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NEWAGE

Deciphering the Iranian elections

by Akbar E. Torbat | Updated at 12:40am on June 18, 2017



Iranian women cast their ballots at a polling station at the Lorzadeh mosque in southern Tehran. — Agence France-Presse/Getty/Atta Kenare

IRANIANS voted in the presidential as well as the city and village councils elections on May 19. The two elections were arranged to be on the same day to boost participations and show support for the clerical regime in Tehran. The Guardian Council had handpicked six candidates and rejected the rest of more than 1600 applicants who had registered to be presidential candidates. The candidates selected by the council were Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, Mostafa Hashemitaba, Eshagh Jahangiri, Mostafa Mirsalim, Ebrahim Raisi and Hassan Rouhani.

In three presidential debates which began on April 28, the candidates discussed their plans for solving the country's problems. In the first and second debates, Hassan Rouhani and his deputy Eshagh Jahangiri came under attacks for corruptions in the executive branch and their failure to solve the country's problems. The third debate on May 12, was focused on economic issues such as high rate of unemployment, smuggling foreign products imports, banking system insolvencies, bankruptcy of many factories, the country's dependence on crude oil exports, increase in food prices, and tax collection plan. Other issues discussed were lack of success in promoting self-sufficiency in industrial and agricultural sectors, and rent-seeking in the public sector, a form of corruption common within the regime which involves selling public properties below market value to government officials or their relatives and cronies. Ghalibaf accused Rouhani and Jahangiri of buying public properties for minimal prices. He mentioned that Rouhani's close relative (his brother Hossein Fereydoon) had engaged in financial corruptions and criticised Rouhani for increase in unemployment rate, high food prices, and his failure to collect taxes. Mirsalim accused Rouhani for increasing export of raw materials and failing to promote manufacturing industries. Raisi accused Rouhani of increasing the payments to retired employees and welfare recipients just before the elections to promote his campaign. Few days after the debates, Jahangiri dropped out of the elections in favour of Rouhani and Ghalibaf left in favour of Raisi, the protégé of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Mirsalim did not get enough public support from a conservative camp he was representing. Also, Hashemi Taba did not gain support from his reformist camp and later he said he voted for Rouhani himself. That meant the election was mainly about choosing the president between two clerics: the incumbent Rouhani from the so-called reformist wing of the regime and Raisi from the conservative wing.

The questionable results

THE government announcement of huge turnout on the election-day was highly questionable. The results of presidential elections were announced by the Interior Ministry on May 21. From the 56 million eligible Iranian voters, 41.22 million or 73 per cent voted in the election. Rouhani received 23.55 million (57.1 per cent) votes, his closest rival, Raisi 15.79 million (38.3 per cent) votes, Mirsalim 0.478 (1.2 per cent), and Hashemitaba (0.52 per cent). Critics called to question the figures announced by the ministry. They claimed the voters' population announced was far beyond the capacity of the polling places. The 73 per cent voters' participation in the election was too high to be true. Since the voters had to write the candidates' names whom they were voting for on the ballots and the limited number of available polling places throughout the country, it was highly unlikely that so many people could have voted in one day. Especially, since the city and village councils elections were simultaneously conducted, and checking and stamping of the voters' birth certificates, and filling out the ballots by so many voters required much more time than one day. As compared to the past elections, this time in the Capital Tehran the poor who mostly reside in south of the city did not crowd the polls at all, while the rich in the north parts had crowded some polls as were shown on the state television. That meant the conservatives have lost support among their traditional constituencies who are the

poor.

After the elections, there were some complaints from the conservative camps concerning miscounting the votes and manipulating the results. The conservatives accused Rouhani of engineering the election in favour of himself. Raisi complained to the Guardian council for violations (takhlof) in conducting the election. He said in some polling places there were not enough ballots and his name had not been printed correctly on some of the ballots.

Assessment of the election outcome

A NUMBER of factors affected the outcome of the elections. First, despite failure of Rouhani in economic and other matters, since the media was organised to promote him, he gained more votes. Also, the western powers had planned to promote Rouhani's re-election. Europeans wanted Rouhani to win the second term because he had signed some lucrative contracts with their firms after the nuclear agreement was finalised in January 2016. Europeans have opposed President Donald Trump's plan to confront the clerical regime. Second, Khamenei's pushing of Raisi as his favourite candidate backfired. Raisi's record of being involved in mass executions of the political prisoners in 1988 and frustration of Iranians with the conservative clerics led to more votes for Rouhani who had promised to promote political reforms. Third, some supporters of the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad either did not vote or did not vote for Raisi, despite Raisi's efforts to absorb some of Ahmadinejad's supporters into his campaign. Fourth, some secular political groups thought boycotting the elections would lead to worst outcome if Raisi was elected. Fifth, some celebrities were shown on state TV and social media, saying they planned to vote for Rouhani. Also, the former president Mohammad Khatami endorsed Rouhani. Overall, regardless of the highly questionable turnout reported by the Iranian government, it was a surprise election outcome. Despite Rouhani's disastrous economic policies, his re-election against Khamenei's favourite candidate Raisi shows how Iranians are frustrated with the theocratic dictatorship of the Supreme Leader.

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