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WINDS OF CHANGE

**TRUMP AND
THE WORLD**

**POPULISM
IN EUROPE**

**MIDDLE EASTERN
TUMULTS**

**ASIAN
DILEMMAS**



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IRANIAN WINDS OF CHANGE?

Saeid Golkar

IRANIAN hardliners began their counter-offensive just days after the re-election of President Hassan Rouhani on May 19th, 2017. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei attacked the Rouhani Administration, asking the Basij civil militia to act as a metaphorical “fire-at-will” unit, and ordering them to act in the event that the elected authorities do not behave “properly.” Such a response to electoral defeat has Iranian observers wondering whether the Iranian elections are an entirely futile process.

What are the impacts of Rouhani’s victory? Will the regime push Iran toward becoming a normal country, or will it continue to be a revolutionary regime that challenges and undermines the dominant international order? Is this election a step toward the democratization of the Islamic Republic, or will hardliners again block meaningful reform in Iran?

While the hope for fundamental changes in Iran’s foreign and domestic policies in the short term is slim, this essay argues in favor of the importance of the re-election of President Rouhani for the possible normalization and democratization of Iran in the longer term.

INTERACTIONISTS & CONFLICTUALISTS

While more than 1,600 people had registered to run in Iran’s presidential election on May 19th, 2017, only six were subsequently approved by the Guardian Council—an unelected conservative body consisting of 12 members, including six theologian appointed by Iran’s supreme leader, and six lawyers introduced by the judiciary and approved by Iran’s parliament. The Council even disqualified former Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Saeid Golkar is a Senior Fellow on Iran Policy at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs and a Visiting Assistant Professor of Political Science at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.



Supporters at a Rouhani campaign rally in Tehran

Of the six candidates who qualified to run for the presidency, two frontrunners quickly emerged: the incumbent Hassan Rouhani and his main challenger, Ebrahim Raisi. These two candidates stood as representatives of Iran’s two main political groups that emerged after the signing of the much-discussed nuclear agreement between Iran and six world powers in July 2015. Rouhani represents the moderate or interactionist wing of Iranian politics, while Raisi represents the hardline or conflictualist faction of Iranian politics. The interactionist bloc consists of reformists, pragmatists (modern conservatives), and traditional conservatives who sup-

ported Rouhani and former presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami; their power is concentrated within the state administration and bureaucracy. The conflictualists are made up of hardline conservatives, including the Supreme Leader, clerics in the Guardian Council, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and the Basij civil militia.

These two groups differ in their views on domestic and international policies, as well as on what the social and economic orientation of the country should be. These irreconcilable differences have shaped the dominant discourse in con-

temporary Iranian politics, driving the struggle between moderation (*Etedaal*) and revolutionary action (*Enqelabgrai*). At a fundamental level, the interactionists' call for moderation is based on the principles of engagement, rationality, and hope, while the conflictualist viewpoint draws on the ideas of prudence, resistance, jihad, and enmity.

These differences manifest themselves in proposed foreign policy directions. While Rouhani and the interactionists believe in engaging with others, both at home and abroad, the conflictualists have called for conflict and struggle on both domestic and global levels. To solve Iran's political and socio-economic problems, Rouhani and the interactionists perceive engagement with the world as the only solution. Conversely, the conflictualists believe that self-reliance and resistance against the hegemonic powers of the West will solve Iran's problems.

One of the most acute differences in the political platforms of Rouhani and Raisi lay in economics and development, specifically regarding the degree to which the Iranian economy should incorporate itself into the global economic system. Whereas the interactionists have championed exogenous develop-

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ment and called for engagement with the rest of the world, the conflictualists have pushed for a self-sufficient and isolated "resistance economy." In stark

contrast to the view held by the interactionists, they believe that limiting imports and increasing domestic production would reduce the harm done by international sanctions and shield the nation from the risks of global financial crises.

Another key difference pertains to Iran's place in global politics. Rouhani has repeatedly called for Iran to accept the realities of the standing international order. In line with interactionist thought, the President believes that Iran should try to engage with the world to restructure its economy. Raisi, on the other hand, believes the international order is based on a dichotomy of dominant and submissive countries, and that the Islamic Republic cannot accept domination. He and his conflictualist supporters favor continuing Iran's historical stance of selective engagement, as they fear the penetration of Western norms into Iran and the pushback of the West against Iran's clerical establishment.

What is often unappreciated outside Iran is the fact that the most important difference between Rouhani and Reisi rests with social and

cultural issues. For example, they disagree about the extent to which Iranian society should be controlled by the Islamic regime to preserve Islamic culture. While interactionists support "limited social and cultural liberation," Raisi pushed for a re-Islamization of society, as well as increased government control over morality and stronger cultural engineering.

ELECTORAL RESULT

In the 2017 presidential election, more than 40 million of Iran's 55 million eligible voters (nearly 73 percent) cast their ballots. Over 57 percent of voters favored President Rouhani and his interactionist platform, while the conflictualist candidate, Raisi, received 38 percent of the vote. More than 16 million, or about 27 percent of eligible voters, boycotted the election.

One can make several sociological observations based on these results. First, the urban and rural gap in Iran was less important in this election. While Rouhani won all urban areas and big cities except Mashhad (a hotbed of hardliners), he also beat Raisi in the majority of rural areas, including the poor provinces of Ilam, Chaharmahal, and Bakhtiari. In part, this shift in voting patterns can be explained by the expansion of social

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media and information communication technologies in rural areas. Since 2013, the Rouhani Administration has expanded mobile phone and internet coverage to more than 27,000 villages throughout Iran. Today, more than 90 percent of the population has a mobile phone and 70 percent of Iranians have a working connection.

In this election, the country's nearly five million youth and student population used social media not only to expose Raisi's dark judicial history and his role in suppressing dissidents in Iran, but also to fact-check his claims and agenda. While the hardliners also made use of social media, their campaign promises that they would increase social handouts and improve social justice did not resonate well in many parts of the country. The memory of the Ahmadinejad government and his suffocating social and cultural policies were fresh in the minds of many Iranians. Rouhani's supporters turned this distrust into a tool to mobilize Iranian youth, women, middle-class citizens, and others who were fearful of a return to conflictualist policy.

To many, returning to Ahmadi-nejad-style policies meant the return of high inflation, runaway

sanctions, and rampant unemployment. Even when the conflictualist candidate promised to triple monthly cash subsidies for the poor, polling statistics showed that Iranians rejected this proposal for the most part, saying it was irrational or would result in more inflation. Many scholars have asserted that these views signified the rejection of populism in Iran. With the power of social media, many Iranians became convinced that the idealistic policies that Raisi proposed were, ultimately, both impossible to implement and counterproductive.

According to published results, Raisi beat Rouhani in religious provinces, such as Qom and Khorasan, which are the main bases of Shia seminary schools. In the seminary schools themselves, the picture is less clear. As many scholars have pointed out, seminary schools are not monolithic, although exit polls show the clergy, especially its younger generation, voted more for hardline candidates. To be more precise, while the traditional and modernist clergy voted for Rouhani, the radical and hardline clergy—including those af-

filiated with the IRGC and the Basij—voted for Raisi.

Last but not least, Rouhani's message resonated with the historically underdeveloped and marginalized religious minority communities in Iran, most importantly Iranian Sunnis in provinces like Sistan va Baluchistan and Kurdistan. While a small group of Iranian Sunnis are attracted to the Wahhabi-Salafi version of Islam propagated by Saudi Arabia, the absolute majority of them have voted for reformists and moderates since 1997.

While the economy was a leading concern of Iranian citizens, it seems that the presidential election rested on different views of governance and the future of Iran. Iranians were convinced that the conflictualist agenda would lead internally to the closing of socio-cultural spaces and the securitization of Iranian society, while it would lead internationally to isolation, conflict with the world, and possibly war with the United States. Instead, they voted for Rouhani and his moderation, in the hope of achieving more open social

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and cultural spaces, engagement with the world, and moving the country toward normalization.

WINDS OF CHANGE?

While the Iranian people have spoken through the election and chosen the future they like more, the prospects of seeing their dreams come true remain uncertain. Many questions remain unanswered with regard to the impact of the presidential election on Iran's foreign and domestic policies.

Regarding domestic issues, Iranian observers wonder if Rouhani can fulfill his promises to open the social and cultural space, enhance civil liberties, and marginalize Iran's deep state. In short, they ask: Will Iran be a more democratic country as the result of his re-election? On foreign policy, important questions include the possibility of changing Iran's Middle East policy. Will Iran be a normal country? Is there any possibility of rapprochement between Iran and Donald Trump's America?

A majority of Iranian observers remain pessimistic. They believe in the futility of any election in Iran and fear the election results will fail to lead to meaningful and fundamental change in the Islamic Republic. They recall the

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Islamic Republic's history, in which hardliners successfully pushed back time and again after each reform initiative was put forward. For example, Mehdi Bazargan's liberal government confronted a backlash from radicals immediately after the 1979 revolution, and President Akbar Hashemi's limited liberal social and cultural policies were challenged by the hardliners between 1989 and 1996.

But the most important example remains the backlash of hardliners after the victory of Mohammad Khatami in the 1997 presidential election, which was followed by the victory of the reformists in the 1999 city council and 2000 parliamentary elections. Many Iranian observers at that time saw these victories as a *Thermidorian-esque* reaction (wherein a moderate counterrevolution overthrows a radical one)—a sign that the end of revolutionary Iran was imminent. However, the hardliners' counter-reaction, which began with the suppression of the student movement in 1999 and intensified after 2000, led to the widespread disappointment of Iranian reformists. The victory of the hardliners in the 2003 city council elections, followed by triumphs in the 2004 parliamentary and 2005 presidential elections (in which Ahmadinejad took

power), saw a full return of hardliners to power, and their revolutionary and radical policies.

The hardliners' attacks on the Rouhani Administration resumed immediately after Iran's nuclear deal was signed with the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany in July 2015. Rouhani's popularity and desire to expand his power had alarmed hardliners, who were already anxious about the possibility of a regime shift and political marginalization.

Feeling endangered, hardliners started a backlash movement in an attempt to contain the Rouhani Administration and disappoint his domestic and international supporters. Such sentiments have been associated with the attack on the Saudi Arabian embassy in January 2016, the detaining of American sailors in January 2016, the unveiling of missiles with the words "Death to Israel" written on them in April 2017—all acts attributable to hardline efforts to undermine Rouhani's foreign policy.

To the disappointment of Rouhani's main social base (including the educated, the middle class, the youth, and people living in urban areas), similar attacks have also occurred domestically. In recent times, hardliners have expanded their moral control, arrested journalists, artists, and cyber activists, and attacked pro-Rouhani politicians.

PESSIMIST FRAMEWORK

The pessimists' arguments, which fatalistically state zero chance of change on the horizon, are based on two models: agent-based and structural. While the agent-based model focuses on Iranian political elites (mainly the personality of Iran's Supreme Leader), the structural analysis model focuses more on the obstruction pathways available to the clerical regime and the pervasiveness of Iran's deep state.

In the agent-based model framework, some observers believe there is no difference between moderates and hardliners. They see the election as window-dressing for the Islamic Republic—there merely to create the illusion of democracy. Others who believe that the election was fair and competitive still identify the personality of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei as a problem. Since he was selected to this post in 1989, Khamenei has had sporadically tumultuous relationships with all of the presidents who have served during his tenure.

Each conflict can be directly traced back to Khamenei's efforts to preserve his own power and the status quo. The origin of the pattern of conflict can be dated back to the tenure of Khamenei's ally and first president, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who helped secure Khamenei's appointment as supreme leader. More understandable, however, is

the conflict that existed between Khamenei and reformist President Khatami. Many blamed the Supreme Leader for the defeat of the reformist government, and still see him as the main obstacle to reforming the regime.

Even President Ahmadinejad, who from the outset was considered to have the full backing of Ayatollah Khamenei, came into conflict with him. More recently, Khamenei also challenged Rouhani during and after the signing of the Iran nuclear deal in 2015, blocking him from any future negotiations with American officials after the Iranian president held a single meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama.

Such challenges continued during the presidential campaign and are ongoing. While Ayatollah Khamenei endorsed the May 2017 election, he did not congratulate President Rouhani on his victory. These gestures have reinforced the notion that Ayatollah Khamenei would not hesitate to fight anyone—even his friends—to consolidate his power. Since May 2017, Ayatollah Khamenei has intensified his attacks on Rouhani and the Iranian government.

Structurally speaking, pessimists have focused on two main issues: the inherent obstructionism of Iran's political system, and its deep state. They believe the Islamic Republic's political system is fundamentally unreformable,

mainly because of its special institutional configuration. The Islamic Republic is a hybrid political system—something between a presidential and a parliamentary one, and there is a fundamental conflict and tension between elected and unelected bodies of the regime. The elected bodies, such as the presidency and the parliament, have little power in comparison to unelected individuals or institutions, such as the supreme leader, the judiciary, and the armed forces. These have inordinate powers, while being unaccountable to the people through elections.

While the president is directly elected and remains the second most powerful person in the country, his appointment hinges on the approval of the Guardian Council. If the president, as chief executive, is responsible for the day-to-day running of the country, the Supreme Leader determines the general guidelines of Iran's domestic and foreign policy, and also commands the armed forces and security apparatus.

Structural pessimists have also taken issue with the existence and expansion of Iran's deep state. The term 'deep state' was initially used to refer to Turkish and then Egyptian militaries and their expansion in the state bureaucracy, as well as their involvement in politics and economy. Many Iranian scholars believe that the IRGC holds similar powers.

Others, however, believe that the IRGC is only the intelligence and security branch of Iran's deep state. In this view, Iran's deep state is mainly the Supreme Leader's Office and its branches. The Supreme Leader's Office is an institution paralleling the Presidential Cabinet, meaning there is an office in parallel with each state bureau that is under the control of the Supreme Leader. Iran's deep state has not only dominated the country's judiciary, but also controls its specific system of courts, such as the Special Clerical Court and the Islamic Revolutionary Court, using it to silence its critics. By controlling Iran's television and radio stations, as well as through his local representatives and Friday prayers leadership throughout the country, the Supreme Leader's office also has a monopoly over the news.

When it comes to financial matters, the Supreme Leader and his Office control the country's wealthiest economic foundations, such as the parastatal Setad Ejraiyeh Farmane Hazrate Emam, worth more than \$95 billion. The Supreme Leader's Office also has a network of civil militia, the Basij, numbering more than five million members spread across 50,000 offices throughout Iran. In fact, Iran's deep state has its own judicial, security, intelligence, financial, and information network, making real reform in Iran unrealistic and, for all intents and purposes, impossible.

OPTIMISTIC HOPES

On the other hand, a small group of scholars remains more optimistic about the reelection of a moderate president and its possible consequences. Optimists believe that, since 1979, the Islamic Republic has been steadily moving from a radical and revolutionary regime toward a more pragmatic and normal country. From this perspective, Iran's domestic and foreign policies have dramatically changed and softened since the end of the Iran-Iraq war (from 1980 to 1988) and the death of founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini in 1988.

Under the leadership of the pragmatist Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989–1996) and the reformist Sayed Mohammad Khatami (1997–2004), optimists believe that Iran moved from a radical and interventionist state to a freer and less authoritarian one. Optimists have also argued that Ahmadinejad's victory in 2005 was the result of a temporary populist wave and that he secured reelection in 2009 thanks to electoral fraud, not popular support. In this view, the victory of Rouhani in 2013 restored Iran's steady trajectory of progress.

For optimists, Rouhani's reelection in 2017 presents a unique opportunity for Iran to move toward normalization and democratization. Optimistic arguments can also be divided into structural and agent-based

models. From one side, optimists refer to the personality of President Rouhani and his extensive clerical, security, and bureaucratic background. As a cleric, Rouhani enjoys the support of the nation's seminary schools, especially amongst the traditional, secular, and modernist clerics. He also belongs to an older generation of security elites in Iran. He was a powerful figure in Iran's defense establishment during the Iran-Iraq War and was the head of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) between 1989 and 2005. As a politician, he also served as the Deputy Speaker of Parliament and was a member of the Expediency Council and the Assembly of Experts. Compared to his predecessors, Rouhani seems more qualified for the position—Khatami had no security or military background, and Ahmadinejad suffered from his clerical background. This extensive background and experience have enabled Rouhani to secure the nuclear deal with six world powers and keep away the hardliners who wanted to sabotage it.

Rouhani's background and his moderate and pragmatist policies have attracted some of the conservative and hardline elites, including Ali Motahri, a prominent member of parliament,

Ali Larijani, the Speaker of Parliament, and Ali Akbar Nateq Nouri, a former Speaker of Parliament and Chief of the Inspection Bureau in the Office of the Supreme Leader. This group formed a "moderate principalist" front and

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gave Rouhani its active support in the election campaign. For example, Larijani strongly criticized the opposing (conflictualist) candidate who had pledged to double or triple cash handouts during the presidential campaign.

Expanding the influence of moderate and pragmatist elites while marginalizing radical ones is a necessity for the (hopefully peaceful) dual process of normalization and democratization-from-above. Rouhani was able to shape a strong center among Iranian political elites, while Ahmadinejad's personality and Khatami's allies made it impossible to fill the gap between the moderate left and right.

In addition to Rouhani's captivating personality, optimists believe that having an interactionist president is structurally important, because of what has been termed a "democratic enclave" in the Islamic Republic. Rouhani and his administration not only help the regime's interactionist forces survive; more importantly, his influence makes

an impact on the issue of the succession of Iran's Supreme leader.

There is an ongoing debate on the importance of democratic enclaves in authoritarian regimes, which has been defined by political scientist Bruce Gilley as an

institution of the state or a well-defined regulatory space in society where the authoritarian regime's writ is substantively limited and is replaced by an adherence to recognizably democratic norms and procedures.

In this model, the reelection of a more interactionist president can enable the more pragmatist element of the regime to flourish and to guard democratic practices against a hardline opposition.

Rouhani's election has the potential to empower the moderate and pragmatist elites, and to marginalize those advocating for a more conflictual policy. Furthermore, since conflictualists have a small social base and, thus, a reduced chance of winning a free and fair election, they might resort to the kind of election manipulation that they used in the disputed presidential election of 2009. With this in mind, having an interactionist president who strengthens the democratic practice of competitive election will further diminish the likelihood of a rigid election taking place again, as was the case in 2009.

The Rouhani Administration can also block the consolidation of power by conflictualists, resist the deep state's desire for total control, and limit interventionist foreign policies. In this view, a president, even with a limited mandate, can slow down conflictualists in foreign policy. For example, President Rouhani can moderate the Islamic Republic's maneuvers in at least three ways: by controlling the Foreign Ministry, by being an active member of the country's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), and by lobbying other power blocs in Iran. An example is the appointment of a new moderate ambassador to Syria by Rouhani, in exchange for his acceptance of the IRGC's candidate for Iran's ambassadorial post in Iraq.

A more important cause for optimism is the president's role in the succession of Iran's Supreme Leader. The succession of any sort of leader is one of the biggest challenges for any non-democratic regime, and Iran is no exception. Due to the Supreme Leader's unique position in Iran's political structure, an interactionist or conflictualist leader can have a major impact on the future of the Islamic Republic.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is 77 and in failing health. The next Supreme Leader could well be elected in the next four years. Ayatollah Khamenei has clearly mentioned that his successor should be a revolutionary

and has asked members of the Assembly of Experts, the body of 88 ayatollahs responsible for the selection of the next Supreme Leader, not to be "timid" in selecting his successor. While the ideological makeup of the members of the Assembly of Experts is far from monolithic, the absolute majority belongs to the conflictualist wing, due to the mechanisms of selection, coercion, and cooptation.

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Until recently, there was a growing consensus among Iranian observers that Ayatollah Khamenei was likely preparing Hojjatolislam Ebrahim Raisi to be his probable successor. Although some believe his chances of being selected as the next Supreme Leader have diminished after losing the election, Raisi still has a good relationship with the IRGC, the Basij, and the top echelons of the judiciary.

The re-election of Rouhani appears to have endangered this plan, as Rouhani can also be considered as a viable candidate to fill the position. There is a precedent for such a scenario, as Ayatollah Khamenei himself was the President at the moment of being selected to his current post in 1988.

As president, Rouhani is a member of an interim council which can collec-

tively assume the position of Supreme Leader in the event of the death, resignation, or dismissal of the Leader.

The other two members of this council are the head of the judiciary and a theologian from the Guardian Council. Together they will take over the leadership of the country until the Assembly of Experts selects the next Supreme Leader. Since there is no deadline for choosing the next Supreme Lead-

er, the Council can be in power for an unlimited time. Since Rouhani is also a member of the Assembly of Experts, he has yet more power to lobby and influence the next selection process.

GETTING TO DEMOCRATIZATION

There are three main channels through which Iran can seek further democratization: reform from above, mass uprising from below, and foreign intervention from outside.

War and foreign intervention are morally unacceptable to an absolute majority of Iranians, and practically impossible because of the military strength of the Islamic Republic. There is always the possibility of a mass uprising, mainly because Iran is a revolutionary and shaky society, and because of massive resentment against the political

regime; but revolution is always bloody and expensive, and there's no guarantee it would lead to democracy—especially not in the Middle East.

It seems that the safer, more stable way for effectuating a transition of the Islamic Republic to a democratic and normal country is through gradual reform from above. Learning from Iran's neighbors in the region, Rouhani and his administration represent the only chance Iran has to avoid interstate or intrastate wars. To achieve this goal, both the Iranian people and the international community should support Rouhani's government and his policies.

The Rouhani Administration should continue to attract more rational and pragmatist elites from the conflictualist camp. More importantly, however, the President must keep his campaign promises to ensure the support of the people. The main conflictualist goal is to disappoint Iranians who voted for Rouhani. To that end, they have started initiatives to sabotage his domestic and foreign policies. In response, Rouhani should fight on a number of fronts simultaneously.

Rouhani should focus on improving Iran's economy by making use of skilled technocrats, fighting corruption, and expanding foreign investment into

Iran. Controlling and decreasing inflation and massive unemployment levels are key issues for Iranians. Similarly, the Rouhani Administration should also safeguard and expand Iranian civil liberties, since a majority of Iranian youth and students voted for Rouhani out of fear of hardline cultural policies and in the hope of opening the country's cultural spaces. By restoring hope and prosperity in Iran, the interactionalists can combat the conflictualists' rhetoric of sadness and despair.

To take on the small but organized conflictualist camp, Rouhani must organize his supporters and take advantage of his large social base as leverage against the conflictualists. Organizing his supporters through civil society organizations is an important way forward, and should be emphasized in the time ahead.

In addition to supporting civil society and non-governmental organizations, Rouhani should encourage the expansion of the nation's online community and continue to use social media to connect with his supporters. One reason he won the 2017 election was the availability of social media and the internet throughout the country—even in rural areas and in poor provinces located far from the capital. In the same vein, the Rouhani Administration must

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now expand the nation's ICT infrastructure, while simultaneously working to provide cheap, uncensored, and high-speed internet to the Iranian people.

Foreign leaders and politicians should support Rouhani, or at least refrain from undermining his government, which only strengthens the conflictualists. A free and democratic

Iran is a key to peace and prosperity in the Middle East. While historically rival countries like Saudi Arabia always want to weaken Iran, the West should support the interactionist elites by expanding its relationship with Iran, engaging with Iranian society, and increasing foreign investment in Iran's economy. The West should stand on the right side of history. ●

