

Challenges Facing Iran's Presidential Contenders

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The Guardian Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which is responsible for vetting candidates in elections, has approved a total of six men out of over 1,600 hopefuls to run for the Iranian presidency on May 19. Arguably, only three candidates appear to be strong enough to be serious contenders: current reformist President Hassan Rouhani, conservative cleric and jurist Ibrahim Raisi, and the conservative mayor of Tehran and former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. All the candidates, however, are acutely aware that if elected, they would have to hew to the wishes and ultimate desires of the Supreme Leader of the Iranian Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who prefers a conservative win and can at any time sway the vote if he were so inclined.

As things stand today, the outcome of Iran's political bazaar is unpredictable since the fortunes of each contender are tied to ideological considerations, economic interests, and clerical elite machinations that make and break coalitions, especially among the conservatives. But given the current field of candidates, it would not be a surprise if none of the candidates received an outright majority in the first round, a situation that would force a runoff. Then again, in 2013, a plethora of candidates pointed to an assured second round, but Rouhani squeezed in with just over half the electorate to win the presidency when his supporters voted for him en masse and conservatives employed strategic voting by backing different candidates for the expected runoff.

The present round of these elections—the twelfth since the Islamic Revolution of 1979—is being fought on a number of domestic fronts, especially the economy and social issues, and around some important external concerns, most notably the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) of 2015 and Iran's regional role. While the economy did not show great improvement since

2013 and the social atmosphere did not liberalize, President Rouhani remains proud of his nuclear deal accomplishment which, given time, he sees as leading to better socioeconomic conditions and improved relations with the world. On the other hand, the conservative candidates have the blessing of being outsiders and the luxury of proposing populist and attractive programs to an electorate that is seeking deliverance from decades of hardship, sanctions, and ostracism.

What is sure is that reformists and moderates in Iran are coalescing around the incumbent Rouhani. Former Reformist President Mohammad Khatami endorsed him despite being banned from public speaking and appearances. Raisi and Ghalibaf are competing among the different factions of the conservative camp, although both are obviously homing in on what are considered to be the failures of the Rouhani Administration, economic and national security issues, and accusations of government corruption. In their fight, they are cognizant of the fact that they can beat Rouhani only if they could muster enough support among those who are socially conservative, economically marginalized, and viscerally distrustful of the Islamic Republic's openness in the international community.

With Iran undergoing notable socioeconomic and political change, its next president, incumbent or newcomer, will have to hit the ground running. Whoever wins will face the same challenges and will be expected to produce better results.

The Challenge of the Economy

The winner of Iran's presidential election on May 19 has to contend with an economy that has seen both progress and continuing lethargy. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015) lifted most

of the international sanctions on Iran related to its nuclear program following the signing of the JCPOA. Iran also repatriated tens of billions of dollars from its frozen assets; this created much activity and hope but did not result in an immediate improvement in people's lives. Some UN and American unilateral sanctions related to Iran's missile technology and its support of terrorism remain in place and limit its economic relations with the world. Indeed, if President Rouhani loses the election, his loss would arguably be mostly blamed on failures related to the supposed benefits expected from the signing of the JCPOA.

Rouhani's greatest challenge in this regard is in convincing the Supreme Leader that the economy will improve with time. In March 2017, Ayatollah Khamenei expressed resounding disapproval of how the government is performing and decried the fact that lifting the sanctions has not produced the desired results. Khamenei had approved the original negotiations over the nuclear program only because he and the entire political establishment wanted relief from sanctions to improve the economy. He also voiced criticism of a social nature, such as his disapproval of the government's adherence to "the Education 2030 plan" of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which he claimed is "western influenced" whereas Iran emphasizes "Islam and the Koran."

Moreover, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) said in a report last February that despite projections for a 4.5 percent growth, there remain structural problems delaying non-oil activities. Unemployment stands at 12 percent and is estimated to be 25 percent for those 29 years old and younger. Rouhani's conservative competitors have seized on Khamenei's remarks as justification for attacking the president and his administration. In the first presidential debate on April 28, Raisi

pushed a populist agenda and called for overhauling the economic system, while Ghalibaf stated that creating five million jobs is an immediate priority.

Importantly, however, whoever wins the presidency also has to contend with the powerful economic role played by the IRGC, now a significant player in infrastructure development, real estate, gas exploration and field operations, finance, and other business operations. In fact, the Revolutionary Guards have become an important bone of contention between the government of President Rouhani and the Supreme Leader who commands the force. The IRGC controls a quarter of the economy and its associated sectors, employs hundreds of thousands of Iranians, and is the premier military and security organization with domestic and external roles. It is arguably the glue that holds the theocratic state together and protects it. Challenging its economic role is thus fraught with pitfalls and dangers, which the sitting president and his supporters fear. Subsequently, winning a second term for Rouhani is neither guaranteed, if the Corps objects, nor easy, given the absolute authority the Supreme Leader exercises.

The Fate of the JCPOA

No Iranian or international participant or observer can doubt the impact that Rouhani's successful endeavor to resolve Iran's nuclear dilemma had on domestic Iranian affairs, both positively and negatively. Iran received the international attention its political leaders craved; its nuclear program got the permission it required for continuing nuclear research and enriching uranium, albeit by small amounts and to low levels; and its economy benefited from the largesse that came after unfreezing its assets. Importantly, Iran opened its economy for foreign investments after decades of

operating under limiting sanctions and closed trade routes. But this investment has not yet included American ventures into the Iranian economy because of US unilateral sanctions and political and regulatory constraints.

On the other hand, with the JCPOA came expectations among moderates for political openness commensurate with economic changes and for recognition of Iran as an important player in the regional environment. Indeed, Rouhani and his foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, were hailed upon the signing of the agreement; the latter was received as a hero once the details were worked out. Both looked invincible despite the doubts and aspersions cast by conservatives, including the IRGC and Khamenei, about trusting western powers.

The conservatives, for their part, fear potential penetration of the Islamic Republic by hostile forces and powers. Ayatollah Khamenei considered the agreement a potential danger. Hardliners in general could see it as relieving pressure so that Iran may pursue an expansionist policy in the region—beset as the area is by the raging Syrian civil war, the expanding presence of the Islamic State, the political chaos of Iraqi politics, and the complicated Yemen war. Additionally, the conservatives' response to the agreement was to limit its social and economic influence domestically and to exploit its gains to fund an expanded foreign role for the IRGC. With Donald Trump as the new American president, Iran's conservatives may see a golden opportunity to do away with the agreement altogether and redirect their country, under their own new president, away from accommodating the international community.

Yet in the second presidential debate on May 5, both Raisi and Ghalibaf said that they would abide by the JCPOA despite their criticism of its failure to

improve Iranians' lot. Such a position indicates that despite their trepidation, conservatives have no alternative to the agreement. This, in a way, is an affirmation that conservatives, led by Khamenei, could not prevent reaching an agreement on freezing the nuclear program in 2013 or the subsequent negotiations and signing of the final agreement in July 2015. It also is affirmation that the conservative camp has used threats of withdrawing from the negotiations prior to the final deal as a tactic to strengthen the stance of Iranian negotiators. Subsequently, if a conservative were to win the presidency, he is likely to accept the existing agreement and its stipulations and hope that he can somehow produce a better economic environment despite continuing multilateral and unilateral sanctions on the Islamic Republic.

Iran's Regional Role

It is hard to see how Rouhani's continuing presidency would be different from that of either Raisi or Ghalibaf when it comes to Iran's regional role and politics. Both moderates and conservatives in Iran are products of an ideology that extols the virtues of Islamic revolution, opposition to western influence in the Middle East, antagonism to Israel, and assistance to friendly militias and organizations. Indeed, Rouhani ascended to the presidency as the Syrian civil war had taken a turn for the worse. Despite his preaching moderation in foreign policy and accommodation with regional actors, Iran's role expanded in Syria to providing cash and materiel and dispatching IRGC-created militias, such as the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite groups, to fight alongside the Syrian regime. Iran's role has also become more prominent in Iraq and Lebanon as the same militias became stronger. In Yemen, Houthi insurgents have received Iranian weapons that are

smuggled into the country by small boats after being off-loaded in Somalia.

On a broader level, Iran continues to call for regional peace through negotiations; yet it holds on to a position that accuses its neighbor and potential partner, Saudi Arabia, of fomenting terrorism and sectarian hatred. Mutual recriminations have been the norm between the two poles of the Arabian Gulf as Iran becomes more involved in the Arab world and the kingdom acts to stave off Iranian advances. The sacking of the Saudi Arabian diplomatic missions in Tehran and Mashhad at the beginning of 2016 has produced a toxic environment that feeds worrisome developments between the two countries today.

The latest verbal sparring came on May 2nd when Saudi Arabia's Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ruled out any dialogue with Iran, which he said "was planning for the return of the Imam Mahdi" and was trying to destabilize the kingdom and "dominate the Muslim world." He also promised to take the battle to Iran. In response, Iran's Defense Minister Hossein Dehghan threatened to retaliate militarily and to "leave no area untouched [in Saudi Arabia] except Mecca and Medina."

The Great Satan Lives

No Iranian politicians, whether clerical or lay leaders, have won a presidential election extolling the virtues of good relations with the United States. In fact, the road to the Iranian presidency has always been paved with condemnations of the "great Satan" and proclamations to defeat it. From the early days of the Revolution of 1979, the United States has figured as the greatest threat to the revolution, its ideology, and the future of the Islamic Republic. Further, after the election of President

Trump and with American policy based on deep distrust of Iran, not even the moderate Rouhani will be likely to announce positions advocating better relations with the United States. As for the European Union, its leaders wish to help moderates in Iran after many European companies took advantage of the JCPOA to enter the Iranian market.

There is no love lost between Iran and the United States when it comes to President Trump. Since his campaign, he has threatened to confront the Islamic Republic and to renegotiate the nuclear agreement. He has a different take on how the United States should deal with Iran from former President Barack Obama, who sought to encourage its opening and reintegration into the international community to help moderate its behavior. However, and bowing to political and international realities and to necessity, the Trump Administration certified Iran's compliance with the nuclear accord. At the same time, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson announced that Iran is still a sponsor of terrorism and stated that the United States is in the process of reviewing its approach to the Islamic Republic. The administration is also on record criticizing Iranian support of the Syrian regime, working to challenge the Iranian role in Yemen by assisting the Saudi Arabia-led Arab coalition to restore legitimacy to Sanaa, and upbraiding it for interfering in Iraq.

Words of Caution

In a political system controlled by an all-powerful Supreme Leader assisted by the brute force of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, it is hard to expect that the twelfth round of presidential elections in Iran will result in a radical change in Iranian politics, whether the winner is a moderate or a conservative. In fact, what is expected is merely another electoral process that will produce a political leader whose powers are circumscribed by those of the

constitutionally based higher theocratic authority, in the person of Ali Khamenei. Indeed, what the democratic process in Iran has produced after almost 40 years of clerical rule is confined to a periodic renewal, or change, of personalities beholden to a powerful, unelected authority that could thwart whatever an electorate decided on election day.

What is to be surmised is not that the new Iranian president, like his predecessors, is a mere figurehead. His function is one of overall manager of the economy and implementer of foreign policy, within the confines of what is acceptable by Khamenei. He will be able to push the limits on

some issues, as Rouhani dared to do with the nuclear affair. He may tinker with the rules of economic distribution and trade. But his aim better always be on serving the Iranian populace lest they revolt against the religious establishment. It is thus important to understand that the competition between the incumbent moderate Rouhani and his conservative challengers Raisi and Ghalibaf is merely one of different approaches to the same files. Each has to be fully aware, without fail, that the overall strategic vision is the survival and longevity of the Islamic Republic.

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