

Despite Iran's history of election surprises, Rohani could triumph



Gareth Smyth

Despite presidential election surprises in Iran – Mohammed Khatami in 1997, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 – caution against believing that Hassan

Rohani is heading for victory on May 19. Recent shocks elsewhere, with Britain's June 2016 Brexit vote and Americans electing Donald Trump in November, add to a sense that Rohani is vulnerable as he seeks a second term.

As in the United States and Britain, social media counts. Candidates utilise Telegram and Instagram, which are generally not blocked and voters can follow on the faster speeds of G3 and G4.

But Saeid Golkar, visiting fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, said most Iranians were sceptical about pledges of cash handouts and higher subsidies from Rohani's main challengers.

"Iran had its wave of populism ten years earlier (than the West), and the people were affected badly," Golkar said. "The big cities, the youth just don't believe these promises."

In 2005, Ahmadinejad won in a landslide promising to restore national greatness and make ordinary Iranians better off but he left office in 2013 with 40% inflation, banks weighed down with non-performing loans and relations strained with Iran's neighbours and the West.

Even the uncertainty over foreign investment fostered by Trump's threats to torpedo the 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers or introduce new sanctions does not seem to have destroyed many Iranians' belief that there is no serious alternative to Rohani's course.

"Ahmadinejad talked about self-reliance and resistance but what we got was higher prices and factories closing," a Tehran professional said. "Yes, we want Iran strong internationally but we also want good relations with the outside world. People aren't enthusiastic about the election but most will vote."

As expected, Rohani's main challengers in a field of six, are two principlists. Ebrahim Raeisi, chairman of the Imam Reza shrine in Mashhad, and Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf focus their appeals on poorer Iranians. A campaign



Uncertainty. Iran's President Hassan Rohani speaks during a visit to Azadshahr in Golestan province.

(Reuters)

video for Raeisi highlighted contrasting images of street children and mansions with swimming pools.

"It had a strong emotional appeal," said Golkar. "In showing the wealth gap, it subtly blames Rohani as an oligarch who doesn't care about the poor."

There has been no sign that either Raeisi or Ghalibaf will withdraw in the other's favour. While this does not rule out one of them facing Rohani in a run-off ballot, needed if no one wins a majority on May 19, having two competing principlists blunts their message.

Polling is unreliable – it is either conducted by phone from outside Iran or done inside the country by vested interests – and therefore cannot clearly indicate which principlist is best placed to beat Rohani.

"Polling inside Iran is part of someone's psychological operation," said Golkar. "The media related to the [Islamic] Revolutionary Guards [Corps] (IRGC) is tending to support Raeisi, and the media closer to the Basij [the 4 million-strong volunteer group linked to the IRGC] is more pro-Ghalibaf. Fars News is more for Ghalibaf, Tasnim more for Raeisi."

The campaign confirms a realignment in Iranian politics with the 2015 nuclear accord. The reformists, slowly re-emerging since sidelined after street protests at Ahmadinejad's disputed 2009 re-election, again back Rohani because of the nuclear deal, his cautious relaxation of social restrictions and his programme of economic reform.

Eshaq Jahangiri, a fourth candidate, who served in Khatami's reformist government and is Rohani's first vice-president, has been talked up by some principlists, probably to take votes from Rohani but Jahangiri is widely expected to drop out in favour of Rohani, who has also received Khatami's support.

Rohani, essentially a pragmatic conservative, has also been endorsed by Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani and by Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, senior adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Larijani and Nateq-Nouri are – to coin a phrase – "moderate principlists" who support the nuclear deal and Rohani's government.

But victory for Rohani would be a defeat for populism and the hard-line principlists and it would not shift the political

centre of gravity from conservatives to reformists. Nor would it change Iran's foreign and regional policies.

It also would not end Raeisi's likely ambition to succeed Khamenei as leader. After this presidential campaign, Raeisi will be better known. The decision about who follows Khamenei, 78 this year and who had prostate surgery in 2014, lies with the 88 clerics of the Assembly of Experts.

For Ghalibaf, who has run for president twice before, this election may end his political career, especially if he loses the Tehran mayoralty with defeat in council elections on the same day.

"In [the presidential poll of] 2005 Ghalibaf focused on the middle class, then in 2013 portrayed himself as a revolutionary," said Golkar. "Now he talks about poor people, although his glasses are a designer brand. On social media, they satirise him as a chameleon, someone who copies others to achieve power."

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A Rohani win will not change Iran's foreign and regional policies.

For Iran's ethnic minorities, whoever wins the election they lose



Rahim Hamid

With Iran's presidential election soon taking place,

media in the country are constantly reporting on tensions between Iranian hardliners and so-called reformists as contenders are vying for the leadership.

Whatever the outcome of the election, however, Iranian people are well aware that it is essentially a cosmetic exercise. In essence, the election is a contest to become the highest-ranking servant to the supreme leader. No candidate will be brave enough to address the injustices against the country's ethnic minorities, which would be political suicide under the current regime.

Regardless of whether the candidate is a nominal reformist or hardliner, he would not be allowed to stand for election, let alone make leadership decisions once elected, without first obtaining Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's approval. The Guardian Council, whose members are also appointed by the

supreme leader, vets all candidates' applications.

The outside appearance of democracy, through a choice of different candidates, gives enough semblance of electoral choice to please Western countries.

In its census, taken every ten years, Iranian governments have avoided recording ethnicities to keep non-Persian communities in the dark about their true sizes, allowing the state to downplay their significance. Available figures are pretty much guesswork but estimates are: Up to 8 million Arabs, 10 million Kurds, 20 million Azeris and 40 million Persians. Smaller ethnic groups make up the rest of Iran's population, which is estimated to be more than 80 million.

For Iran's Ahwazi Arabs, as well as for other minorities, the choice is even more farcical. Elections in Iran, like the doctrine that shapes the country's constitution, are based on a mixture of theocracy and Persian supremacy, with policy issues second to sect and ethnicity.

Kamil Alboshoka, a prominent Ahwazi rights activist asked: "How can Ahwazi people pin any hope on this election while

they're considered worthless by the [Iranian] regime, their language is banned, their identity denied and their environmental wealth destroyed and stolen?"

Reza Fathollanejad, an Iranian-Kurdish journalist, voiced similar scepticism about the value of the election.

"If you look at all of the past presidential elections, the Kurdish people have always chosen two options. The first is voting for the candidate who is said not to be the leader's favourite and the second is to boycott the election," he explained. "The boycott choice has always been a significant option in Kurdistan compared to the other regions of Iran based on the official statistics and, even then, Kurds have said that the level of participation is far lower than the level shown by the government."

Babek Chalabiyani, the spokesman of the Azerbaijan National Resistance Organisation, was also contemptuous, calling the election a "sham." Chalabiyani said the regime's brutal repression and imprisonment of Turkish Azeri human rights activists mean that the wisest course is to boycott the election rather than taking part in an undemocratic,

predetermined vote.

With no possible benefit from voting, particularly for Ahwazis or other minority groups in Iran, there is a persuasive argument that the best way for ethnic minority voters to register their unhappiness about this farcical situation and lack of choice is to simply refuse to vote. A widespread lack of public participation is a safe way for minorities to express their frustration at a system that marginalises and oppresses them.

Under the current grim reality in Iran, ethnic minorities suffer systematic oppression and denial of their most basic human rights under a fundamentalist theocracy whose sole concern is maintaining its own power.

The election in Iran is a public relations exercise, a piece of political theatre that has nothing to do with Iranians' lives but that sends a message to the rest of the world promoting the regime's favourite lie that it has acquired the characteristics of democracy and moderation.

Rahim Hamid is co-founder of Ahwaz Monitor, a website that focuses on Iran's Arab community.

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