



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Report

Rouhani's Victory:

A Reading of Political and Social Transformations

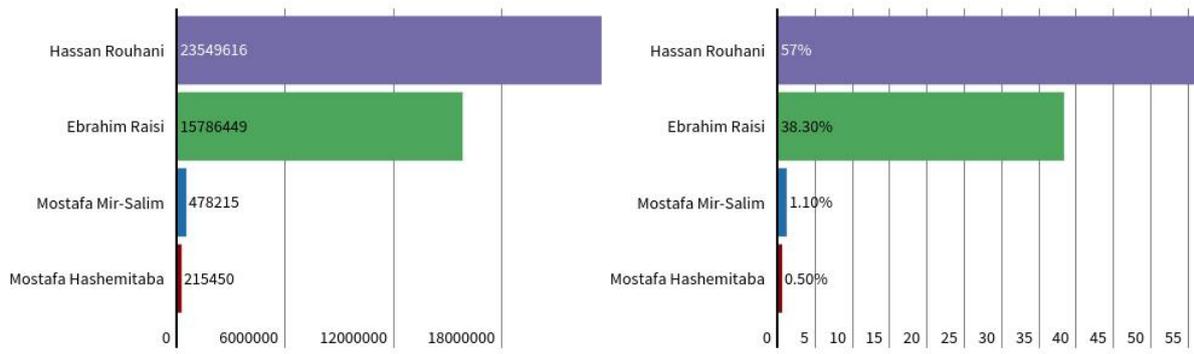
*Dr. Fatima Al-Smadi**

28 May 2017



Number of votes

Percentage



[AlJazeera]

Abstract

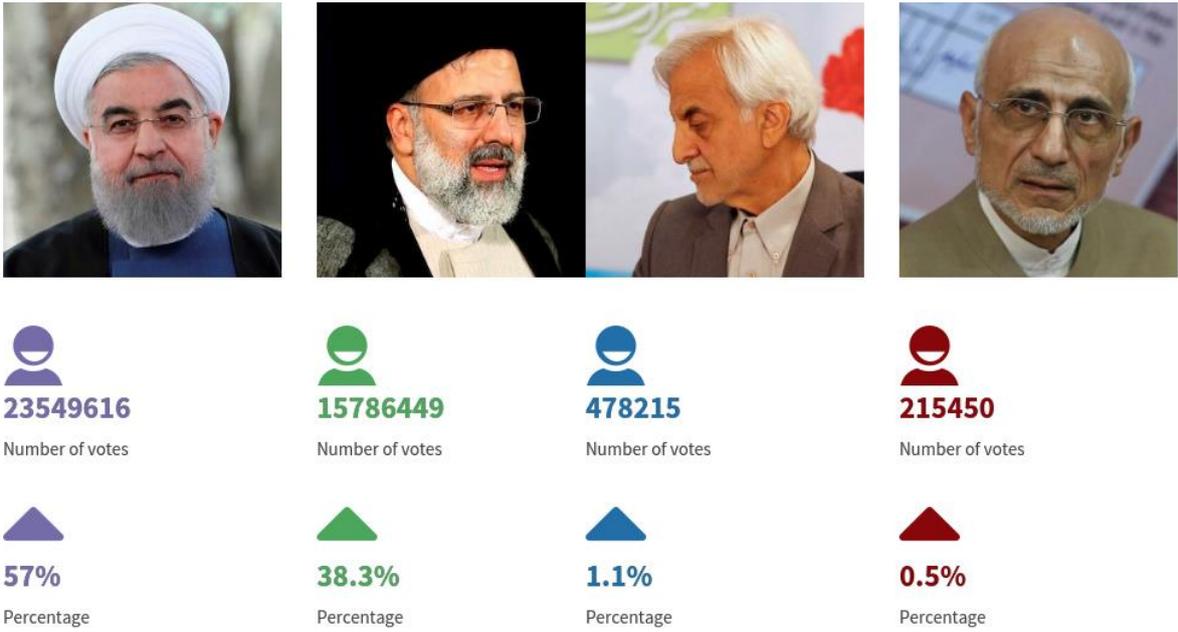
The results of Iran's presidential election in which Hassan Rouhani won reveal the fact that the Iranian political scene is divided and open to a number of intellectual and political currents: some existed decades ago, others are new, and the rest are under formation. Rouhani's 'moderate current', an extension of Hashemi Rafsanjani's intellectual thoughts, is in touch with Iran's social transformations, and its leaders realise that the vast majority of the fifth generation after the Revolution does not seem to be interested in the ideas of the first generation.

The main obstacle facing Rouhani is the US administration and the possible tension that might impede the implementation of the nuclear agreement, which puts him at the disposal of his enemies and opponents. Therefore, Rouhani's administration will focus on strengthening its relationship with Europe, Russia and China to overcome the US obstacle.

Iran's President Hassan Rouhani won a second term in office after defeating his main rival, Ebrahim Raisi, with 57 per cent of the vote. According to the figures of the interior ministry, which is primarily responsible for the elections, Rouhani won 23.54 million votes, while his rival Ebrahim Raisi won 15.7 million votes, 38 per cent. Meanwhile, the candidate Mostafa Mir-Salim came third, followed by the candidate Mostafa Hashemitaba.

Hassan Rouhani's difficult victory in the second presidential term, and the electoral competition preceding it, have many indications and implications that may help in reading the political situation in Iran today and comprehending the Islamic Republic's social, economic and political transformations, which are reflected in the election results.

In this paper, the researcher discusses a range of issues, drawing on discussions and interviews with a number of political elites in Tehran, as well as her observations and notes while following the presidential elections.



[AlJazeera]

The paper documents these issues in point form, several of which will be addressed in separate papers.

- Rouhani’s victory was unsurprising, but the period leading up to the vote and until the announcement of the results had many surprises. Political rivalry in Iran today is not characterised by the usual dualism (principlists–reformists; principlists–moderates; principlists–reformists–moderates). These elections revealed the fact that the Iranian political arena is divided and open to a number of intellectual and political currents and debates. Some have been present for decades, others are recent, and the rest are under formation. However, the old current is not left, as it has been before, and its positions have changed radically, especially with regard to the economy, the role of the state and the relationship with the outside world. The new current is trying to convey a discourse that hesitantly uses the slogans of the past, interprets the transformations of society, especially socially, and seeks to respond to them. The discourse of the current that is currently under formation is primarily founded on deprivation and anger.
- If reformists and principlists represent the problems and transformations of the right and the left in Iran, which emerged after the Revolution’s victory, the moderate current under construction seeks to combine the ideas of the right (principlists) and the left (reformists) without successfully overcoming the

consequences of the transformations and contradictions of its spiritual father, Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, including an evasive, multifaceted speech which Rouhani inherited.

- The moderate trend's strength lies in its appeal for social changes in Iran. Its leaders realise that the majority of the fifth generation after the Revolution does not seem interested in the ideas of the first generation and even desires a clean break. Although the current does not publicly accept these changes, it at least responds to them; so, there has been less 'policing of the veil' and an expansion in personal freedoms. Young people are willing to vote for Rouhani for more of this.



[AlJazeera]

- Rouhani has increased his share of the vote compared to the previous term by 8 per cent, reaching 57 per cent. Still, it was the lowest rate received by an Iranian president since the Revolution's victory.
- The reformist party is the absent present in this election, and its presence rests in the fact that it does not express itself except to influence one candidate at the expense of another. Because of the exclusion policies, the party cannot present a candidate in its name, beyond offering external support. While the reformist movement has exercised the option of supporting Rouhani in response to the Guardian Council's policies, it seems unable to meet the demands of the new generation within it, which relate essentially to a question of freedom as a whole system. Therefore, this trend is ahead of divisions, predicting the formation of new groupings in the future. The reformist party, Nedaye Iranian, tried to contain it without success.

- The principlist movement did not succeed in getting its candidate Ebrahim Raisi to the presidency, but these elections revealed a large and homogeneous social base that reached 16 million votes. This homogeneity and the clarity of its intellectual platform are some of the current's strengths, but also reflects its inability to absorb and attract opponents.
- In this election, former Iranian President Ahmadinejad is a present absent. The 'Ahmadinejad' movement (a trend that has not yet fully developed) is the most prominent phenomenon, which must be read socially and politically as close to principlists but simultaneously very far from them. This trend may also have an impact on Iran's future. The main features of its composition are deprivation and anger as well as a sense of social and economic marginalisation, and its reach extends to rural areas and cities other than Tehran. Despite the Guardian Council's decision to exclude Ahmadinejad as a presidential candidate, he managed to confirm his presence in the Iranian political arena as part of a political bloc that cannot be ignored while his supporters insisted on raising his name and slogans at electoral gatherings for the other candidates.

The electoral gatherings gave candidates an opportunity to express the current trends in Iranian society, which may indicate social conflict between the values and structure of the Islamic Republic. The following points can be noted:

- At the Imam Khomeini Chapel in Tehran, thousands assembled during an electoral rally in which Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf announced his withdrawal in favour of the principlist candidate Ebrahim Raisi. The crowd clearly shouted several slogans, many of them expressing anger at Rouhani, while one was repeated several times: 'By the end of the week, Rouhani will leave'.
- The following day, Rouhani supporters gathered at one of the polling stations on Ali Shariati Street. Many slogans reflected fear of exclusion and hope of a renewed victory for Rouhani, epitomised by the slogan, 'Another time Iran, another time Rouhani'.⁽¹⁾ Between the location and the supporters' features and slogans, clear differences between the two events reflect the division in Iranian society regarding the presidential candidates and, at the same time, a sharp disagreement about the form that each party wants for Iran.
- At the Imam Mosque in southern Tehran, religious characteristics were obvious among the main Raisi supporters. Veiled women in the crowd clearly portrayed the scene. Many of Ahmadinejad's supporters attended and shouted slogans about poverty and unemployment, among the most prominent refrains. People

who voted for Rouhani in the previous term were also present, 'but he failed them so they decided to punish him' and give their votes to Raisi.(2)



[AlJazeera]

- In Rouhani's electoral headquarters in northern Tehran, youth and women comprised the majority of participants. The scene spoke of a social level and class among the participants unlike those who were present at the Imam Mosque the day before. The women's clothing indicated a desire to remove the veil.
- If the majority of the youth's pro-Raisi slogans emphasised poverty and unemployment, the other side's focus was 'freedom' and perhaps 'personal freedom'. It is clear that Rouhani understands this perfectly as he uttered a broad slogan: 'For the sake of further freedom in this country, I am coming'.(3)
- Rouhani's rhetoric seems wide-ranging but vague; he and his supporters cannot agree on a definition or interpretation of freedom. It is this broad and purely electioneering approach that caused him to pre-empt his campaign and publish a picture of himself in the mountains with young women wearing veils that are unacceptable under the laws of the Islamic Republic, while he replaced his religious clothes with clothing suitable for a 'mountain climber'. Paradoxically, Rouhani himself boasts in one of his books that he 'has the credit of imposing veils on women in the army and official institutions'(4) before it became compulsory for everyone. However, Rouhani, the president and negotiator, appears different from Rouhani, the member of the Islamic Consultative Assembly.

- Remarkably, the candidates in these elections returned to the style and method used by Ahmadinejad in previous electoral debates, when he made corruption a headline of these debates and accused prominent political figures of involvement in corruption. Ghalibaf originally tried to imitate Ahmadinejad but, as a result, the rivalry increased and Ahmadinejad was recalled without being able to play his role to the fullest; he soon withdrew in favour of Ebrahim Raisi, abandoning mutual accusations of economic corruption.
- These elections reveal a decline in the role of clerics in politics, although the competition was mainly between two religious leaders. However, Rouhani's religiosity was not a factor for a large group of voters whose voice played a major role in resolving the outcome in his favour. The social dimension and questions of openness and freedom were the most significant.
- In his interpretation, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei examined the transformations of the Iranian scene and, despite challenges, he calculated that Iran would have peaceful elections with the highest participation levels and with careful concern for the elements on the scene. It seems that the experience of 2009 and the famous sermon that followed the elections, where Ayatollah Khamenei announced his support for Ahmadinejad at the expense of his old friend, Hashemi Rafsanjani, had a high cost, and he was keen to overcome its consequences.
- These elections brought back the discussion of the Guide's succession. Ebrahim Raisi's failure removed him from the list of candidates to succeed the Guide. Some saw in this candidacy a gamble that thrust the man forward at a time when he lacked political experience.
- In his quest to attract 'grey votes' (those who were not voting), Hassan Rouhani initiated highly sensitive battles with influential and powerful parties inside Iran. In the week before polling day, his attacks and criticism reached the Revolutionary Guard. Although Rouhani's critique was 'interference in the elections', this controversy precedes and will exceed the elections. It mainly relates to the Revolutionary Guard's economic and political role. Rouhani intends to reduce the government's economic projects and benefits to the Guard in an effort to control its economic influence and prepare the ground for foreign investment in Iran. He is determined to continue this as part of his efforts to promote the implementation of the nuclear deal. Thus, a conflicting relationship is predicted between Rouhani and the Revolutionary Guard, which is the second most important player after the Iranian government, and its influence extends to oil and gas projects as well as construction, banks and marinas.
- Foreign policy did not constitute a prominent topic in the Iranian elections,⁽⁵⁾ which may indicate that voters are satisfied with Rouhani's performance on this

level. With the exception of some slogans of Ebrahim Raisi's main supporters and a limited reference in the debates, economic pressures and livelihood concerns overshadowed this topic. Since the nuclear agreement is Rouhani's most outstanding achievement, which he has defended strongly, it will be one of his priorities to implement it in a way that has a significant and deep impact on Iranian lives.



[AlJazeera]

- The main obstacle to Rouhani's confrontation will be the US administration and the tension it can add to impede the implementation of the nuclear agreement, which puts him at the disposal of his opponents and enemies. Rouhani's administration will therefore focus on strengthening its relationship with Europe, Russia and China to overcome the US obstacle. Rouhani seems to be facing this obstacle in a critical form in his second term, especially with the Saudi-US move. However, Iran predicts that the US administration is likely to manage the conflict with Iran carefully, which does not appeal to Saudi Arabia. Internally, the Guide of the Islamic Revolution's position and evaluation of the nuclear agreement and what it has achieved put Rouhani in a critical position, which makes it imperative for him to produce solutions that satisfy the Guide of the Revolution and silence his opponents.

References

- (1) From the researcher's observations at the Rouhani electoral assembly on Ali Shariati Street on 18 May 2017.
- (2) From the researcher's observations at the main electoral assembly at the Imam Khomeini Chapel on 17 May 2017.
- (3) From the researcher's observations at the Rouhani electoral assembly on Ali Shariati Street on 18 May 2017.
- (4) "Hassan Rouhani's Perspective on Compulsory Hijab", Mashregh News, 26 April 2014, <https://goo.gl/x1ALIC> (accessed 22 May 2017).
- (5) Observations recorded by the researcher on electoral debates, slogans raised in rallies and election festivals.