



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 930, May 19, 2017

Iran on the Eve of the Presidential Election

Sima Shine, Raz Zimmt, and Anna Catran

On May 19, 2017 Iranians will elect their president for the next four years. Although incumbent Hassan Rouhani is considered by many to be the frontrunner, the current political campaign has proved to be particularly tumultuous. Predictably, emphasis was on the nuclear agreement, which was attacked by Rouhani's opponents, but issues long considered taboo that breached the limits of accepted public discourse also figured on the public agenda and in the public debates among the candidates. The rivals leveled mutual accusations in scathing terms and did not balk at straying into personal territory, especially on the issue of corruption. For the first time, Rouhani even questioned the wisdom of hanging a "Death to Israel" banner on a missile in the National Army Day parade.

While Iranians are free to vote as they choose, the candidates are carefully vetted by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Guardian Council of the Constitution, which whittled the list down from more than 1,600 people who submitted their candidacy to just six who represent the two major political camps – the pragmatic and the conservative.

Until days before the election, there were two key candidates representing the conservatives. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the mayor of Tehran, identified with the pragmatic wing of the conservative camp, brought extensive military and managerial experience to the table. This was his third time running for president, but this past year his name was linked to a serious scandal involving corruption in Tehran's municipality and to the January 17 collapse of a multi-story building, which cost the lives of dozens of people. For Ebrahim Raisi, a conservative cleric, the election is his first foray in national politics. Since the early 1980s, Raisi has held a series of positions in the judiciary, and as deputy public prosecutor for the city of Tehran signed the death warrants for 30,000 political prisoners in 1988. He serves on the Assembly of Experts (which is ultimately supposed to select the next Supreme Leader) and last year Khamenei placed him in charge of the Imam Reza Foundation in Mashhad, a powerful institution controlling central Islamic holy sites, significant assets, and enormous budgets. Despite his lack of political experience, Raisi's

name has been mentioned in the past year as a possible successor to the Supreme Leader. Indeed, it seems that this first election campaign was chiefly designed by Khamenei to showcase Raisi to the public and improve the negative image he acquired in the judiciary. If elected President, his status as a leading candidate to succeed Khamenei will be boosted. Therefore, his central campaign message portrays him as an approachable populist, sensitive to the public's economic plight.

On May 15, four days before the election, Ghalibaf announced his withdrawal from the race, in order to strengthen Raisi's chances. Pragmatist candidate Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri Kouhshahi also dropped out and called on his supporters to vote for Rouhani, who remained the only representative of the pragmatic camp. Although Rouhani is not a reformist and over the years was a revolutionary regime insider, he won the support of the reformist camp, including former Presidents Khatami and Rafsanjani (Rafsanjani, who died last January, was one of the founders of the Islamic Republic). Rouhani's election four years ago, in the first round and by an impressive margin in both well-to-do and poor districts, was largely due to the connection Rafsanjani made between the pragmatic center and the reformists. Now too, after Rafsanjani's death and despite the reformists' disappointment with Rouhani for not having kept his promise to promote civic reforms and insure human rights and civil liberties, they will have no choice but to vote for Rouhani. Otherwise, the next president might well be an arch-conservative who will increase tension with the West, especially the United States, stem economic improvements, and prevent even the slightest chance for domestic changes.

On the eve of the election, both candidates are working hard to maximize their chances of victory. In addition to interviews with various media outlets, they have held mass rallies and made effective use of social media, which at times have served as an indirect channel for disseminating messages censored by the regime-controlled state media channels. There were also three televised debates broadcast live by the state television channels. The debates, which dealt extensively with issues of cardinal importance to Iranian society, particularly economic development programs with emphasis on unemployment reduction, included harsh rhetoric that often included personal affronts. In the last few days, Rouhani declared that the public had to choose between him and a judge whose verdict is final and who, for several decades, was busy primarily with signing execution warrants.

The most significant achievement of Rouhani's four year term was the nuclear agreement, which relieved Iran of the crippling sanctions and helped improve the economy and mitigate the country's international isolation. This was Rouhani's campaign slogan four years ago, and he revived it in the current campaign to prove that he had kept his promise.

However, the merits of both the nuclear agreement and the economy are hotly contested. Rouhani's critics say there has been no real relief in the people's economic situation, and the public has yet to enjoy the fruits of the agreement. Furthermore, they charge, Rouhani made too many concessions and harmed Iran's scientific achievements.

Indeed, the economic improvement, which is real, is for now reflected mostly by macro data – a growth rate of more than 6 percent and inflation that has been curbed to single digits – and has yet to trickle down to individuals or significantly affect unemployment. Unemployment is the leading issue on the public agenda, affecting mostly young university graduates, who according to unofficial data suffer a 40 percent unemployment rate. To begin tackling the problem, the Iranian economy needs large investments Rouhani hopes to raise from the global economy now open to Iran thanks to the agreement. By contrast, his conservative opponents, enjoying the support of the Supreme Leader, are afraid of the West's penetration into Iran and its negative implications for society.

Although the presidential function in Iran is limited mostly to economic issues, as the Supreme Leader decides security and foreign affairs matters and is directly responsible for the security apparatuses, the current election campaign is important, because the next four years could prove to be critical in deciding the identity of the next Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. If Raisi is elected, his chances of succeeding the Supreme Leader improve. The election of Rouhani for a second term, which has many precedents in Iranian presidential elections, will likewise improve his chances of vying for the position of Khamenei's successor when the day comes.

As in the past, the regime considers the election and a large voter turnout to be important confirmations of its legitimacy. The traumatic memory of the riots that erupted after the 2009 election is still vivid in the minds of the regime. In recent months, led by the Supreme Leader, senior figures have worked hard to encourage the public to vote and given the people the sense that the process is honest and untainted by the intervention of the Revolutionary Guards or the Basij. However, in recent speeches Rouhani has charged that his opponent has brought busloads of people from Iran's periphery to mass rallies and will do so on election day as well. Iranian public opinion polls, whose accuracy is unclear, predict a close race; the prevalent assumption is that the public generally favors a more moderate president, giving Rouhani something of an edge. However, the conservative camp is better organized than in the past and its supporters are more committed to voting than in previous elections. Therefore, Raisi's election is not out of the question. At the same time, a Raisi victory might inflame the Iranian public, especially the young, who

would see it as yet another threat to civil liberties. The regime is prepared for this possibility and the lessons of the 2009 riots have been learned.

Whoever becomes Iran's next president will have to cope with many challenges facing the Islamic Republic in several spheres, including the economy, regional issues – especially Iran's involvement in Iraq and Syria – and relations with the United States, which is now reexamining its Iran policy. As required by the US constitution, the administration announced (on May 17) the continued suspension of the nuclear-related sanctions given Tehran's fulfillment of its commitments as spelled out in the agreement. Many attribute the timing to the US desire to help Rouhani, who is under attack on this issue, even as Congress has proposed new legislation for sanctions in other fields. Against this background, the identity of the next Iranian president – pragmatic or arch-conservative – will have a decisive effect on the direction Iranian policy will take and on Iran's interactions with the international system.