

Iran: Caught Between Global Engagement and Internal Power Dynamics

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Abstract

The 2016 elections in Iran, both for parliament and the Assembly of Experts, offer essential insights into the possible future direction of the country's foreign policy. Even though the results of elections in Iran have not usually been as desired, Iranian people have always valued the opportunity of voting in order to express their political views. During the 2016 elections, they had the choice of voting for either a radical or a moderate response to the country's wide range of internal and external challenges. Ultimately, Iranians shifted their votes towards the moderate party, which also indicates their satisfaction of the nuclear deal. As a result, almost all of the representatives who opposed the nuclear deal lost their seats in parliament. President Rouhani now has the political capital to push a course of greater socioeconomic reform and liberalization at home and engagement abroad. With a blend of descriptive and analytic approaches, this paper intends to provide a review on Iran's 2016 elections, as well as to analyze the possible obstacles that might exist in the path of the Rouhani administration for Iran's future foreign policy.

Keywords: Iran, 2016 elections, Rouhani, Reformists, Nuclear Deal.

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Introduction

Iran's 2016 elections, both for parliament and the Assembly of Experts, offer hopeful lessons for the future direction of the country's foreign policy. They hold significant implications for the re-election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2017 and will likely further the possibility of Iranian markets opening up to Western investments. The urgency surrounding Iran's economic difficulties, however, is increasingly apparent – particularly considering how important economic crises have historically been in driving the country's politics.¹

Iranian politics is not a zero-sum game. Elections are emblematic of political trends in ways that exceed the institutions they occupy.² Iranians have consistently valued the opportunity to articulate their

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political views via voting, despite the fact that their political participation has not always yielded the desired results. During the 2016 elections, Iranian voters had the choice of voting for either a radical or a moderate response to the country's wide range of internal and external challenges. Ultimately, Iranians gave the Zarif-Rouhani team their seal of approval, allowing the duo to mitigate Iran's traditional enmity with the United States and rapprochement with the West. In some respects, these elections were a testament to the pragmatism, compromise, and dialogue that previous presidents—namely, Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami—embarked upon.

Iran's 2016 election results also act as the Iranian peoples' stamp of approval for the recent nuclear deal, with many in Iran now hoping that the nuclear deal paves the way to more amenable relations with the West. The electorate has traditionally blamed the country's deteriorating economic conditions on Iran's pariah status, caused in part by years of crippling sanctions imposed by the West and also in part by the Ahmadinejad administration's mismanaged policies.

Although Iran's democratic process is admittedly imperfect, it is unique in that it continues to function within the context of a turbulent Middle East. At minimum, Iran's elections are meaningful and its internal politics subject to change. In the 2016 elections, moderates in Tehran swept all thirty seats in the delegation that represents the country's capital. After the second round of elections on April 29th, 2016, seventeen women were elected to the 290-seat parliament (Majles)—representing the largest number ever in the history of the Islamic Republic. Of the sixty-eight seats available during the second round of elections, thirty-six went to pro-Rouhani moderates. This gave moderates at least 131 seats in the new 290-member parliament. The conservative faction, however, still holds 124 seats, and the remaining 30 seats belong to independents. The forty independents elected to parliament may be key in changing the balance of power in Parliament to favor the moderates. Depending on whether they join the moderate or reformist blocs, the independents could be a game changer for President Rouhani's agenda. However, with no group controlling a majority, political clashes should be expected, thus complicating Rouhani's mandate.³

Virtually all of the representatives who opposed the nuclear deal lost their seats in parliament. This included the powerful Mohammad Yazdi,

head of the Assembly of Experts, and Mohammad Taghi Mesbah Yazdi, a prominent hardline ideologue. Ahmad Jannati, the hardline head of the Council of Guardians, just barely held on to his seat. The significance of the election results, however, goes beyond shifts in the balance of power. In the face of a changing Islamic Republic, Iran's long-standing trends—including a young demographic, economic difficulties, and decreased support for hardliners—favor the moderates. Iran's national identity is evolving and being redefined, particular as secular nationalism overshadows religious nationalism. President Rouhani now has the political capital to push a course of greater socioeconomic reform and liberalization at home and engagement abroad. The ultimate outcome remains to be seen, but both regional and global experts are hopeful that moderation prevails.

At home, however, Rouhani faces a number of daunting challenges. Since assuming the presidency in 2013, President Rouhani's key challenge has been to forge a national consensus around the nuclear deal and opening up the country's economy. One significant reality is that the moderate wing, led by Rouhani and his reformist allies in parliament, has the support of the people—including Iran's youthful population, who are eager to engage with the outside world.⁴ Although it is still too early to tell what the future holds for the Rouhani presidency, or for the hardliners and their power bloc, any analysis of domestic Iranian politics must take into account the complexity and opacity of the country's political system.⁵

It is also worth noting other significant trends shifting power dynamics in Iran. The country's development of broader national solidarity and political unity remains intact, which is essential at a time when the region is engulfed in political turmoil, rampant sectarian tensions, and ethnic strife. Social media's rapid growth in Iran suggests that the social change currently unfolding is consistent with the country's quickly globalizing society. The speed with which the Iranian people have joined the international community could eliminate the widespread misconception that the Iranian people's struggle for social justice and democratic rights is bound to fail.

Since the upheaval caused in the wake of the 2009 presidential elections, an orderly process of legitimate elections and the existence of strong institutions have also facilitated the success of domestic efforts to increase international engagement. The 2016 parliamentary

and Assembly of Expert's elections were not marred by violence and disruption, even in the midst of regional political instability.

The rise of moderate and reformist groups in Iran, as demonstrated in both the 2013 election of President Rouhani and the victory of his sympathizers in the 2016 parliamentary elections, is a pointed reminder that the Iranian government seeks to engage with the rest of the world. However, it is dangerous to get caught up in the jubilation of recent electoral victories.

Change under the Islamic Republic remains painfully slow, though gradually more inevitable. This string of victories is likely to strengthen President Rouhani's ability to integrate Iran into the global economy. It will also force his administration to define the boundaries of its engagement and to establish a balance between its desire to participate in the global economy with the possible social and political limits of such an enterprise. The Rouhani administration is keen to find ways to reap the economic benefits of integrating Iran's national markets into the global economy. Nevertheless, Iran's ability to pursue a middle ground between globalization and the hardline conservatives' isolationist perspectives remains to be seen.

Finally, these elections have raised the bar for the Rouhani administration, requiring it to navigate the complexity of Iranian politics and governance. Rouhani should seize the opportunity to demonstrate his dedication to greater social and political freedoms as a credible alternative to his predecessors – which is particularly important as the Rouhani administration can no longer insulate itself from legitimate external scrutiny. Admittedly, the challenges he faces in the coming months and years remain daunting. However, despite the fact that the country's powerful institutions and Revolutionary Guards are well placed to resist change, the road to transition appears less bumpy than ever before. It is worth noting that the larger concern remains: if sanction relief fail to materialize in the near future, both hardliners in Tehran and staunch opponents of the nuclear deal in US Congress could seriously undermine this historical deal.

Notes:

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