

Iran's Moderate Moment: The Leader Just Let It Go

Written by Maysam Behravesht

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/07/irans-moderate-moment-the-leader-just-let-it-go/>

MAYSAM BEHRAVESH, JUL 7 2013

The election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as the next Iranian president took many off guard inside and outside Iran. What makes this surprise matter are the fundamental questions the development has raised among analysts about the very character and future course of the Islamic Republic following eight years of hardline rule. After all, why did people flock *en masse* to the ballot boxes in favour of a moderate reform-seeker with the alienating frustration of 2009 still in their memories and prohibitive hesitations about the counting process? Also, why did the ruling system abstain from tampering with the results given the presence of ideologically closer candidates to it? Explanations are manifold.

As for Iranian society, the economic hardship caused by domestic mismanagement under Ahmadinejad and vast sanctions levied by the West can be safely argued to have exerted a sobering effect on it. The pressure has been so much that the majority of Iranians just decided in a moment of collective prudence to suspend, if not shed, their emotive grievances over the past betrayals and take advantage of the single least harmful opportunity to initiate change – however skin-deep or superficial that might prove to be in the future. In fact, the massive participation reflected the resilience of a whole nation in the face of a long-standing and erosive sense of despair and the renaissance of a “politics of hope” in the history of Iran. Spearheaded by the younger generation, Iranians are in fact displaying an extraordinary degree of emotional maturity marked by genuine faith in non-violent action, which does not have more evident precedence in the post-revolutionary era. The traumatic experiences of the civil war in Syria being the paragon of a militarized revolution as well as the staggering failure of externally enforced democratization in Iraq have also awakened them to the bare fact that in such a context as theirs there may be no quick recipe for change and the best remedy for all that is wrong is peaceful incremental evolution.

When it comes to the Iranian state, commentators in the West tend to see the centrist victory either as an unpalatable outcome that in one way or another slipped out of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei's hands or a premeditated compromise he and the like-minded circle of advisors around him – including the Revolutionary Guards top brass – made in the shadow of 2009 protests and under adverse domestic and foreign circumstances. While the intensive pre-election efforts of hardliners during the vetting process to bar rival candidates from running and more broadly their history of political performance over the past decade partly validate these explanations, they are essentializing accounts in the final analysis, portraying the Leader as an agent of immutable nature who is incapable of letting others go a different path, let alone do it himself. The problem with these stories is their exclusionary nature as they foreclose other possible ways of thinking about the politics of decision-making in Iran.

Rouhani won the election with 50.71 percent of the total ballots cast, that is, short of only 0.72 per cent of the vote, he would have failed to triumph in the first round and a run-off would have had to be called between him and the former military commander and “principlist” candidate Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. Though the latter cannot be safely said to be favoured by the Iranian leadership over Rouhani, the likely convenience of forcing a run-off by a small-scale manipulation of the votes renders the first explanation above – that the moderate victory took Khamenei by surprise, confronting him with a *fait accompli* – questionable. However, the win was not entirely planned either. While conservatives remained divided themselves along narrow lines of vested interests, they could hardly imagine that the eleventh-hour alliance between centrists and reformists – whereby the original reformist candidate Mohammad Reza Aref stepped down in favour of Rouhani – would mobilize such a nationwide backing among the public. They had also underestimated the level of popular dissatisfaction created after eight years of “principlist” rule under

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Ahmadinejad. This complacency might be the result of a possible general impression in the conservative camp that at any event the system/leadership would not allow the moderate axis, which was perceptibly sympathetic to the Green Movement “seditionists”, to score a win at such a critical juncture.

But the leadership had decided not to interfere in the outcome after eliminating the undesirable candidates through the Guardian Council. This became more apparent towards the end of the campaign. At the early stages of electoral competition, the bulk of Ayatollah Khamenei's speeches about the “fittest” (*aslah*) candidate revolved around the confrontational themes of “resistance” and “Jihadi” struggle against external pressures, which gave way, as the election day approached, to a more conciliatory and realistic discourse emphasizing the “national prestige” of Iranians, existing “realities”, and the “solutions” a competent president can offer to the country's “problems”. Moving beyond his usual promotion of the “Islamic state” – which he rules – and appealing to those who endear Iran only as their “country” in the secular sense of the term, he said in an unprecedented statement two days before the 14 June elections that “there may be some people who do not wish to support the Islamic system for any reason, but at least they do want to support their country; they should come to the ballot boxes too. All should come”. This was a rare recognition of nationhood and national will on the part of the Ayatollah. Taken together, these shifts may also reflect his last-minute loss of faith in the capability of fragmented conservatives to navigate the Islamic Republic securely for at least another four years. Simultaneously, given Rouhani's proven fidelity to the system and middle-of-the-road leanings, he felt safe enough to let things go as they did, but also ensured that no rogue element would disrupt them on his behalf.

Whatever the cause of a centrist takeover after two successive terms of hardliner dominance, one thing is for sure: the event gave a new lease of life to the Islamic Republic, with the guarantee that its foundational structures will remain unchallenged for many years to come. Considerably narrowing the widening state-society gap, however, it has endowed Iran with a normative surge of soft power, ripening the ground for a new way of statecraft that can bring about a whole change of identity for the state. And, this is where Iran's top leadership can make a bigger and more sustainable difference.

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