



Reading Iran's Elections: Implications for Change, the Future of the JCPOA, and the Hardliner Risk

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Iranian elections on February 26 appear to have empowered reformist and moderate-leaning candidates, notwithstanding attempts on the part of hardline members of the Iranian government to steer the elections decisively in their own favor. Final results have yet to be tallied for all parts of Iran, particularly the traditionally more conservative rural districts, and it is certain some particular constituencies will require a second round of voting. As such, it remains unclear exactly how the elections will affect the formal balance of power in the two bodies that had elections, the Iranian parliament (or Majles) and the Assembly of Experts (or AOE, which has the responsibility of choosing the next Supreme Leader of Iran when the incumbent retires or dies). Irrespective of the final tally, it is clear that hardline elements were dealt a severe setback. Many influential conservative leaders in both bodies lost their individual elections and more reformist and moderate-leaning individuals – including President Rouhani and power-broker Rafsanjani – won their own with significant margins. It is reasonable to claim that these elections have underscored the considerable support Rouhani has in his conduct of foreign and domestic policy, and will strengthen his hand politically within the country.

As such, for outsiders who have stressed that the Iranian population is fundamentally more diverse, moderate-leaning and complex than some Western stereotypes would suggest, the election results are a resounding vindication. But, at the same time, those who have warned against overstating the importance of Iranian elections can also point to the fact that, though some reformers may have won, the distinction between “reformist” and “conservative” in Iran – particularly as relates to some of Iran’s most noxious foreign and domestic policies – is scant. Moreover, it remains an open question the degree to which either the Majles or the AOE matter in terms of setting those policies. As with all things Iran, there is truth to both sides.

Near-term implications

Assuming that the initial projections are sustained, with reformist and moderate-leaning candidates expanding their strength in the Majles and the AOE, there will be a shake-up in how Iranian politics have proceeded during the first two years of President Rouhani’s administration. The previous Majles was elected in early 2012, before the economic crisis that Iran experienced due to Western sanctions and the cumulative damage of years of mismanagement. It was also largely hardline and opposed to many of the economic reforms that Rouhani has pushed since he was elected in June 2013. During this campaign, several of Rouhani’s ministers were officially warned and threatened with impeachment. Though Rouhani was able to get the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) approved by the Majles in the fall of 2015, this outcome was uncertain, with hardline opposition mounting until Supreme Leader Khamenei implied that he supported the deal.



It is unlikely that reformist or moderate factions will have a majority in the new Majles, particularly since rural seats have yet to be allocated. However, with a new Majles in office, it is likely that the harassment of moderates will decline or, at a minimum, there will be less risk of threats being carried out. Rouhani will also have an easier time getting legislation through the Majles that supports his economic reform agenda.

However, though the Majles is not a *potemkin* parliament, it is also not the last word in Iranian governance. Bills from the Majles must be approved by the hardline leaning Guardian Council, an appointed body that has ultimate authority over acts of the Majles. (This BBC graphic helps articulate its place in the process) The Guardian Council is still hardline leading. Moreover, the Supreme Leader himself retains significant political power, even as he has sought to exercise it via a consensus-building approach since his own appointment nearly 30 years ago. And, of course, hardline factions in the security services exercise their own, considerable influence on the political process, as they can arrest and prosecute those deemed out of line with what they consider to be appropriate Islamic revolutionary principles.

Ultimately, though, the Iranian government has long placed value in its ability to claim that it is a democracy with popular rule, even if few outside of Iran would describe it as such. It is in part for this reason that the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential election was so jarring inside of Iran, prompting political protests. Iran's leaders have no desire for similar protests to occur again, particularly after witnessing the turbulent events of the Arab Spring with a combination of *schadenfreude* and disquiet. As a consequence, though hardline groups will still make Rouhani's life difficult, it seems reasonable to assert that Rouhani will have a freer hand in developing and executing a more liberalized economic policy, as well as continuing with a more constructive foreign policy.

Importantly, “a more constructive foreign policy” does not mean a foreign policy that is in line with US interests and desires. We should temper any expectation that Rouhani will now abandon Assad, that Iran will stop supporting Hezbollah or terrorists in general, or that human rights will automatically improve in the country. In fact, some elements of Iranian foreign policy probably won't change at all in the near term, if for no other reason than as a sop to those embittered hardline elements retaining their official positions. But, if the initial indications from Rouhani are serious and he continues to prioritize a more positive Iranian approach to the outside world, then these elections will enable him to expand this approach beyond addressing concerns with Iran's nuclear program to get sanctions relief. Indeed, these elections now remove an excuse he previously could have claimed for failing to be more constructive.

JCPOA implications

No matter how the election had gone, it was unlikely to have had major near-term implications for the JCPOA. Certainly, with this result, it is far less likely that the Iranian government will decide to stop implementing the JCPOA and to return to its unconstrained nuclear program of 2005-2013. However, even hardline elements probably would want to see some of the benefits of the sanctions relief under the JCPOA before they took steps that could lead to its termination. This election does



not change this equation. That said, to the degree the election is seen as disenfranchising hardline elements, we should now be on the look-out for provocations from those elements, who may wish to embarrass Rouhani or place him in an uncomfortable spot.

But, assuming that these elements are contained to a large extent, we should continue to see Iran seek foreign investment in its economy, an expanded role for non-hydrocarbon industry, and the privatization of state-owned enterprises where constitutionally possible and as permitted by the JCPOA.

Long-term implications

Over the long term, it is not clear what the election results will mean. The Iranian people have voted in favor of a more conciliatory faction of their political elite, but one that still largely embraces conservative strains in the Iranian political culture. Reform minded parts of the population will be pleased and the election suggests that there are more of them than those inclined to a more doctrinal approach. But, the see-saw of Iranian politics could go in the other direction if Rouhani's reforms are unsuccessful in solving Iran's many economic problems and, importantly, the hardline elements within the Iranian government have tools to use to ensure this is the case.

Rather than conclude the inevitability of moderation in Iran, it is safer to argue that moderate-leaning groups are empowered now to make their case, both rhetorically and in government policy. If they succeed, then hardline factions will increasingly face an existential crisis of their own, left behind by the population they allege to serve. Their response to this threat will probably be the most significant determinant of whether Iran is on the right path to a more moderate, constructive, prosperous country in the long-term or if this election marks another lost opportunity for real change in Iran.

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