

The 11th Presidential Election in Iran

Pilihan Raya Presiden Iran ke-11

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ABSTRACT

The political structure of Iran is a theocratic system based on Shia doctrine. The most powerful religious and political authority is a Shia religious authority known as the Supreme Leader. However, the head of government is a president elected through popular vote. So far eleven presidential elections have been held since the 1979 revolution. The eleventh presidential election was held on June 14, 2013. It was one of the most important presidential elections. It owed its importance to the previous controversial presidential election in 2009 which led to a wide popular uprising. More importantly, the eleventh presidential election was held amid tensions among different political streams within the political system. Based on primary and some secondary sources, this paper looks at the Iranian electoral laws, the candidates, their campaigns, voting, the election result and the wider significance of the eleventh presidential election. It specifically answers the following questions: what was the importance of the eleventh presidential election? What were the electoral laws, institutions and procedures for the presidential election in Iran? How was the presidential election conducted? What role do presidential elections play in the Iranians' quest for democracy? This paper finds that although the election results received welcome by Iranians, there are significant flaws in the Iranian electoral system which casts doubt on the credibility of the elections being held in Iran. In particular, there were series of events during the eleventh presidential election which affected its natural outcome. Finally, this paper discovers that despite the conservatives' paeon, the presidential election was a major setback for them.

Keywords: Election; Iran; Presidency; electoral law; Guardian Council

ABSTRAK

Struktur politik di Iran adalah sistem teokratik yang berlandaskan doktrin Syiah. Kuasa agama dan politik paling kuat di Iran ialah daripada pihak berkuasa keagamaan Syiah yang juga dikenali sebagai Pemimpin Agung. Walau bagaimanapun, ketua kerajaannya adalah presiden yang dipilih melalui undian paling banyak. Setakat ini sebelas pilihan raya telah diadakan sejak revolusi 1979. Pilihan raya kesebelas telah diadakan pada 14 Jun 2013 dan merupakan salah satu pilihan raya yang paling penting kerana pilihan raya yang dilaksanakan pada tahun 2009 membawa kepada pemberontakan. Apa yang lebih penting lagi, pilihan raya kesebelas telah diadakan di tengah-tengah ketegangan aliran politik yang berbeza dalam sistem politik Iran. Berdasarkan sumber primer dan sekunder, makalah ini melihat kepada undang-undang pilihan raya Iran, calon-calon, kempen, undian, keputusan pilihan raya dan signifikan daripada pilihan raya tersebut. Secara khususnya makalah ini menjawab persoalan berikut: Apakah kepentingan pilihan raya presiden kesebelas? Apakah undang-undang pilihan raya, institusi dan prosidur pilihan raya yang dilaksanakan di Iran? Bagaimanakah pilihan raya presiden dijalankan? Apakah peranan yang dimainkan oleh pilihan raya presiden dalam usaha Iran untuk demokrasi? Makalah ini mendapati bahawa walaupun keputusan pilihan raya mendapat sambutan oleh rakyat Iran, namun terdapat kelemahan ketara yang menimbulkan keraguan terhadap sistem dan kredibiliti pilihan raya yang diadakan. Khususnya, terdapat peristiwa semasa pilihan raya presiden dijalankan yang menjejaskan keputusan pilihanraya. Akhirnya, makalah ini menemui bahawa disebalik kemenangan konservatif, pilihan raya Presiden adalah satu tamparan kepada mereka.

Kata kunci: Pilihan raya; Iran; Presiden; undang-undang pilihan raya; Guardian Council

INTRODUCTION

Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, eleven presidential elections have been held in the country. The ruling elite tend to interpret people's participation in these elections as a sign of support for the Islamic Republic. They also cite these elections as a proof for the democratic nature of their Islamic political system. Signboards sporting a message of the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini, that "the vote of the nation is the true measurement", also stands in glory in every nook and corner of the country. However, there are a number of legal, institutional, and procedural issues related to the election quality in Iran, which are always highlighted by the opponents as obstacles to democracy in the country.

This paper analyses Iran's 11th presidential election held on June 14, 2013. First, it discusses the importance of the 11th presidential election. Second, it examines the electoral laws and procedures related to the presidential elections in Iran. Third, it examines the parties and candidates contesting the election. Fourth, it examines the campaigns, campaign issues and the voting process. Finally, it analyses the election results with particular reference to the Iranians' struggle for democracy.

DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS

Elections are considered as the very spirit of a democracy. However, one needs to know more "about the conditions existing in particular countries before awarding them accolade 'democratic' simply on this basis" (Moten 2000: 67). To put differently, although democracy cannot exist without elections, it's not the only political system where elections are held. In Schedler's view "Elections have been an instrument of authoritarian control as well as a means of democratic governance" (2000: 36). He argues that the era of overt repression is over, and even the authoritarian regimes now operate under the shadow of elections. Schedler suggests three types of political systems where elections are held: liberal democracy, electoral democracy, and electoral authoritarianism. According to him, "while liberal democracies go beyond the electoral minimum", electoral democracies "manage to 'get elections right' but fail to institutionalize other vital dimensions of democratic constitutionalism, such as the rule of law, political accountability, bureaucratic integrity, and public deliberation" (Schedler 2000: 37). And, in electoral authoritarianism, the contests do not comply with minimal democratic norms at all (Schedler, 2000: 38).

Essentially, 'democracy' means having the rights to choose political leaders through regular, free and fair elections (Diamond 2008: 21). In the words of Schumpeter, democracy is an "institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the

common good" (Schumpeter 2003: 250). Therefore, there is no disagreement on the meaning of 'democracy'. However, academics disagree on the criteria for calling a system 'democracy' (See. Schumpeter 2003: 250-254). It is a fact that democracy cannot be achieved in the absence of freedom of expression and association, and the rule of law. So, while free and fair elections are important for institutionalization of democracy, they are not enough (Diamond 2008: 21). A democratic system besides having free and fair elections must amongst others, ensure that all ethnic and religious minorities are equally accommodated. More importantly, electoral laws should be consistent with related universal laws or at least should not be contradictory to those universal laws (Diamond 2008: 22).

Failing the above would turn a system into *pseudo democracy* (Diamond 2008: 23). As argued by Diamond (2003: 23), "competitive and uncertain elections, even frequent alternation of parties in power, can coexist with serious issues such as human rights violation, absence of social and political freedom, discrimination against minorities, etc." Diamond rightly argues that "Electoral democracy helps to make these other values more achievable, but it does not by any means ensure them" (Diamond 2008: 23).

Against this background, one would need to know the electoral laws, institutions and the procedure for presidential elections in Iran. It is also imperative to examine the importance of the 11th presidential election, the way it was conducted, and its role in the Iranian's quest for democracy.

THE 11TH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND ITS IMPORTANCE

The 11th presidential election was one of the most important elections in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran, as it followed the controversial 2009 presidential election that stirred massive protests throughout the country and eventually led to the emergence of the popular pressure group known as the Green Movement. International and local observers showed particular interest in the 11th presidential election for two main reasons. First, they were interested in the reaction of the Green Movement to the 11th presidential election, given the severe crackdown on protesters in the previous election and the arrest of the movement's two top leaders: Mehdi Karrobi and Mir Hussain Moosavi. Second, they wanted to know how the ruling elites would move to avoid crisis in these elections in the aftermath of the Green Movement.

Later developments also tended to add to the importance of the 11th presidential election. The most important factor was the relationship between Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader. While Ahmadinejad enjoyed strong support from the Supreme

Leader, and even his second-term controversial victory was explicitly backed by the Supreme Leader, their relationship became subject to many disputes during Ahmadinejad's second term in office. However, no drastic measures were taken against Ahmadinejad due to the initial strong support of the Supreme Leader to him, as any political crisis could potentially leave a question mark on the wisdom and choice of the Supreme Leader. As they put it in Persian, 'Ahmadinejad, in his second term, turned into a bone stuck in the Supreme Leader's throat that he could neither swallow nor take out'. Perhaps it would be right to argue that Ahmadinejad's first-term victory in 2005 was a surprise for many, his second victory in 2009 was subjected to many controversies, and his departure was a long-awaited event for the ruling elite and observers alike.

Free and fairness in the 11th election was also an important issue, as the previous presidential election had turned out to be the most disputed election in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the past, only outside opponents of the Islamic Republic would question the credibility of elections in the country, but during the 11th presidential election internal political forces seemed equally concerned for the first time. It provoked the Supreme Leader to warn against using the term 'free and fair election' as he believed anyone who used the term was speaking the language of the West against Iran (Supreme Leader 2013a: 1&3).

The clandestine role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard has always been seen with suspicion in elections in Iran. Its role in the 2009-presidential election stirred massive protests and immense controversy. Yet, during the 11th presidential election, the representative of the Supreme Leader in the Revolutionary Guards went a step further arguing that the Revolutionary Guard will set criteria for the election. He asserted that "our essential duty is the rational and logical engineering of the election" (Tihirān e Imrūz 2013: 3).

Observers also wondered how Ahmadinejad would continue his stay in politics. Among the five previous presidents, only Khamenei (1981-1989) had managed to ascend to the higher position of the Supreme Leadership following the death of the founder of the Islamic Republic in 1989, while the other presidents were eventually disgraced.¹ The debate over this issue involved a key player namely Isfandyar Rahim Masha'ee -- the father-in-law of the president's son and his chief of staff -- who was labelled by the supporters of the Supreme Leader as the head of the so-called Deviation Front. There was growing concern among the opponents of Ahmadinejad that he might promote Masha'ee as his successor in the 11th presidential election. It eventually led the ruling elites to fear that unrest might begin before the election, unlike in 2009 when riots followed the presidential election.

ELECTORAL LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The post-1979 revolution political system of Iran is a 'two-tiered sovereignty'. It claims popular legitimacy on the basis of regular elections being held, and at the same time the major portion of power is reserved for the clergy (Saikal 2009: 92). The Supreme Leader is the most powerful political and religious authority under the Article 57 of the constitution. All republican institutions are controlled, directly or indirectly by the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader is also the chief commander of all military and paramilitary forces. In addition to the above constitutional prerogatives, in the Iranian political system the major portion of power are vested among the informal individuals, institutions and networks. In other words, the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is much more than what is mentioned in the country's constitution. These institutions, individuals and networks are directly or indirectly linked with the Supreme Leader, thus are not answerable to any republican authority (Mehran & Houchang 2004: 508-510).

The president in Iran, more or less, is the head of the state. He is elected through a direct vote for four years, and can be re-elected for only one consequent term. He chooses cabinet members, endorses the credential of ambassadors stationed in the country, and signs treaties with foreign countries. He also ratifies all laws approved by parliament. Yet, as noted above, unlike other republican political systems, the president in Iran is not the first person in the country. According to Article 113 of the constitution, he is the second in rank after the Supreme Leader, and is in fact accountable to the latter in tandem with Article 122.

Based on the Article 115 of the constitution, the president should be elected from political and religious *rijāl*. The term *rijāl* is the plural form of the Arabic word *rajul*, which literally means 'Man'. The use of the word has led to a continual debate whether or not a woman can contest the election. Some law experts argue that the term should not be taken in terms of its literary meaning, and it is rather applicable to both genders. However, no interpretation of the word has been offered by the Guardian Council (GC) so far, nor a single woman could ever qualify to contest election. The GC is the sole authority to interpret the constitution and to decide the qualification of candidates in parliamentary and presidential elections. It is a supervisory body comprising six senior clerics and six law specialists. The clerics are to be appointed directly by the Supreme Leader in tandem with Article 91 of the constitution, and the law specialists are to be nominated by the Chief of Judiciary who is a direct appointee of the Supreme Leader.

At the threshold of the 11th presidential election, the Iranian parliament drafted an electoral reform act which some of its clauses stirred a controversy. The most controversial clause was the age requirement. According to the draft act, the candidacy age is limited between 40 to 75 years (Fatimih 2012). To many observers, the clause was purposefully inserted in the act to deprive ex-president Akbar Hashemi Rafsenjani from contesting the election. However, the certification and age related clauses were later rejected by the GC, and the act was approved partially. Yet, the overall act, brought a major change in organizing presidential elections in Iran. The most important change was related to Article 31 of the electoral by-laws. Previously, the Interior Ministry had been responsible to conduct the election. According to the new law, the ministry had to work under a council namely *Hay'at e Ejrā'yi e Markazī* (Central Executive Board). The board would have 11 members, including Interior Minister, Intelligence Minister, Prosecutor General, and one member from the presiding board of parliament. The seven non-official members would be chosen from a list of 30 religious, political, cultural and social personalities proposed by the Interior Ministry (Iranian Student News Agency 2012).

However, the profiles of the seven non-official members in the 11th presidential election suggest that they were more or less officials or semi-officials close to the political system, particularly the Supreme Leader. For instance, one of these members was Muhammad Muhmmadian, the representative of the Supreme Leader in universities; another member, Reza Taqawi, was the head of Governing Council of Friday Imams; and Muhammad Hassan Rahimian was the representative of the Supreme Leader in *Bunyād e Shahīd* (Martyr Foundation). To some analysts, the act aimed at reducing President Ahmadinejad's government control over the election process. This argument seemed valid given the government's resistance to form the Central Executive Board. According to the law, the government is supposed to form the board at least four months before the election, but it was formed only two months ahead of the 11th presidential election. To many ruling elites, it was a deliberate delay by the president.

THE NOMINATION AND THE PARTIES

As announced, nominations were held from May 7-11, 2013. In the presidential election, major candidates usually file their applications on the closing day. Similarly, in the 11th presidential election, the nomination process started with little-known candidates filing their papers. In fact, most of them did not seriously intend to contest the election. For instance, one of these candidates was quoted as saying, "If Ahmadinejad could become the president, why can't I?" Another claimed, "I am a sorcerer, and, by writing a few words, can hoodwink

the U.S. President Barak Obama. I will write a talisman and put it in dunes throughout the country, so that people would get relief from depression once they use the water. I am also able to write something which will help provide jobs to the youth and find dream-mates for boys and girls." (Shargh 2013a: 2) Among them, there was one old man wrapped in winding-sheet, bearing the Iranian flag on his shoulder. Holding a flower in one hand and the Holy Quran in the other, he claimed he was the only person who could rescue Iran. There were also some candidates who believed that nominating themselves for such a high position would enhance their self-confidence (Shargh 2013a: 2).

The most interesting moment of the nomination process was when two important candidates arrived to file their papers, just minutes before the nomination period was about to end. The first one was Akbar Hashemi Rafsenjani. He was at the heart of election debates. He is known as the architect of 'supreme leadership' (*vilāyat e faqīh*) in its current form, as it is believed it was him who paved the ground for Ayatollah Khamenei to become the Supreme Leader. After the demise of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khomeini, in 1985, at the Assembly of Expert meeting which had been called to choose the Khomeini's successor, Hashemi claimed that Khomeini in his final moments had expressed his desire for Khamenei as next Supreme Leader (Takeyh 2009: 254). However, once considered the closest person to the Supreme Leader, he was disgraced by the ruling elites following his stand on the post-2009 election crisis in his Tehran Friday prayers speech on July 17, 2009. He was never invited again for the speech.

However, disqualifying Rafsenjani was not easy for the GC. The question was how a two-term president, one-term speaker of the parliament, Head of Assembly of Expert for eight years, and the current head of the Expediency Council, could be disqualified. Therefore, the ruling elites preferred that Rafsenjani himself decides not to apply for candidacy. On the other hand, reformist leaders, including the former president Muhammad Khatami, pursued Rafsenjani to file his nomination papers. According to reports, there were a number of meetings between Khatami and Rafsenjani, each one trying to convince the other to participate in the election. Nonetheless, Khatami kept on saying publicly that given the socio-politico-economic situation of the country, Rafsenjani was the best option. It's worth mentioning that Rafsenjani is not a reformist in essence; he is rather regarded as 'man of all seasons'. Reformist leaders believed that in a situation when everything was being controlled, Rafsenjani was the only person who could face those challenges. However, failing to stop Rafsenjani from application for candidacy, initiatives were taken to prepare the public opinion about his disqualification by the GC. In this regard the first statement came from GC's spokesperson, who said that "if someone is only able to work a few hours a day,

his qualification would not be approved in any case” (Kayhān 2013: 1&2).

The other candidate who arrived at the last minute was Isfandyar Rahim Masha’ee. He was being accompanied by President Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad’s act provoked severe criticism from the ruling elites, who called the act as a clear violation of the presidential oath. The GC called a meeting in which the members unanimously declared the president’s act as a crime, and the case was referred to the court (Jumhūrī e Islāmī 2013a: 2).

A total of 686 persons applied for candidacy. As noted earlier, the majority of these applicants were little-known individuals who did not actually intend to fight the election. Out of the total number, there were around 40 major applicants. They belonged to four major streams: *Usūlgarāyān e Tundru* (Hard-line principled), *Usūlgarāyān e Mu’tadil* (Moderate Principled), *Iqlāṭ Talab* (Reformist), and independents.

Within the Hard-Line Principled camp, there were four different groups, the most important being *Jibhih e Pāyidārī* (Resistance Front). It was led by a conservative cleric namely Mesbah Yazdī, who nominated Fazel Lankarani, the former Health Minister in Ahmadinejad’s first cabinet. *Pāyidārī* was formed in the early 2012 by a group of Ahmadinejad’s former team members, which is why the group is also known as ‘Dismissed by the government’. The other group in this camp was 1+2 Coalition comprising three persons (Ali Akbar Velayati, Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Ghulam Ali Haddad Aadel). They had agreed to file nomination but at the end, depending on the taste of the political environment, two of them would withdraw their applications. The third group was 2+3 Coalition, which comprised five individuals namely Yahya Aal Ishaq, Muhammad Reza Bahonar, Hassan Abu Abu Turabi, Mustafa Pour Muhammadi and Manoochehr Muttaki. This group, in fact, was a mere coalition of five individuals, while the 1+2 Coalition had systemic support from the conservative class and the establishment. The fourth group was associated with President Ahmadinejad, with Isfandyar Rahim Masha’ee as its main candidate.

The reformist camp was led by the former president Muhammad Khatami with Muhammad Reza Aref (First Vice-President from 2001 to 2005) as its principal candidate. The Moderate Principled camp was led by Rafsenjani, with Hassan Rouhani in the second position. Finally, there were independent candidates. Most of them, in terms of political inclination, belonged to the Hard-line Principled camp, unofficially backed by different conservative groups and personalities. In this category, Muhsen Rezaee, the former commander of Iranian Revolutionary Guard, and Saeed Jalili, Iran’s chief interlocutor in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, were important applicants

The Ultra-Principled camp had a clear advantage over the reformists in the election process. Having

access to the corridors of power, the Ultra-Principled camp mostly resorted to pressure tactics and force while the reformist, due to their weak position in the power structure, adopted a softer line. Similarly, while the Ultra-Principled camp had access to state-supported media, the reformist camp relied on a few newspapers and some websites and online forums. Additionally, due to the weaker position of the Ultra-Principled camp among the public, they preferred contesting with the second-ranking reformists or semi-reformist rather than with Khatami and Rafsenjani.

THE VETTING PROCESS AND THE FINAL CONTESTERS

With the closure of the five-day-long nomination period on May 11, 2013, the election entered its most breathtaking phase. Around 75 million Iranians were waiting for the opinion of 12 individuals (six clerics and six lawyers) at the Guardian Council which was about to decide who could run for the election. According to the law, the GC is supposed to finalize the list of qualified candidates in five to ten days after the nomination period ends. However, in the 11th election, the GC took more time, seemingly because of a lack of consensus over the final list of contenders. Eventually, out of 656 applicants, only 8 were qualified. The most controversial decision was the disqualification of Rafsenjani and Masha’ee whose nomination had created a huge hue and cry in the Ultra-Principled camp.

The implication of Rafsenjani’s disqualification was enormous. For many it was unbelievable while many equated it with putting a ‘cancel stamp’ on the identity card of the Islamic republic. The New York Times quoted an Iranian youth as saying “they say a revolution eats its children, but in the case of Rafsenjani, the revolution has eaten its father” (Erdbrink 2013). It was believed that by disqualifying Rafsenjani, there was no hope left for free and fair elections, and that the Supreme Leader would bring his man to the president’s office by any means. Rafsenjani was a source of hope for many people. To a number of Iranian expatriates in Malaysia interviewed by the authors, Rafsenjani was the person who had created the Supreme Leader, and only he could counter him. To them, Rafsenjani’s disqualification had crystallized the authoritarian nature of the Supreme Leader.

The disqualification also provoked a strong reaction from the political and religious elites. A number of high-profile clerics and politicians wrote open letters to sympathize with him. Among these letters, some were written to the Supreme Leader appealing him to intervene by his special order which, in Iran’s political jargon, is called *hukm e hukūmatī*. In this regard, the most important letter came from Zahra Mustafavi, the daughter of the founder of the Islamic Republic

of Iran. Her letter contained an unheard narration which marginalized the main theme of the letter. She had mentioned that her father, while talking about his successor(s), had mentioned Rafsenjani's name too (Mustafavi Zahra 2013: 3). It was for the first time that such a statement was made by a close person to the founder of the Islamic Republic challenging the official version of the narration according to which the founder had only named Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader, as his right successor. However, far away of these reactions, Rafsenjani himself remained calm.

As far as Masha'ee is concerned, unlike Rafsenjani, he seemed determined to defy the GC's decision. The president also supported this stand, saying that "Masha'ee has been subjected to oppression. I believe in a country where there is *vilāyat e faqih*, oppression of such a level cannot take place" (Shargh 2013b: 2). He said he would follow up the case through the Supreme Leader until a solution was found (Shargh 2013b: 2). Masha'ee's campaign stalls operated for seven days after his disqualification, despite Iran's chief of police's warning that the disqualified candidates' campaign stalls should immediately be closed, or else they would be crushed (Shargh 2013c: 12). Given the temperament of the president, most observers expected a bold reaction over Masha'ee's disqualification. But, as of today, the reasons behind Ahmadinejad's silence towards those statements remain unknown.

However, neither the president's backchannel negotiation for Masha'ee nor the appeals for Rafsenjani's qualification could bring any change to the GC decision. Finally, the Supreme Leader put his approval stamp on the GC's decision. In his meeting with parliamentarians, he expressed his gratitude to those candidates who were disqualified but remained obedient to the law (Supreme Leader, 2013b: 3). Consequently, the list of candidates remained unchanged with eight candidates: they were Ali Akbar Velayati (Advisor to the Supreme Leader in International Affairs), Mohsen Rezaee (General Secretary of the Expediency Council), Muhammad Garazi (a former Revolutionary Guards official), Hassan Rouhani (Head of the National Security Council's Strategic Studies Center), Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf (Tehran's mayor), Haddad Aadi (parliamentarian), Saeed Jalili (the then Iranian chief nuclear negotiator), and Muhammad Reza Arif (Member of the Expediency Council, and the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution).

Muhammad Reza Arif was the principal candidate for the reformists, while Hassan Rouhani emerged the candidate of the moderate-principled group after Rafsenjani's disqualification. The three members of the 2+1 Coalition (Ghalibaf, Aadel and Velayati) were backed by different mainstream principled groups close to the Supreme Leader, while Said Jalili was believed to be the favourite candidate of the Supreme Leader. Saeed Jalili later also won the support of *Jibhih e Pāyidārī*, and

its spiritual mentor, Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, following the withdrawal of the group's principal candidate, Bagher Lankarni. Gharazi was a weak candidate having no significant group behind him, while Raza'ee had declared himself as an independent candidate from the very beginning despite the fact that he had his *Jibhih e Istādagi* (Determined Front) behind him.

ELECTIONS CAMPAIGNS AND THE VOTING

The election campaigns were scheduled from May 24, 2013 to the late hours of June 12, 2013. Nevertheless, campaigns started before the scheduled time. There were three types of campaign. One took place on the state-run media. Three rounds of group debate had been planned for the candidates. However, the first round hardly seemed like a debate. It was like a multiple-choice test. A moderator would ask them a question and the candidates would have to choose the correct answer from four available options. Most of the time, the candidates preferred to say "the question is incorrect", or would suggest a fifth answer. In the latter days, the show turned out into a laughing stock for the public.

The debates were designed to avoid the problems that emerged during the 10th presidential debate in 2009, in which the candidates debated on a one-to-one basis. The outspoken Ahmadinejad had come along with documents related to the misuse of power by his rivals displaying them live for the viewers. However, in the remaining rounds the candidates were provided with the opportunity to defend and clarify their position over national issues.

The second form of campaign happened at public places such as public halls and stadiums and universities. All eight candidates travelled across different provinces to address the public, garnering support for their election agenda. Some of these speeches proved to be counterproductive. One of Ghalibaf's speech is important in this regard. In a gathering with *Basij* students, in order to prove that he always stood firm against the anti-regime elements, he admitted that in the position of Commander of Tehran's police force, he had personally sat on a motorbike, a truncheon in hand, beating the student protestors at the Tehran University Dormitory Complex in 2003. The content of this speech offered evidence for his misuse of power against the students, thus affecting his vote bank (Kaleme 2013).

The third type of campaign was conducted through posters, brochures, pamphlets, propagation of electoral symbols and other publicity literature. The most popular symbol, key, belonged to Rouhani. Rouhani interpreted his symbol as the 'key of wisdom' by which all national problems --from nuclear issues to economic sanctions -- could be resolved.

Some candidates and their supporters were significantly active on the cyber space, especially on the

social media, for their election campaigns. According to a survey done by *Khabar online*, Ghalibaf (with 85 pages) and Saeed Jalili (with 73 pages) were the most active candidates on Facebook. Haddad with 4 pages and Gharazi with 7 pages had the lowest presence. Arif, Velayati, Rouhani and Rezaee had 15, 26, 44, 45 pages, respectively (Khabar Online 2013). It is interesting to note that Facebook is officially banned in Iran, and access to it requires anti-filter software. In the meantime, in parallel with these campaigns, negotiations were also going on in the Ultra-Principled camp to convince them into supporting a single candidate. As result, one of the candidates, Haddad Aadel, withdrew. The reformist and the moderates were also engaged to choose between Rouhani and Arif, as the presence of both would definitely split the reformists' vote bank. Finally, Muhammad Reza Arif, withdrew in favour of Rouhani, boasting the latter's position, as he became the sole candidate for both the reformists and moderates.

As scheduled, the voting started at 8 a.m., and its period was increased from the scheduled eight hours to 13 hours. Ahmadinejad, contrary to the custom of early casting of vote by top authorities to encourage the public's participation, came at the last hours to cast his vote. Like the president's 11-day walkout from cabinet meeting, this delayed casting of vote was also interpreted as a sign of protest to his candidate's disqualification.

THE RESULT²

The voting process ended at 11 p.m. after an extension of three hours without any untoward event and top Iranian officials celebrated a successful election. Unlike previous presidential elections, the results were relatively delayed. Besides, a gradual update policy was adopted. Based on this, the results were announced after 13 consequent official updates. Although the election authorities justified their new method by saying that they preferred accuracy over speed, it was generally believed that the delayed and periodic announcement of the results meant to avoid any unrest that was seen during the 2009 election.

Finally, the interior minister announced the final election statistics. Out of 50,483,192 eligible voters, 35,458,747 voters correctly cast their votes, and the turnout stood at 72.71 per cent. As shown in Figure 1, Hussan Rouhani with 18,613,329 votes was declared as the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ghalibaf with 6,077,292 stood second, followed by Jalili (4,168,946 votes), Rezaee (3,884,412 votes), Velayati (2,268,753 votes), and Gharazi (446,015 votes).

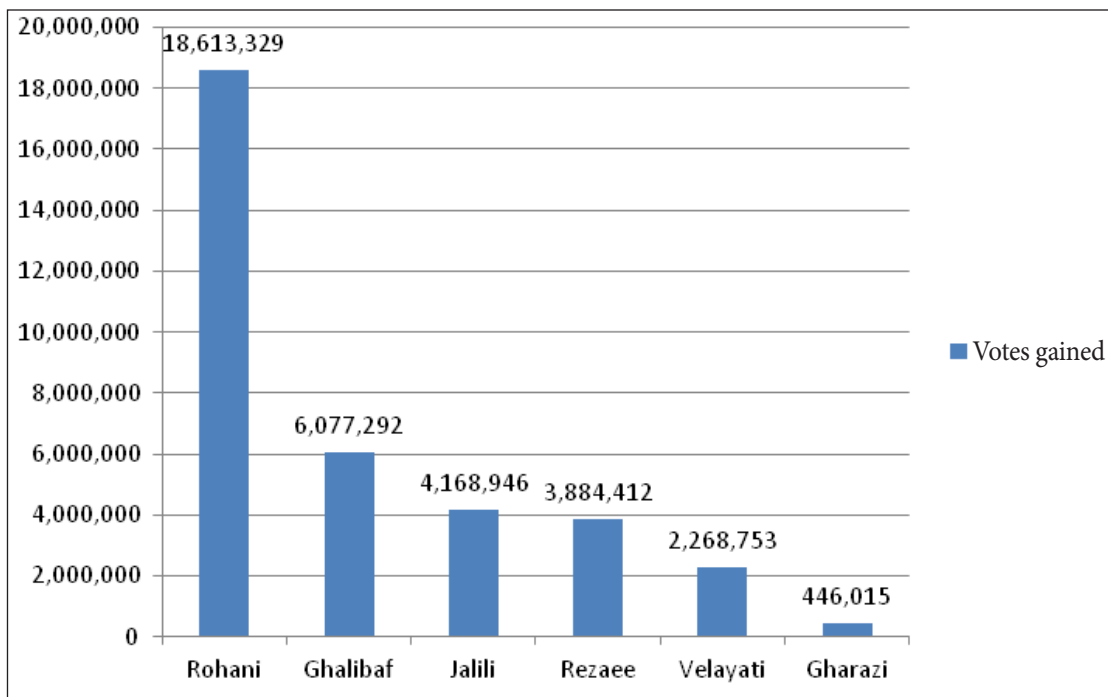


FIGURE 1. Number of Votes Gained by Candidates

Source: *Jumhūri e Islāmī* 2013b: 3.

Given the fragmentation of the Ultra-Principled camp, and the unification of the reformists and moderates, most analysts had predicted Rouhani's win. However, Rouhani's eventual success came as a surprise to the same analysts, as they fear massive rigging. Interestingly, in the 11th presidential election, the Ultra-Principled and the Reformist-Moderate camps both claimed victory. Before the election, the supporters of the Ultra-Principled not only disowned Rouhani, but also attributed him to reformists and secessionists. For instance, on June 13, 2013, the representative of the Supreme Leader in *Kayhān* newspaper, in a unity appeal to Ultra-Principled candidates, wrote: "Don't you see that the American-Israeli traitors of 2009 secession are screaming in the club of claimants of reformism; and their candidate [Hassan Rouhani] even is proud of being supported by this bunch of people which worked as enemy's fifth column in the 2009 secession [unrest after 2009 election]" (Shariat 2013a: 2). The same columnist, in his first editorial after the election on June 17, 2013, wrote: "Mr. Rouhani's emphasis on the obedience to the Supreme Leader, his two decades of representation of the Supreme Leader in the National Security Council ... played a major role in his success" (Shariat 2013b: 2).

However, despite Rouhani's close connections to some Ultra-Principled figures, it was clear that Rouhani's victory was not a success for the Ultra-Principled camp. A micro analysis of the result shows that the Ultra-Principled did not perform well even in those areas which they considered as their strongholds. For instance, Ghalibaf expected a clean sweep in Tehran, where he initiated important urban mega-projects as a mayor. During the election campaign, he had promoted his projects as a symbol of his administrative skill. Yet, Hassan Rouhani scooped 1,326,964 votes in Tehran, while Ghalibaf stood second with 725,854 votes.

In addition, the role of smaller ethnic groups and religious minorities was quite clear in Rouhani's success. In the province of Sistan and Baluchistan, the turnout was 73% out of which 70 % voted to Rouhani. Similarly, in the Kurdistan province, 71% of votes were cast in Rouhani's favour. It is worth mentioning here that the people of Sistan and Baluchistan and Kurdistan are the followers of the Sunnite denomination of Islam and they are not allowed to contest the presidential election under Article 12 of the constitution; they can only vote. Rouhani's popularity in these areas was a result of his promises to address issues concerning religious and ethnic minorities after being elected to office. Rouhani was the only candidate to highlight minorities issues during the election campaign. Also, the support of the Khatami and Rafsenjani boasted Rouhani's position. The appeal by conservative clerics for Ultra-Principled candidates was not received well among the masses. For instance, in Qom, the hub of the clergy, Saeed Jalili expected a large vote bank due to Ayatollah Mesbah's open support for him. Yet, Rouhani stood at the top with 210,677 votes while Jalili bagged only 121,237 votes.

DEMOCRACY AND ELECTIONS IN IRAN

Many independent observers and analysts are reluctant to see elections in Iran as a proof of the existence of a democratic political system. They have reservations in terms of the quality of elections in Iran, and believe that the sole underlying purpose of these elections is to gain legitimacy for the ruling elite (See. Amuzegar 2012: 25-36), and that elections in Iran are a "safety valve, an instrument of repressive tolerance" (Milani & Mcfaul 2008: 31). The electoral legal framework in the Islamic Republic of Iran virtually divides Iranians into two broad groups: *khudi* (the insiders) and *ghair-e-khudi* (the outsiders). *Khudis* are supposed to be the supporters of the Islamic regime while *ghair-e-khudis* are the non-conformists. Such a framework systematically prevent non-conformists from contesting in the elections (Milani & Mcfaul 2008: 27-31).

However, in spite of being aware of undemocratic elements in the Iranian electoral system, the Iranian citizens have never paid a significant attention to the election-boycott call by the opposition groups. That is why, the turnout ratio have never dropped so low to become a point of incredibility for elections in Iran, though there have always been a strong suspicion about the accurate turnout figure. Based on these authors' observations of the previous six presidential elections in Iran, there have been a suspicion amongst a significant portion of Iranians that the election would be rigged, but so far this thought has not stopped them from voting, rather it has worked as an incentive for maximum participation.

Although the Iranian establishment always translates the participation of the Iranians in the election as approval to the theocratic political system in Iran, the reality is otherwise. In fact, the Iranian citizens' preference to vote can be explained in the context of their quest for democracy. The Iranian voters see these elections as an opportunity to disrupt the power structure of the theocratic political system of Iran. To put it in another way, Iranians see these elections as a platform to protest the undemocratic elements of the Iranian political system. In the Iranian political discourse, participation in elections is a necessary part of transition to democracy. According to Akbar Ganji, a renowned anti-establishment figure in Iran, "the transition to democracy is like a game of chess where dictators are sitting on one side and democrats on the other. We must enter the game and use all the pieces in order to checkmate the opponent" (Ganji 2004: 51).

Therefore, although in democracies, elections are part of the democratic practice and mechanisms for peaceful transfer of power, in the Iranian context, elections are viewed as 'marathon of democracy versus theocracy'. The general trend in the Iranian presidential elections show that the Iranian voters have particularly targeted the absolute authority of the supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. That is why, one can easily see

that in the Iranian presidential elections, the popular grace has been with those candidates who have been more distant from the establishment, particularly the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei.

Moreover, the micro analysis of the results of the presidential elections in general and the 2013 presidential election in particular, shows that the winning candidates would scoop the major portion of their votes from ethno-religious minorities. It is not a surprise that Khatami, and Rouhani both received the highest vote from the sunni-dominated provinces of Baluchistan and Kurdistan. The votes of these people should be understood as a sign of protest to the current theocratic political system, as the sunnis themselves are only allowed to vote in the presidential elections, and cannot contest it. Therefore, the high voting turn-out in these areas can best be understood in the context of ethno-religious minority struggle against the undemocratic and discriminatory electoral system of Iran. Similarly, in the rest of Iran, the winning presidential candidate usually gets his vote from the youngsters particularly the female. Like the sunnis and other ethno-religious minorities, the women in Iran are also ineligible to contest in the presidential elections.

Last but not least, while in the Iranian political system, the democratically elected president is a subordinate to the undemocratically appointed Supreme Leader, the former plays an important role in the empowerment of the democratic forces. That is why the Iranian youngsters, opposition groups, as well as ethno-religious minorities have always voted for reformist and moderate candidates. They believe that under the presidency of a moderate or reformist president, they could struggle for their basic rights in a less-politicized and social environment. Therefore, supporting Rouhani should be conceived as a message by the ethno-religious minorities, and the youngsters, particularly females, as well as other democratic forces, that even though they are discriminated against in the election process, they have not given up their struggle for democracy.

CONCLUSION

Although, regular elections are considered important in the religious political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the political power drawn from these elections is strictly limited given the role of non-republican institutions, particularly the Supreme Leader. Furthermore, from the very beginning to the end, there are clear procedural, electoral and legal shortcomings in conducting elections in Iran which significantly affect its outcome. In particular, the right to be elected does not go in parallel with the right to vote. The electoral laws of Iran make the elections in Iran largely exclusive, in which a notable group of candidates who don't believe in the theocratic political system or the *vilāyat e faqīh*

do not qualify to contest the election. More importantly, the Sunnites citizens of Iran who comprise roughly 20 to 25 percent of the Iranian population are constitutionally barred to contest the election under Article 12 of the constitution, which requires the candidate to be a follower of the Shiite denomination. Similarly, the female population of the country is deprived to contest the election as it does not meet the criteria of being a 'political and religious personality' (*Rajul e Sīyāsī Maz'habī*). Finally, the analysis of the result shows that the ruling elites are facing serious challenges among the Iranian masses. Despite serious flaws in the conduct of elections in Iran, the Iranian citizens are using these elections as a tool to voice out against the theocratic political system of Iran.

NOTES

1. Abul Hassan Bani Sader (1980-1981), the first president of the Islamic Republic, fled to France amid presidency. Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997) who, in one stage, was known as person who had operationalized the idea of *velayat e faqih (Supreme Leadership)*, and helped the current Supreme Leader, (Ayatollah Ali Khamenei), to become the absolute religious and political authority in the Islamic Republic, was disgraced, and his son and daughter were put in jail. Muahmmad Khatami (1997-2005), from the very first day of his presidency was subject to suspicion by the supporters of the Supreme Leader, to the extent that after completing his tenure as president, his name was put in the country's Exit Control List.
2. Statistics in this section are extracted from, *Shargh*, 2013d: 14 & *Jumhūrī e Islāmī* 2013b: 3.

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