

The Unexpected Results of Presidential Elections in Iran

By Akbar E. Torbat

Iranians voted in the presidential, city and rural council elections on June 14, 2013. The two elections were arranged to be on the same day to boost participations and show support for the Islamic Republic. The Guardian Council had handpicked eight candidates and rejected the rest of the applicants for presidency in violation of the Islamic Republic's constitution.¹ Despite 1.6 million first-time young voters, the turnout was 10% lower than the previous election. Some political factions had indicated that they would boycott the election. However, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei encouraged Iranians to vote by saying "It is possible that some people, for whatever reason, do not want to support the Islamic Republic establishment but if they want to support Iran, they should come also to vote at the polls." In reality, those who did not support the regime did not have anyone on the ballot to vote for. According to John R. Bird, Canada's Foreign Minister, the election was "effectively meaningless" because only "regime-friendly" candidates were allowed in the race.²

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had designated his former Chief of Staff Esfandiar Rahim Masheh as a nominee for president but the Guardian Council rejected him to be on the ballots. As Masheh was pushed aside, the election became a competition between the two wings of the clerical oligarchy; the conservatives (or principalists) and the moderates plus their reformist affiliates. Masheh who had advocated secular policies and had nationalistic sentiments was considered a threat to the clerics, and therefore they decided to bar his candidacy. That pleased the West that wanted Ahmadinejad and his group to leave for good. Ahmadinejad narrowly escaped death in a helicopter crash a week later on June 1.³ To increase pressure on Ahmadinejad, he was summoned by an Iranian criminal court for unspecified charges brought by the Speaker of the parliament, Ali Larijani, just two days after the election. Ahmadinejad's term will end on August 3, when the new president will come to the office. Ahmadinejad had previously said he knew a lot about the corruptions in the regime and some day he would reveal them but he remained quiet throughout the election and after the election to this date despite the rejection of his nominee by the Guardian Council.⁴

The Two Clerical Factions Compromised

The two wings of the clerical oligarchy competed in the 2013 election to win control over the executive branch of the government. They have been at odds since the moderate cleric Mohammad Khatami defeated the conservative cleric Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri in the 1997 presidential election. In 2005, the conservative clerics sided with a secular professional group

named Abadgaran Party to support the radical candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in order to defeat the moderate cleric Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in the presidential elections.

After Ahmadinejad became president, The Western political elites looked at Mohammed Khatami to become a presidential candidate again. Khatami was invited to attend the Bilderberg Group Annual meeting in 2006. Invitation of Khatami to the meeting was assumed to be the Western elites' endorsement of his candidacy in the subsequent presidential election in 2009. Since changing the regime in Iran by military intervention was considered to be infeasible, the alternative for the West was to bring back Khatami under the cover of promoting democracy. This was revealed on September 21, 2009, when the daily newspaper Kayhan reported that Khatami was a part of a foreign conspiracy against the Islamic regime. George Soros had met with Khatami twice, first time in New York, on September 14, 2006 and the second time at the 38th session of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in January, 2007.⁵ The Soros Foundation was named during trials of those arrested in Iran's post-election unrest in 2009 and accused of promoting and plotting a "velvet coup" in Iran. Khatami has denied meeting Soros.⁶

In 2009, Rafsanjani and Khatami were the key figures in the velvet revolution or the so-called Green Movement. In this year's election Rafsanjani and Khatami were the key figures to make their side win. They both endorsed the only cleric candidate Hassan Rohani. Mohammad Reza Aref, an able reformist candidate reluctantly left his campaign under pressure from Khatami in favor of Rohani. Aref had previously said he would remain in the race until the last minute.

Apparently compromise was made among the clerics to keep Ahmadinejad's group and other secular factions out of the election to prevent secularization of the regime. Apart from Mohammad Reza Aref, another candidate, Gholam Reza Hadad-Adel, also withdrew his candidacy a few days before the election. He was a member of a group of three candidates (Hadad-Adel, Ghalibaf, and Velayati) who had declared that only one of them would remain in the race at the final stages.⁷ However, Velayati did not finally leave in favor of Ghalibaf who had better standing on the polls.⁸ As a result, the position of Rohani who was the only candidate from the moderate group was strengthened and eventually the election did not go to the second round.

For months, the Persian BBC had campaigned for returning Rafsanjani or Khatami to presidency, but that did not happen. Khamenei who has influence on the conservative candidates failed to react when Velayati refused to pull out and did not endorse any particular candidate to make his side win. The outgoing president did not endorse any of the presidential candidates either but cast his vote on the Election Day as was shown on the state TV. The conservatives diluted the votes of their own candidates to make the moderate candidate Rohani the winner in the first round. Given the war torn situation in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya,

and the ongoing war in Syria, it is possible that the clerics compromised to share power among themselves to eliminate the secular and nationalist groups from the political scene and avoid conflicts after the election.

In the past few decades, literacy in Iran has substantially improved. The conservative clerics' interference on the peoples' social lives has angered the population. Many of the Iranian young are well educated in secular sciences leading them to call to question the clerics' theological arguments. The young and educated Iranians consider the clerics' traditional ideas a barrier to their social progress. In the 2009 elections, the sole cleric candidate, Mehdi Karroubi, obtained negligible votes, the lowest among the four presidential candidates. Also, the number of clerics elected to the Iranian parliament has decreased to about half as compared to the beginning of the revolution in 1979. The number of clerics in the cabinet has also decreased to only one. All these show that clerics were losing power to a new class of secular professionals. But this is going to change as clerics have increased their power by the election of a cleric president. In this election, the moderate clerics enticed the young and educated through Facebook, text messages on smart-phones and other means to vote for Hassan Rohani. Mohammad Khatatmi issued a written endorsement notice that was sent to millions of Iranians' Facebooks and smart-phones to vote for Rohani. All of these efforts seem to be geared towards gaining back total control of the Iranian political system by the clerics. Now that the power is shared between the two clerical wings and the Ahmadinejad's group that was advocating nationalistic views, secularization, and more social freedom is leaving the scene, the conservative clerics can retain their control over the revolutionary Guards, the Judiciary, the Islamic endowment Funds, and the revolutionary foundations, while the moderate clerics will take back the executive branch and in turn, will control the industry, commerce, and the financial sectors.

The 2013 Election Results

Out of nearly 50.5 million Iranian eligible voters, 72% participated in Iran's 11th presidential election on June 14, 2013. That meant 28% of eligible voters did not see any of the candidates would serve the interests of the country. In Tehran the turnout was a little more than 50% of the eligible voters. In the final tally a total of 36,704,156 valid ballots were counted, Hassan Rohani won by 18,613,329 (50.70%) votes. The other candidates votes were for Mohammad-Baqer Ghalibaf 6,077,292 (16.56%) , Saeed Jalili 4,168,946 (11.36%), Mohsen Rezaei 3,884,412 (10.58%), Ali-Akbar Velayati, 2,268,753 (6.18 %) and Mohammad Gharazi 446,015 (3.3%). A total of 1,245,409 ballots were declared invalid.⁹ These results were unexpected because Ghalibaf had the highest standing in polls before the election.¹⁰ Most analysts had strongly anticipated that the election would go to the second round. It was quite surprising and unexpected why the election did not go to the second round.¹¹ There was no argument this time that the election had been rigged as compared to the previous elections in 2009.

Due to the fact that the clerics are very unpopular among people, it is quite surprising that Rohani, a relatively unknown cleric to the public until six weeks ago without having any administrative experience, could have such a large number of votes. Many of the votes for Rohani must have been against the conservative clerics. Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri who is an advisor to the Leader Khamenei previously had said the election would end in the first round and he knew who would be elected but could not give the winner's name.¹² That implied some compromise might have taken place behind the scenes and raises skepticism regarding the announced 50.7% of the votes for Rohani which gave him just the minimum number of the votes needed to win the election in the first round.

The Western media mainly the Persian BBC and the Voice of America broadcasted in favor of the moderate clerics and against the outgoing Ahmadinejad's administration. The election results pleased the West as a moderate cleric is becoming Iran's president. Historically the British and later the United States have used the clerics' influence to promote their interests in Iran. Journalist Richard Dreyfuss in his book *The Devil's Game* explains well how the United States pursued this policy. To curb the influence of the Left, nationalists, seculars, and intellectuals, for decades, the US and its Western allies sided with the Islamic fanatics in Muslim countries.¹³ During the Iranian revolution, the Western media played an important role in promoting the Islamic factions led by the Islamic clerics. The Western media, including the VOA, and in particular the Persian radio BBC became a propaganda tool of the West to turn the 1979 revolution away from the secular factions in favor of the Islamic groups hoping that would serve the interests of the West.¹⁴ Houshang Nahavandi, a former chancellor of Tehran University, explains how the US and its allies turned the Iranian uprisings in 1978-79 to an Islamic revolution led by the clerics they favored.¹⁵ After executing the key figures of the Shah's regime and consolidating its power, the Islamic Republic gradually eliminated its viable political opponents; mainly the Left, nationalists, and other secular factions that could not tolerate its Islamic ideological zeal.

The New President

Hassan Rohani has primarily Islamic seminary education. The Iranian TV announced that he had studied law in Britain but that could not be confirmed according to the Telegraph.¹⁶ Rohani has experience in various organizations of the Islamic Republic. He served in the Iranian Parliament for several terms and is currently a member of the Expediency Council. Rohani has had a friendly relation with Jack Straw the former British foreign minister and wants to keep good relations with the West. On November 15, 2004, Britain, France, and Germany representing the EU met with the head of Iran's negotiating team Hassan Rohani at Sadabad Palace in Tehran and signed an agreement to suspend all Iran's nuclear enrichment activities. In 2005 while running for president, Ahmadinejad criticized Hassan Rohani for yielding to EU3 demands to

sign the agreement and ignoring Iran's right to nuclear technology. He promised to take a tough stance against the West to defend Iran's rights and preserve its nuclear program if he became president.¹⁷ He later charged Rohani and the members of his negotiation team with nuclear espionage.

Overall the election in Iran for the new president went in favor of the affluent class represented by the moderate clerics. It seems the same merchant capitalism will be pursued as was under the cleric presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami. In that period of sixteen years, Iran lagged in industrial development. The new president probably will appoint some of his colleagues in the Expediency Council, the center of Iran's wealthy elites, to various posts in his administration. The members of the Council are affiliated with large banks and very wealthy merchants. Its president is the cleric tycoon Rafsanjani. They favor to promote the US model of neoliberal capitalism.

It remains to be seen what this election will hold for Iran and the Iranian people including the young, women, the press, the social and political activists, and political prisoners. What the future holds will likely have very significant consequences for the Iranian people in the years to come.

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¹ <http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article35153.htm>

² <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/06/16/canada-doubts-moderate-president-elect-will-effect-real-change-in-iran/>

³ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/02/mahmoud-ahmadinejad-helicopter-incident_n_3374997.html

⁴ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/17/ahmadinejad-summoned-iran-court_n_3453089.html

⁵ <http://www.kayhannews.ir/880701/2.htm#other204>, also see Iran newspaper, http://www.iran-newspaper.com/HTMLResources/Tools/PrintVersion/?NewsID=newsContent_23446

⁶ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/106868.html>

⁷ <http://www.latimes.com/topic/politics/government/gholamali-haddad-adel-PEPLT0009042.topic>

⁸ Tehran mayor Ghalibaf seen as a strong contender in Iranian presidential race

http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/tehran-mayor-ghalibaf-seen-as-a-strong-contender-in-iranian-presidential-race/2013/06/05/fe118584-cc5d-11e2-8573-3baeea6a2647_story.html

⁹ <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/06/15/309169/rohani-becomes-irans-new-president>

¹⁰ <http://iranelectionwatch.com/tag/ghalibaf/#.UcETg9gXyM0>

¹¹ <http://www.moonofalabama.org/2013/06/irans-presidential-election.html>

¹² <http://secretnews.ir/News.aspx?code=217>

¹³ Robert Dreyfuss, *Devil's Game*, Metropolitan Books, 2003, p. 2

¹⁴ Houshang Nahavandi, *The Last Days: the End of Reign and Life of the Shah* pp. 222-225

¹⁵ Houshang Nahavandi, p. 217. , http://www.amazon.com/akharin-roozha-payane-saltanat-dargozashte/dp/1595840192/ref=sr_1_17?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1371618987&sr=1-17

¹⁶ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/10111275/British-academic-record-of-Iran-presidential-candidate-under-scrutiny.html>

¹⁷Kasra Naji P. 122, http://www.amazon.com/Ahmadinejad-Secret-History-Radical-Leader/dp/0520256638/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1371620892&sr=1-1