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A Fragile Opportunity

The 2013 Iranian Election and its Consequences

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Executive Summary

The election of Hassan Rouhani constitutes an opportunity to change the nature of the relationship between Iran and the West, but it is one that must be approached realistically and with an eye on the domestic determinants and repercussions of engagement.

His victory represents a broad coalition of interests who share a dislike of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his policies. In effect, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei has had to bow to the demands of a 'baronial revolt', aggravated by the political and economic crisis engulfing the country.

While there is general agreement that the economic crisis must be addressed, there is widespread disagreement as to how best to achieve this and even less consensus on the need for political change. Rouhani's victory has therefore challenged the status quo but not overturned it, and there is much that remains to be settled.

For all the positive change in tone towards politics and society, Iran's immediate policy is being directed towards economic stabilisation through sanctions relief.

This has been reflected in a new realism within the foreign-policy establishment, led by new Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, with an ambitious timeline for a solution to the nuclear crisis and a tentative reappraisal of regional policy, particularly towards Saudi Arabia. At the same time, the task ahead is immense and it remains to be seen whether the disparate Iranian elite fully appreciates the depth of the damage done by the Ahmadinejad administration to Iran's international position.

Western policy-makers should pay close attention to the opportunities and pitfalls witnessed under Ahmadinejad's predecessor, Mohammad Khatami, and take care not to strengthen those who are opposed to engagement. This will require careful calibration and close attention to the political detail.

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> Our … policy in each successive stage ... [w]hether of interest or apathy, has ever been characterised by a note of exaggeration.
>
> (Lord Curzon, 1892)

The first-round victory of Hassan Rouhani in the eleventh presidential election of the Islamic Republic of Iran took many observers by surprise. One of eight candidates deemed suitable to run by the hard-line Guardian Council, he – along with the more openly reformist Mohammad Reza Aref – was generally regarded as an electoral outlier, whose chief function was to re-ignite interest and enthusiasm among the vast swathe of the Iranian electorate who had become disillusioned with the politics of the Islamic Republic over the last eight years, especially since the electoral debacle of 2009.

It was therefore important for the regime, and for Ayatollah Khamenei in particular, to manage a successful election in order to remove the deep political stain of 2009, and restore a measure of legitimacy both domestically and in the eyes of the international community. For this, a high turnout and a clean process were vital. The former could only be achieved by providing a measure of perceived competition, addressing *real* issues that would matter to those parts of the electorate that had come to feel alienated. Rouhani's campaign, promising a government of 'prudence and moderation', and liberally endowed with slogans that were drawn straight from the reformist playbook, managed to do just that. His articulate and diplomatic presentation, if occasionally combative, contrasted starkly with the ideologically convoluted and frequently incoherent ramblings of his main hard-line opponents.

In the event, the skilful management of popular 'hopes and fears' catapulted Rouhani to a successful (if marginal) first-round victory, taking some 52 per cent of the votes cast with a 72 per cent turnout. The public elation that followed has tended to disguise the often complex and fraught political negotiations that facilitated the election. Distress gave way to devotion; expectations of the Rouhani presidency remain high. It says much of the depth of the despair that the emotional rebound has been so uncritically enthusiastic, but it is also a reflection of the opaqueness of the political process that commentators – both inside and outside Iran – have rushed to re-imagine and rationalise the past in an effort to explain the present and reinforce (or justify) the enthusiasm they now feel.[1]

In stark contrast to the election of 2009, the presidential election of 2013 passed off relatively peacefully, much to the satisfaction of the authorities and the elation of those who had voted for Rouhani. What drama there was remained largely off the streets: despite a mediocre start, the televised

debates – which had caused such controversy in 2009 – contained sufficient material of interest to keep both the public and the pundits engaged. At the same time, the turnout fulfilled the Supreme Leader's promise of a 'political epic'. Yet the general sense of satisfaction and self-congratulation that followed should not disguise the fact that this remained among the most controlled and opaque of any Iranian election to date.

The Iranian public tend to be 'slow burners' as far as interest in elections are concerned, and even presidential elections do not generate positive interest until quite late in the day. But the situation this time round was qualitatively different. Public apathy and scepticism about the integrity of the vote were considerably higher, reinforced by Khamenei's assertion that any talk of 'free elections' was seditious and a Western plot.[2] Moreover, much of the grassroots organisation that had been the basis of the Green Movement in 2009 had been uprooted, which meant that any popular mobilisation would be difficult to achieve. The authorities, meanwhile, while anxious to secure a 'legitimising' high turnout, were equally if not more so about being faced with a rerun of 2009, which by all accounts was a far more serious challenge to the integrity of the Islamic Republic than many would explicitly acknowledge. There is little doubt that the developing chaos of the Arab Spring and, more pertinently, the extensive street protests in Turkey, weighed heavily on the authorities, and Khamenei in fact alluded to these regional developments in one particularly bad-tempered post-election exchange on the events of 2009.[3]

A number of other factors also undoubtedly shaped the mood. By far the most serious was the economy, the parlous condition of which, despite the receipt of unprecedented oil revenues, was a matter of public anxiety and deep consternation among key members of the elite. Indeed, the combination of mismanagement, intensifying sanctions and the continuing political bravado of a president who seemed only too eager to provoke and annoy almost anyone who mattered all ensured a broad coalition of somewhat disparate allies increasingly determined to secure some sort of change. In this respect, Ahmadinejad succeeded where almost no other Iranian political figure (except perhaps the last Shah) had in uniting almost every significant political faction in the country against him – including key sections of the hard-line merchant establishment and the Revolutionary Guards.[4] Widespread elite dissatisfaction with the status quo, as represented by Ahmadinejad, was a critical feature of the political environment in this election. Khamenei might have ignored reformists, centrist technocrats and traditional conservatives, but the open criticism of self-styled 'principlists' was more difficult to dismiss. What made the situation even more serious was the fact that these divisions appeared to extend into the Office of the Supreme Leader itself, the very heart of the autocracy.[5]

If Rouhani was not an unknown personality, his politics nevertheless remained opaque. He had been at the heart of the security establishment for the better part of two decades and had even been one of a handful of individuals entrusted with engaging with Robert McFarlane during his ill-fated visit in May 1986.[6] He had generally been understood to be a conservative, but like all political appellations in Iran, the meaning of this depended very much on context. During the reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami, his tenure as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council saw him firmly defined as a staunch if not hard-line conservative. Rouhani's somewhat abrupt conversion to the tenants of reformism most obviously associated with Mohammad Khatami took many observers by surprise.

What determined the decision of this disaffected elite to regroup around Rouhani is more difficult to discern. *Ex post facto* analyses always tend to see more method in the madness that is the political process. In Iran, perhaps more than elsewhere, calculation is always mixed with a heavy dose of opportunism. Whether the momentum came from below or was directed from above, it is highly unlikely, after four years of the most severe repression, that the popular mood would have gained any traction at all had the fractured political elite not been receptive. Discomfort in 2009 translated into anger in 2013 at its continuous political marginalisation (to say nothing of the insults that had been heaped upon it by Ahmadinejad and his allies) and a real anxiety over the economic crisis facing the country.

At the same time, as far as the electorate was concerned, it was palpably clear that for such latent discontent to be effectively driven to the polls, a much greater effort would have to be made to overcome deeply ingrained popular scepticism. This necessitated two important developments: unity among key elements of the elite and the promise of dramatic change. The first step was to foster a new progressive alliance, bringing together the centrists (under Hashemi Rafsanjani) and the reformists (under Khatami). Having earlier warned the electorate not to disengage from the political process, Khatami decided, along with Rafsanjani, to throw his weight behind Rouhani's candidacy.[7] Together, they brought with them extensive support in the wider bureaucracy and among students and activists. Khatami's support, was to prove especially critical in two particular ways: first, in ensuring the withdrawal of the reformist candidate, Aref; and second – and of no less importance – in convincing a sceptical public to participate.

Rouhani, for his part, played his role almost to perfection, careful not to antagonise any of the key constituents on either the left or the right of the political spectrum. His promises grew increasingly dramatic and there is little doubt that he grew into his role as the torchbearer for reform.[8] His assured performances in the televised debates, which despite a lacklustre start (largely due to the curious quiz-show format devised by state television) grew

increasingly fractious, only served to cement his credentials as a thoughtful practitioner.[9] This contrasted favourably with the poor performances of his main rivals, especially Saeed Jalili, whose intellectual incoherence elicited the popular joke that Iranians could finally empathise with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Catherine Ashton's pain.[10]

For all the momentum, which finally built to a popular climax on 14 June, the post-election elation at Rouhani's first-round victory has tended to disguise the final part of the equation that had to be carefully managed, namely the hard-line establishment itself – principally but not limited to Khamenei – which was by no means reconciled to a Rouhani victory won on the back of slogans it had thought had been confined to the dustbin of history. Rouhani sought to anticipate these problems by writing a private letter to the Supreme Leader to assure him of his fidelity to both the Leader and the Revolution.[11] Yet even then, in the days leading up the vote, there were suggestions by the Guardian Council that the qualifications of candidates could be reviewed and it subsequently transpired that Ahmadinejad's minister of the interior – charged with administering the elections – had come under intense pressure from the Guardian Council, which had indicated it was keen to have Rouhani disqualified.[12] Past experience suggested to many that there was nothing certain about a Rouhani victory. A high turnout was not guaranteed, even with all the assurances and promises to the electorate, but that aside, anxieties remained about the position Khamenei would take. Even Rouhani's most ardent supporters felt the best they could expect was a second-round contest, and the principlist strategy seems to have been to achieve only this, after which a unified hard-line candidate would sweep up the votes. In fact, only one person had been confident of a first-round win for Rouhani as he went to cast his vote – Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri.

Nateq-Nuri's certainty of a first-round victory for Rouhani was the first clear indication that the mood in the Supreme Leader's office had changed. Given a high turnout and no prospect of state interference, Rouhani's platform would be secure. Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri was a traditional conservative with few moderate strings to his bow. Once seen as a likely successor to Hashemi Rafsanjani, Nateq-Nuri had famously been defeated in Khatami's first landslide election victory in 1997, among the first of the Supreme Leader's preferred candidates to suffer humiliation at the hands of the electorate. But this aside, Nateq-Nuri was emblematic of an elite that had become deeply concerned at the political and economic crisis facing the regime, the crisis of legitimacy that the events of 2009 had engendered, and the critical economic situation that the country now found itself in, weighed down by the most severe set of sanctions the country had ever suffered. One can only surmise that, subject to assurances about his own position, Khamenei had finally recognised the urgency of the situation, faced as he was by an

elite rebellion of unprecedented reach. This sense of urgency was no doubt reinforced by the realisation that people throughout the region, from Egypt to Turkey, were in a turbulent mood.

There are two indications that this was indeed the case. In the days leading up to the vote, Khamenei made an unprecedented appeal to the electorate to come out and vote, discarding his usual bombast to appeal to voters to vote for the honour of their country, even if they did not believe in the regime.[13] This was an extraordinary exercise in outreach which did not go unnoticed. As if to emphasise the point, Khamenei made a further remarkable appeal as he cast his ballot, bluntly dismissing US criticism and adding, for good measure, that no one, not even members of his own family, knew his voting intentions. Whether intentional or not, this was taken by a number of domestic observers to indicate that his son Mojtaba, the *bête noir* of Iranian electoral politics, was neither privy to nor able to influence his decisions.[14]

The result, of course, was a dramatic victory in the first round, with a turnout that satisfied the Khameini demand for a 'political epic'. Compared to 2009, the count took some time before the Ministry of the Interior formally announced the results on late afternoon the following day. One of the problems for observers was the lack of clarity over the precise number of votes needed by Rouhani to pass the 50 per cent mark, with some discussion over whether this meant 50 per cent (plus one vote) of the entire eligible electorate, or simply of those who had voted. When it was confirmed that it was the latter, it then became a question – in the absence of any electoral register – of establishing how many people had actually voted. The figure of 72 per cent turnout that was eventually released was of course entirely in line with the figure predicted by Fars News some time before, and the truth is that – in the absence of any objective means of assessment and given the paucity of foreign journalists (in stark contrast to 2009) – there is no way of verifying the figures.[15] What is known, however, is that, unlike in 2009, there was no attempt to present the counting process as one that was heavily computerised, and the announcement of the results, though perhaps a few hours slower, was broadly in line with the announcement of results in elections prior to 2009.

The immediate victor in this election, in many ways, was Khamenei himself. For all his anxieties, the electorate had by all accounts delivered a healthy turnout which had served to heal the scars of 2009. No one had complained and no one had protested. Indeed, the fact that the small margin of victory (albeit in the first round) had not elicited protests from the principlists suggested that they were both more politically mature and more lawful than the supporters of reformist candidate Mir-Hossein Mousavi in 2009. The popular elation and elite relief was palpably felt, and was akin to a country slowly awakening from a nightmare, such that an extraordinary exercise

in retrospective rationalisation took effect almost immediately. The first beneficiary of this was Khamenei himself, who was immediately shielded from any responsibility for the previous eight years and 'thanked' by almost everyone across the political spectrum (including Khatami) for having managed the 'political epic' with such finesse – with perhaps the most ironic chants of 'dictator, dictator, thank you, thank you' coming from a populace elated that he had chosen not to interfere after all.[16]

The corollary of that, of course, was to heap all responsibility for the past eight years onto the 'deviant current', and the personality of Ahmadinejad in particular, as loyalists swiftly moved to disavow him. The other major exercise in the historical settling of scores was the insistence that the epic of 2013 had effectively proved the protesters in 2009 wrong; Rouhani now spoke of the protesters in derogatory terms, and added, for good measure, that the political slate had been wiped clean.[17] Khamenei himself was more forceful, demanding an apology from his critics.[18] Khatami and his legacy were sidelined, while the reliably hard-line *Kayhan* newspaper made clear in an editorial that Rouhani is 'one of us' and that those who hankered after substantive change were likely to be disappointed.[19]

A New Dawn of Prudence, Moderation and Hope?

If President Rouhani campaigned on a platform of prudence, moderation and hope, it would be fair to say that the response to his victory – especially among foreign observers – has been high on hope and less clear on moderation and prudence. Much like the general relief that greeted Obama's dramatic election victory in the US, the bar had been set so low that the mere fact that the new president is thoughtful and articulate is almost a revolution in itself. In the context of a government that thought nothing of fabricating their academic qualifications, the fact that Rouhani actually has a doctorate (albeit from Glasgow Caledonian rather than Glasgow University, as Rouhani's website initially suggested) is read as progress. Similarly, while boasts of his language fluency compared to his predecessor seem wildly exaggerated, he is probably fluent in at least two languages.

While Rouhani continues to enjoy the benefit of the doubt, it might be better to see his prudence and moderation in the context of the realities of Iranian politics. Rouhani has become president at a time when the culture of deference to the authority of the Supreme Leader has reached levels not seen since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and many would argue that Khamenei's involvement in the day-to-day management of the state is perhaps even greater than that of his predecessor. The aforementioned, pointed *Kayhan* editorial aside, Ayatollah Khamenei has himself since reiterated the centrality of his position in an extensive series of fatwas issued on his website, which reiterate with no ambiguity that obedience to the *vali-e faqih* – the guardian jurist – was the equivalent to obedience to

the Prophet of Islam.[20] There is no ambiguity about this statement. Nearly a decade of consolidation has ensured that those institutions of accountability – most obviously the Assembly of Experts – that might restrict the leader's powers have been largely emasculated, and the string of congratulations and expressions of gratitude, to say nothing of Rouhani's insistence that he has the leader's 'full authority' to pursue his policies, are all indicative of the reality that if Khamenei's power has retreated, his authority remains intact. In many ways, this is the deal that has been struck to ensure a smooth transition of executive power – albeit one that is more prime ministerial than presidential in character.

If Rouhani's election should, however, be read as a setback for Khamenei's authoritarian approach and exercise of power, this has resulted more from what might be classically termed a baronial revolt than any sudden affectation for democratic values. In 2009, faced with the prospect of a popular upheaval, the elites held firm and united behind the leader. Their interests lay in stability, and however much some may have criticised the detail and the handling of the situation, ultimately they held together. However, the bitterness that emerged in 2009 came home to roost in 2013, and the anger was made all the more acute by a weakening economy exposed by damaging sanctions that hurt revenue. Much has been made of Rafsanjani's September speech, in which he blamed the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons on its own citizens. Of equal interest is the bleak picture Rafsanjani paints of the Iranian economy.[21] Even allowing for a degree of exaggeration as one administration replaces another, the scale of the economic crisis facing Iran is striking: all the more so when one considers the magnitude of the oil revenue enjoyed by Ahmadinejad – far in excess of that of his predecessors – spread lavishly in acts of patronage which have made a select few very rich at the expense of structural investment in the economy. The opportunity cost of the last eight years will undoubtedly be scrutinised by Iranian economists for some time; suffice to say that the books are only now being properly assessed and that early revelations are not positive.[22]

It was this economic urgency that drove Rouhani's election, and the economy remains his priority. It has shaped his choice of cabinet, drawing on a range of technocratic expertise largely affiliated with Rafsanjani's 'Servants of Construction'. It has also driven his policy choices, including the important decision to re-establish the Management and Planning Organization of Iran (formerly the Plan and Budget Organization), unceremoniously abolished by Ahmadinejad in 2007. Most obviously, it will shape his foreign policy. Here, Rouhani's priority is to contain and, if possible, roll back the sanctions that have been imposed. This constitutes a difficult though not impossible task, and much will depend on the seriousness with which the problems are understood and tackled, not necessarily by Rouhani himself, but in the wider political hinterland within which he is obliged to operate. Put simply, the flippancy

of the Ahmadinejad years, in which international developments were often trivialised, will have to be set aside, and the measure of professionalism that had characterised the Iranian foreign ministry will need to be restored.

Few appointments reflect this realisation better than Rouhani's choice of Mohammad Javad Zarif as foreign minister. Zarif is widely regarded as one of the most competent diplomats in the Iranian foreign ministry, well versed in the cultural norms of the West, and of the US in particular. He has been in the lead of a concerted public-relations campaign designed to capitalise on the goodwill Rouhani currently enjoys, using all means of social media to reach out to Western interlocutors. This exercise in 'Twitter diplomacy' has caught the imagination of some Western commentators, especially given the constructive tone of the messages, but it is not quite the novelty that some have concluded, and neither is Rouhani's cabinet the first to use Western-educated ministers. That particular trend was established some time ago and even Ahmadinejad employed a foreign-policy adviser (Hamid Mowlana) who had spent the better part of his life in the US.

The use of social media has not been without its problems, the most obvious being the paradox that Iranians are themselves restricted in their use of such sites. This, of course, raises the question of the genuineness of the new administration, and the extent to which some in Iran believe that much can be achieved simply by altering Iran's image abroad to encourage sanctions relief. Such a belief would be misplaced, and there is little evidence that Rouhani or his main backers (Rafsanjani and Khatami) subscribe to this view. Rouhani's contention that one of his foreign-policy priorities would be to rebuild relations with Saudi Arabia is one that would find clear support among the centrists and reformists in the system, and points to a pragmatic strategic clarity that Ahmadinejad never had. Rafsanjani and Khatami both understood that while there may be no love lost with Saudi Arabia, Iran could not systematically begin to rebuild its economy while the largest producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) remained antagonistic. It is this priority that is undoubtedly helping to soften Iran's policy and support for President Assad in Syria.

This may be less difficult to achieve than many of the issues on the domestic agenda that Rouhani has promised to deal with: Khamenei's decision to allude to the 'heroic leniency' of the second Shia Imam, Hasan – who forewent the political leadership of the faithful when confronted by the realities of his day – suggests that, at least where foreign policy is concerned, a new realism may have taken hold.[23]

With respect to the domestic agenda, Rouhani – the 'jurist' – has promised to restore and enhance civil and political rights for the people; a significant advance if it were to be achieved.[24] He has appointed his deputy for legal

affairs to oversee this. Perhaps his most interesting appointment, however, is that of Ali Shamkhani as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Shamkhani, a rear admiral who served in the Iran-Iraq War and who was noted for not condemning Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi over the last four years, has been charged with reviewing the house arrest of the two leaders of the Green Movement. Yet at the same time, the government has introduced legislation defining a political crime which has dismayed lawyers in terms of the broad-brush definitions it employs. Moreover, the draft suggests that it is the government and institutions of the Islamic Republic that will be protected from 'political' criticism, not the people from arbitrary repression.[25] This should serve as a reminder that while Rouhani's election may augur well, the challenges are immense and he faces a political and institutional hinterland that remains distinctly unfriendly.

Conclusion

There is a logic to what Rouhani has promised, of which all those with experience of the politics of the Islamic Republic are only too aware. We have, in sum, been here before, both under Rafsanjani but most obviously under Khatami. What the latter, in particular, understood was that economic development cannot take place in the absence of political development – one depends on the other. This does not mean, in the immediate term, the development of a locally defined, liberal-democratic settlement, but it does mean stability, transparency and the rule of law. The narrative, voiced by Rouhani, that the election itself has gone a long way towards solving Iran's political problems, and that Iran's confrontation with the West is simply the product of a huge 'misunderstanding' of the 'real' Iran, will soon find itself confronted by a reality characterised by much deeper problems. Above all, Iran will have to move above and beyond the view of itself as a perennial victim. Iran not only faces a crisis of trust that is both broader and deeper than it was in 1997 – for which it shares at least some of the responsibility – it also has to engage with a Western foreign-policy establishment that can draw on a far greater pool of expertise than existed a decade ago. More than ever, style will have to be matched with substance. There has to be some permanence to the changes in Iran before genuine progress can be made; and the more substantive these are, the better. This will require bold choices and even more courageous leadership.

For the West, Rouhani presents an opportunity, but one that should be approached with a sober and realistic mindset. The lessons of the reform era loom large for all to learn and there is palpable anxiety that the mistakes of the Khatami era should not be repeated. The right lessons need to be learnt, and this applies to Iran's politicians as much as to anyone else. Above all, these relate to clarity, the management of expectations and a recognition of historical and political realities. On one level, Iran's priority must be to see the nuclear file returned from the UN Security Council to the International Atomic

Energy Agency. From a broader perspective, it must be aware of the political hinterland, not only abroad, but crucially on the home front. Economic reform in the absence of political change will lack both stability and durability; nuclear security in the absence of human security will provide only a short-term solution to a profound malaise in Iranian state and society. In the West, in particular, there needs to be a greater appreciation of the relationship between Iran's domestic and foreign policies: how Western policies affect the domestic environment in Iran and how this, in turn, will influence Iran's own foreign-policy posture. As in 2003, this is not always as obvious as some suggest. Then, justifiably eager to achieve a diplomatic solution, the EU3 (the UK, France and Germany) effectively diminished the reformist government in favour of reaching a deal with 'conservatives', without fully assessing the consequences of their approach for the reinforcement of unsympathetic domestic political trends. The subsequent 'election' of an empowered hard-line parliament took everyone by surprise, spelled the end for the reformist movement and, without any prospect of the ratification of the agreement, set negotiations back for the better part of a decade. For Iranian reformists, the sense of betrayal was acute.[26]

Above all, it should be remembered that Iran will engage constructively with those it respects rather than those it simply likes. It should come as no surprise that the enthusiasm recently witnessed in New York has elicited a measure of contempt and anxiety from Iranians across the political spectrum. Put simply, contempt will embolden hardliners, whereas respect will empower those determined to reform.

Nevertheless, although the West must play its role judiciously, it will ultimately be up to the Iranian state to deliver that for which the people have voted. Rouhani inherits a much more difficult presidency than that which Khatami took over in 1997, with the economy in a critical condition. He is tentatively supported by a fragile coalition of elite players, many of whom have no interest in the progressive agenda he has articulated. But he currently enjoys the support of at least two of the three grandees of Iranian politics, and has, at the very least, the tacit support of the third. Whether he fulfils his promise depends, as ever, on just how 'heroic' that third person in the triumvirate – Ayatollah Khamenei – can be persuaded to be. The stakes have rarely been higher.

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