



# Yes they could - Iran's presidential surprise

by Rouzbeh Parsi

In case anyone had forgotten that Iranian presidential elections have a propensity to surprise us, they were reminded over the weekend. Centrist-cum-reformist candidate Hassan Rouhani not only made a strong showing in the polls but managed to obtain 50.7 per cent of the vote, thereby eliminating the need for a second round. The very high turnout, 72 per cent, has given him a clear mandate as well as confirming the vibrancy and necessity of the electoral process in Iranian politics. Four years after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's traumatic and controversial re-election, Iranian politics is slowly undergoing a course correction - back to allowing for a broader domestic political spectrum.

## The electoral dynamics

After the selection of officially approved candidates, the real campaigning began - with the different candidates trying to stake out positions and make themselves known to the electorate, traveling across the country and appearing on national TV. It was clear that the economy was the issue on most voters' minds: something reflected in the way the candidates went about courting the electorate, with Mohsen Rezaee distinguishing himself with his blunt assessments of the current economic climate. In contrast, the supposed darling of the hard-line right, nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili, joined the discussion late and with even less concrete proposals than his competitors. His campaign was much more value-based and catered to the culturally conservative, i.e. those who in many ways do not

want to acknowledge that the revolution is over. The splintered landscape on the right reflected a four-year long, acrimonious blame game among the 'principlists' that in effect begs the most fundamental of questions: what does principlism mean in today's Iran?

The centrist/reformist part of the approved electoral spectrum proved to be not only more dynamic but also a much more in touch with the fatigue that many Iranians feel after eight years of protracted conservative domination. Thus Mohammad Reza Aref, the *bona fide* reformist, and Hassan Rouhani, a centrist at heart, quickly became the catalysts of the simmering discontent among the electorate. In fact they both led - and were driven by - a large section of society that craved change and acted - in line with the resilient dynamics of Iran politics - as conduits for the expectations and demands from below.

It is unclear and too soon to claim this as evidence of a resurgence of the 2009 'Green' movement. The dynamics surrounding the reformist wing of Iranian politics were tied to the elections, and the different strands that could amount to a new 'Green' movement have yet to form a proper social coalition.

Within this context, the candidate who proved most astute, moulded by (and catering to) the potential voters rallying at his campaign events, was indeed Hassan Rouhani. The reasons for his emergence as the man of the hour were as much

to do with the lack of other suitable candidates as with his own leadership qualities. A close associate of Rafsanjani and Khamenei, and a man of the cloth to boot, he managed to be 'something to everybody'. In doing so, he managed to both assuage the intelligence and security apparatus that rejected Rafsanjani as a candidate while assuring a large chunk of the electorate that he can provide relief and course correction, normalisation as it were. What probably sealed his victory in electoral arithmetic terms was the fact that his coalition (of sorts) with the reformists actually worked, unlike the 2+1 (Qalibaf, Velayati, and Hadad-Adel) touted among the 'principlists'. The leaders of the moderates and reformists - former presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami respectively - came together and convinced their associates to join forces. As a result, Aref withdrew and threw his support as the official reformist candidate behind Rouhani, boosting his momentum and subsequently, his number of votes.

### Against conventional wisdom

Unfortunately, there is a tendency in Western punditry and among Iranian exile groups to perpetuate a bleak narrative of Iran as being stale and hopeless. Among the ingredients of these narratives is, first, the alleged need to boycott the elections because they are meaningless. Politics in Iran, it is said, are an illusion affecting no real change and brokering no real societal feedback. Second, even if the president is someone who may offer a glimmer of hope for liberalisation (domestic) or *détente* (foreign, nuclear), the very institution is immediately put into question: Iranian presidents are powerless and cannot accomplish much or indeed anything at all.

When Mohammad Khatami won a surprising victory in 1997, he was immediately castigated by both conservative foes at home and those abroad who prefer the narrative of an Iran concocting dark schemes of regional domination: yet he managed to both liberalise at home and normalise relations abroad. Ahmadinejad, however, was often touted as a powerful president whose rhetoric should be taken at face value and as a plausible indicator of actual policies. Rouhani is now being written into this narrative whereby - supposedly - nothing can change under his presidency: things are comfortably and predictably going to stay bad.

In reality, the Iranian electorate decided to continue the struggle for incremental change from within the system and to hope that against all odds, yet again, the trajectory of developments in the country can be changed. In fact, as it is their country and their fate, there are no real alternatives at their disposal and they cannot 'exempt' themselves from the society they live in - nor can they afford to stand idly by and expect change to spring from apathy.

### What can he do?

The Iranian president, like any other holder of executive power, must contend with other elements within the state structure. In the Iranian case, however, these other structures are particularly formidable and complicated. There is always tension between the supreme leader and the president: the former drawing his authority from God, and indirectly from the people, while the latter is elected on a popular mandate. Rouhani will also have to deal with a security establishment that has become more powerful and brazen in its interference in politics and a parliament dominated by various conservative factions.

Nonetheless, he will have within his mandate to influence politics in many arenas - both domestic and foreign. He will need to address the structural problems, the possible continuation of subsidy reform, the development of the economy as foreseen in various plans drawn up for a 5-20 year period. This includes walking the tight rope of electoral expectations to liberalise the political atmosphere and confronting the wishes of the hardliners to stay in control and stave off reform.

In foreign policy, he is *de facto* the 'face' of the Islamic Republic and can help ease the atmosphere in interacting with the surrounding world (as Khatami did). This includes the complex regional dynamics surrounding Lebanon, Syria and Iraq; the relationship with Egypt and Saudi Arabia; and, of course, the negotiations with the E3+3 on the nuclear issue. In his role as chief negotiator during Khatami's second term, his calm, reasonable yet firm style earned him praise. These qualities will come in handy in the coming years.

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