began to change in 2000, when Iran's ruling oligarchy was faced with its biggest internal challenge since the revolution: the rise of a reform movement that sought to democratize the Islamic Republic from within.

Having won the presidency and the city and village council elections, the reformists were on the verge of another landslide victory in the 2000 parliamentary elections. This was when the first sign of explicit vote-rigging was witnessed. The Guardian Council delayed releasing the results, repeatedly declaring hundreds of thousands of votes invalid, in order to grant Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (who was then allied with the hardliners) one of the thirty seats allotted to the district of Tehran. It was hoped that if he could make it into parliament he would be a leading candidate for parliamentary speaker and would thus slow down the reformist tsunami that was sweeping the country. The electoral fraud at this time was so blatant, in part due to a vibrant press, that even after he was illicitly given a seat in parliament, Rafsanjani resigned in embarrassment—a move that highlighted the dubious nature of the process.⁷

In 2004, hoping to put an end to the reformist project, the Guardian Council banned thousands of reformist candidates from the parliamentary election on ideological grounds. This included eighty sitting MPs who had already been vetted by the same Guardian Council four years earlier. The reason for the ban was unequivocal: during their time in parliament they had demonstrated a serious commitment to democratization.

A year later in the 2005 presidential election, the Guardian Council again banned all the leading reformists. This ban was subsequently overturned by the supreme leader, after student demonstrations and a public outcry threatened to affect voter turnout. During the second round run-off, in part due to the political apathy of the middle class and a youth vote frustrated by the slow pace of reform, an obscure politician by the name of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected. Ahmadinejad ran on a populist platform with strong backing from the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps. He won the presidency but not before allegations of vote-rigging resurfaced. Two of the leading presidential candidates at this time, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mehdi Karroubi, both penned open letters of protest alleging significant vote tampering and rigging. In the interests of regime stability, however, no investigations were

launched and the plaintiffs refused to pursue the matter.⁸ This issue of electoral integrity was to re-surface four years later, however, with enormous consequences for the stability of the Iranian regime.

The 2009 presidential elections were a turning point for the internal legitimacy and stability of the Islamic Republic.⁹ The most blatant vote-rigging in the history of the Islamic Republic took place at this time. Fearing a reformist comeback and based on a surge of support for Mir-Hossein Moussavi in the final weeks of the campaign, an elaborate electoral fraud was concocted and imposed on the Iranian people.¹⁰ While the full story of this event has yet to be fully chronicled, the motives of the Iranian regime in staging this electoral coup were the same: the threat of democracy had to be contained and terminated. In this latest battle, the Iranian regime ultimately prevailed through methods of state-sanctioned repression, Stalinist show trials of opposition leaders, mass arrests and incarcerations, political assassinations, and the construction of new and elaborate conspiracy theories that linked George Soros, the British government, and Saudi petrodollars to Iranian reformists in a plot to overthrow the Iranian regime. A series of continuous street protests that lasted six months shook the Islamic Republic to its foundations. Feuding between prominent members of Iran's ruling elite and clerical community were on public display, and according to General Mohammad Ali Jafaari, the senior commander of the Revolutionary Guards, this series of events posed a greater threat to regime stability and political order than Saddam Hussein's 1980 invasion of Iran and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War (1980-88).¹¹

As a result of these events, political authoritarianism deepened at all levels and a massive crisis of legitimacy set in after the election. Ali Saeedi, the special representative of the supreme leader to the Revolutionary Guards, implicitly acknowledged this crisis when he noted that a key reason why there could not be a trial of the arrested leaders of the Green Movement was because of their popularity within Iranian society, including among senior clerics. This implied that their prosecution could lead to political instability.¹²

Further evidence of a legitimacy crisis was revealed by the Revolutionary Guards when they announced that 90 percent of their resources in Tehran were devoted to preventing a "soft war." This term is used by the regime to refer to a foreign plot but in truth it is a code word that is employed to silence pro-democracy activity, in particular repressing civil society and preventing the free flow of information from entering the country from abroad.¹³ The case of BBC Persian Television (a service of the British Broadcasting Corporation, funded by the British government but editorially independent) perfectly exemplifies this crisis of legitimacy.

Launched in January 2009, the award-winning television service is accessible via the Internet and satellite transmission, and is geared toward a global Persian-speaking

audience primarily inside Iran. BBC Persian Television quickly distinguished itself by virtue of its high quality programming, state-of-the-art technology, and professional journalism. It is for this reason that it became extremely popular, well-respected, and widely watched among Iranians.¹⁴ The response from the Iranian regime amplifies and reveals its legitimization crisis. It is not an exaggeration to state that, from the outset, Iran's clerical leaders have been particularly obsessed with BBC Persian Television, and for all the right reasons. Not only is the service routinely and repeatedly criticized by official state and hardline media as part of an external plot to destabilize Iran, but its satellite transmissions to Iran are regularly jammed. More recently, however, as a way of pressuring Iranian staff to quit their jobs in London, the Iranian regime has begun intimidating, harassing, and even arresting their family members who reside in Iran.¹⁵ All of this begs the question: Why? What has BBC Persian Television done to have invoked this type of reaction, and what does this tell us about the Islamic Republic? The answer is unsurprising. BBC Persian Television reports the news factually and accurately, entertains a range of perspectives, and regularly debates issues that are relevant to contemporary Iranian politics and society. It is precisely for these reasons that the Iranian regime cannot tolerate its existence.

Iran and the Arab Spring

Iran's 2013 presidential poll was shaped by a number of intersecting developments at the international, regional, and domestic levels. Internationally, Western criticism and economic sanctions over Iran's nuclear program were key factors. Domestically, the fallout from the 2009 electoral coup deepened the crisis of legitimacy facing the Iranian regime. Regionally, however, the Arab Spring was an important development. It qualitatively changed the moral and political context of the Middle East, and this has had serious consequences for the Iranian regime's approach to the 2013 elections.

One of the chief consequences of the Arab Spring has been that, for the first time in history, a global spotlight has been directed toward the region that highlights the voices of pro-democracy movements and exposes the behavior of dictatorial regimes. Sensitive to this new development, and not wanting to be equated with other repressive regimes facing internal insurrections, the Iranian leadership officially embraced the Arab Spring when it first emerged in Tunisia and Egypt. It attempted to own these uprisings by claiming this was the dawn of a new "Islamic Awakening," inspired by the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the political theology of Ayatollah Khomeini.¹⁶

The problem with this narrative is that the participants of these revolts, both secular and religious elements, have explicitly repudiated this claim. In fact, Islamist parties and intellectuals have pointed to Turkey and Erdoğan as their political model, not to Iran and Khamenei. Secondly, the Iranian regime has been placed in the awkward

position of publicly celebrating the Arab Spring while cracking down internally on similar protests at home. In February 2011, the Green Movement called for demonstrations in solidarity with Tunisia and Egypt, where a common street slogan was “Mubarak, Ben Ali, now it’s the turn of Seyed Ali [Khamenei].” These protests were crushed and the leaders of the Green Movement were placed under house arrest, where they remain today. This event was a tremendous embarrassment for the Iranian regime, and its timing could not have been worse. And then came Syria.

When the Arab Spring spread to Syria, Tehran found itself in the awkward position of opposing a popular revolution while backing one of the most brutal regimes in the region. This has led to a significant loss of Iran’s soft power in the Middle East, where it formerly enjoyed considerable popularity among the Sunni masses for its opposition to American and Israeli policies.¹⁷ One small part of this story, which highlights the political contortions that Tehran has performed, took place in August 2012, when newly elected Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi travelled to Tehran for the Non-Aligned Movement summit meeting. Iran’s leaders were thrilled about Morsi’s visit, but to their embarrassment, parts of his keynote speech at the conference had to be censored, resulting in a public relations disaster. Morsi’s reference to rebels fighting a repressive regime was deliberately altered by the official state media to make it seem as if he were referring to Bahrain and not Syria.¹⁸

“A Vote for the Islamic Republic”

As Iran’s leaders have repeatedly emphasized, during and after the election, the primary goal of the 2013 election was to encourage maximum voter turnout. The main audience was the West and the message they were hoping to transmit was that the Islamic Republic of Iran enjoys broad internal legitimacy. According to Khamenei, a “maximum turnout at the ballot box is more important than anything else for the country.” If the nation voted in huge numbers this “will prove its firm relationship and connection with the Islamic system and will once again make the enemy unfulfilled and hopeless.” He also observed that a “vote for any candidate is a vote for the Islamic Republic. It’s a vote of confidence in the system and the mechanisms of the election.”¹⁹ His concern about poor voter turnout reached new levels when, for the first time, he acknowledged there were people in the country who did not support the Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, he appealed to them to vote in the elections, in the name of the national interest. Doing so, he argued, would strengthen Iran against its foreign enemies.²⁰

Six months before the presidential election, two revealing statements by senior regime officials highlighted the anxiety of Iran’s leaders toward the forthcoming election. On January 8, 2013, Ali Saeedi gave an interview to the Iranian Students’ News

Agency, where he stated it was the responsibility of the guards to “rationally and logically engineer the elections.”²¹ This led to a huge outcry and debate about the validity of this election. Even Ahmadinejad jumped into the fray, fearing that these comments were directed at him, where he famously stated that “anyone who wants to manage the people, the people will manage them [instead].”²²

Coincidentally, on the same day, Khamenei delivered a speech in Qom where he lashed out at those people, both inside and outside the country, who continued to speak about “free elections” in Iran. He stated: “It is obvious that the election must be free. Have not the more than thirty free elections over the past three decades been free? In which country are elections more free than in Iran?” Khamenei then pointed to why he thought a public debate on this topic was harmful: “Be careful that your statements do not dash the hopes of the people toward the elections. In which country are there no considerations for the qualifications [of candidates]? Why do you stress so much on this issue and try to create the idea in the thoughts of the people that participation in the election is futile?”²³

This set the tone for a major policy initiative by the Islamic Republic to ban any public discussion of “free elections.” Raising this topic, it was officially announced, was aiding and abetting the enemies of Iran, and was tantamount to a form of sedition. Revolutionary Guard Commander Yadollah Javani led the charge with a lead article in the guards’ weekly paper, *Sobh-e Sadegh*, titled: “Is the Slogan of ‘Free Election’ the Code Word for Another Sedition?”²⁴ The answer he gave was yes. Hardline clerical hawk and chairman of the Guardian Council, Ahmad Jannati, weighed in on the topic during the official Friday prayer sermon, where he identified Hashemi Rafsanjani as a leading culprit in this alleged plot. He thundered: “To those who consider themselves seasoned politicians and who held senior positions in government, are you not ashamed that you use the same language as the foreign enemies of our regime and you repeat the words of outsiders?”²⁵

Similarly, 219 members of the hardline-controlled parliament signed a statement of support endorsing Khamenei’s criticism of the free elections debate. Part of their statement read: “We warn all those domestic voices and broadcasters who call for free elections to learn from what happened to the other seditionists and remind all parties, groups, personalities etc. not to remain silent over this new sedition, to come forward and denounce this new sedition, thus denying a revival of the seditionists.”²⁶

As the presidential election approached, the Iranian regime began to tighten the screws on civil society. Reformist journalists were arrested, publications were shut down, satellite jamming and internet censorship increased, and new restrictions were placed on foreign journalists. A special working group to monitor the elections was established, supervised by the head of the Iranian judiciary, which listed the following

as criminal offences: any publication that tries to persuade people to boycott or limit their participation in the election; strikes or sit-ins related to the election; creating anxiety in the public mind about the elections; the public discussion of controversial issues related to ethnic or racial minorities; the publication of opinion polls about the election or the candidates; forms of political satire mocking the elections or any of the candidates.²⁷ In justifying these new measures, Iran's minister of intelligence, Heidar Moslehi, stated that the goal was to "prevent the emergence of sedition before the elections."²⁸ The word "sedition" is a code word for the Green Movement or pro-democracy activity more generally.

On May 21, Iranian state television announced the names of the candidates who were eligible to run for president. Of the 686 people who registered to run, only eight passed the scrutiny of the Guardian Council, most of whom were strong allies of the supreme leader.²⁹ Not only were women explicitly banned from running, but a former president, Rafsanjani, was also excluded.³⁰ Since 2009, Rafsanjani as well as another former president, Mohammad Khatami, has been accused of complicity in trying to destabilize the Iranian regime by backing the Green Movement. They are viewed as insufficiently loyal to the Islamic Republic to be trusted with the office of the presidency lest they unleash popular forces that might lead to a repeat of the 2009 pro-democracy protests that rocked Iran. This fact was publicly acknowledged by Mohammad Esmail Kowsari, a member of the Majlis National Security and Foreign Policy Committee. He explained one of the key problems with Hashemi Rafsanjani was that his repeated calls for "free elections" were based on international standards of elections and this was not in line with the supreme leader's opinion. "Unfortunately the standards of Mr. Hashemi regarding issues related to election are the standards and criteria of imperialist countries," he explained, "whose elections only represent the views of certain classes of society, and the majority of the people, especially the lower class, are not represented."³¹

The real prerequisite for running for high office in the Islamic Republic was publicly stated by the regime as the elections approached: loyalty to the supreme leader was the main criterion. This point has frequently been emphasized in the wake of the 2009 elections, and as Iran's crisis of legitimacy has deepened, the same point has been repeatedly proclaimed by the senior leaders of the regime. For example, at the weekly official Friday prayer sermon on December 21, 2012, Ayatollah Mohammed Emami Kashani affirmed that the "the future president must answer to the call of the Leader and move in his direction."³² A few weeks later at the same weekly gathering, amidst the furor over the "free election" debate and attempts to ban it, the hawkish cleric, Ayatollah Ahmad Khatami elaborated a little further on the topic: "If it were not for the supreme leader's [efforts at preventing sedition], this revolution would have been destroyed," he stated. "So do not go under the flag of parties, factions and

groups; instead look only toward the supreme leader and work with him, because in Islam we do not have political parties and factions and that which will neutralize seditions is obedience to the supreme leader.”³³

In sum, contrary to claims by several popular U.S. commentators on Iran that these elections were fair (Hooman Majd), or that the “election was a real contest” (Flynt and Hillary Mann Leverett), in truth they were arguably the least free and most unfair elections in the history of the Islamic Republic.³⁴ More accurately, this exercise can be described as a textbook case of what scholars have called “electoral authoritarianism”, whereby ruling elites seek to present the image of free and fair elections while, in fact, these elections are a mechanism to block genuine democratization and perpetuate their rule.

Authoritarian regimes, however, are different from each other. Iran’s authoritarian political system co-exists with elements of democracy and totalitarianism to produce a unique brand. When it comes to national elections, the regime, in recent years, has attempted to accomplish two simultaneous goals: to ensure that candidates loyal to the authoritarian underpinnings of the Islamic Republic get elected (and democratic voices are excluded), while also attempting to ensure a high voter turnout. There is considerable tension between these two objectives. In order to accomplish the second, the regime is forced to tolerate a small degree of political pluralism among a carefully vetted group.

The Deep State

Iran’s pro-democracy movement has welcomed the election of Hassan Rowhani. Many members of the movement remain in a state of euphoria, partly because of their ability to mobilize support for the one candidate with whom the Iranian hardliners were most uncomfortable with. They view this election result as small yet significant victory in the struggle for democracy because the Iranian regime has been forced to make a tactical concession due to pressure from below.³⁵ There are now huge expectations of Iran’s new president-elect. Will he be able to live up to them? A sense of Iran’s recent political history suggests cause for caution rather than optimism.

Hassan Rowhani is a product of Iran’s national security and foreign policy community. Over the years, he has held several important positions. The most prominent of these has been as head of the National Security Council and chief nuclear negotiator from 2003–05. While he is not in the inner circle of the supreme leader, he is a trusted member of the regime, particularly on matters related to foreign affairs. Ideologically, he is a pragmatic-conservative and close to the worldview of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani and the *Kargozaran-e Sazandegi* (Executives of Construction) party. While he seeks to be a bridge-builder between rival political constituencies in Iran, the task he has set himself is herculean. In a public statement following his victory, Rowhani outlined his domestic and foreign policy agenda, reminding his listeners that the

“majority of Iranian people voted for moderation, collective wisdom, insight and consultation. Everybody should accept the people’s vote—the government should accept the people’s vote. The people have chosen a new path.”³⁶

In assessing the prospects for political change in Iran under Rowhani’s presidency, an event sixteen years ago is worth recalling. At that time, there was similar excitement, euphoria, and enormous expectations about qualitative political change in Iran. Mohammad Khatami, was the surprise winner in a landslide presidential election in 1997 that promised to take Iran in a new political direction.

Despite the sincerity of his efforts and his early successes at democratizing and liberalizing Iranian politics and society, in the end Khatami failed to uphold his campaign promises. This was primarily because of a concerted conservative backlash, supported by the office of the supreme leader, which viewed Khatami’s reformist agenda as a direct threat to the structure of power inside the Islamic Republic. In other words, the republican and Islamic dimensions of Iran’s unique political system were clashing, and when the dust had settled, the Islamic dimension proved to be more durable.

If Hassan Rowhani attempts to live up to his campaign pledges and fulfill the democratic aspirations of those Iranians who voted for him, he will face the same obstacles that Mohammad Khatami did. Elections come and go in Iran, some are fairer than others (none of them are free), but there remains a core, neo-fascist element at the heart of this regime; a deep-state if you will. It is buttressed by oil revenue that greases an extensive patron-clientele network, and it cynically manipulates the themes of anti-imperialism and Islamic authenticity to preserve and perpetuate its political power. This is an enduring feature of Iranian politics and it will not go away without significant pressure from below, notwithstanding the continuing façade of free elections and the eloquent campaign speeches that accompany them.

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 - 8 Mehdi Karoubi, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050619_karoubi-objection.shtml; Hashemi Rafsanjani, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/06/050619_mf_hashemi_statement.shtml
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 - 11 His exact words were: "That test and its aftermath was a huge divine test for the Muslim people of Iran and the threat was much larger than that of the eight-year war for the revolution and Islam." He added: "This test and event was, like the imposed war, a turning point for the revolution." See Bahram Rafiei, "IRGC Concerned about 2013 Elections," *Roozonline*, December 31, 2012.
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