

Iranian elections: repercussions in Middle East

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What are the messages Iranians signaled by their robust election campaign and high turn out? Western nay-sayers say it shows discontent. But perhaps with a touch of envy, at a time when western politics is rife with discontent and yet elicits at best a yawn, or at worse, looks more like a circus. The Islamic revolution has had bad press in the West from the start, but the results show a level of freedom that contrasts favorably with the West, and puts paid to the mantra that the 2009 elections were stolen by the bad guys.

All 30 reformists in Tehran won in Iran's highest turn out, but then Ayatollah Khamenei issued a fatwa declaring voting a religious obligation, endorsed all candidates, and congratulated Iranians on the elections. "I thank Iran's wise and determined nation, and I hope the next parliament will act responsibly towards people and God." Iranians "showed the bright and powerful face of a religious democracy to the world. These are sensitive times and the future parliament will have a heavy responsibility." He even asked those who don't believe in the Islamic Republic to vote, because the government provides security for all.

In the Assembly of Experts election, both Rafsanjani and Rouhani were elected--their 'parties' People's Experts and Hope won 19 and 27 seats respectively--giving them a majority, and putting them in a strong position to determine who the next supreme leader will be.

Setback to 'principalists'?

The reformists and centrists this time were dubbed the "List of Hope". Its logo and slogan is "the second step," the sequel to reformist Rouhani's election as president in 2013. This election was a referendum on Rouhani's three years, culminating in the nuclear deal which marked an end to western sanctions. The western press's "hard-liners" is a misnomer. The conservatives are

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called "principalists", and their manifesto focuses on loyalty to Islam and the Iranian Revolution, obedience to the Supreme Leader of Iran, and devotion to the principle of Vilayat Faqih.

No one in Iran is against ending the stand-off with the West and sanctions. Yes, the conservatives are critical, worrying that the US is already planning a scenario to impose sanctions again, that it is just playing a game. Iranians have good cause to distrust Uncle Sam. So the choice was more between optimism and caution.

None of Iran's three main political camps--reformists, independents, or principalists has an outright majority in the 290-seat legislature. For the West, the interpretation is that while the election itself was honest, the electoral slate was rigged, and that reformists grudgingly allowed to run -- won. That the high electoral turn out shows that Iranians use any chance to protest their Islamic state.

The reality is that the more liberal candidates (in Tehran) are not the country. What's most important for the other 260 seats in parliament is local affairs, regional issues such as infrastructural and economic conditions (employment, housing, etc.). There are still 70 seats to be contested in a runoff vote in April.

Finessing facts

Iran's electoral turn out is traditionally high. Last time -- 75%. This time it was probably closer to 80%, with some polls staying open to midnight in Tehran. Contrast this with the US. Only 55% of Americans voted in the 2008 presidential election. The turnout in elections has varied over the years from a low of 49% in 1996 to a high of 63% in 1952. Most countries--86 around the world--have a higher turnout rate.

Both Republicans (and Canada's Conservatives) have schemed when in power on 'electoral reform' to limit voters' rights, counting on their redneck constituents to be included on tightened lists without problems. Yes, democracy for right wing cronies. Some countries, such as Uruguay and Australia, have compulsory voting, though there is no evidence that this radically alters the outcome of an election. What is important is that there is a real choice.

What about human rights? There is always room for criticism on that count. But 60% of university students are women. The reform list for Tehran included eight women, all of whom were elected. 20 women are expected to win seats in the parliament, a record number for the Islamic republic. Of the 5,000 candidates in the elections, 500 were women. After his election as president in 2013, Rouhani appointed female vice presidents--for women, legal affairs, and the environment.

The International Trade Union Confederation recently protested against the conviction of trade union activists charged with "activities against national security and disturbing public peace and order by participating in an illegal gathering". But there is context. There are independent unions, but Islam frowns on creating divisions in society that cause strife. If everyone is a sincere Muslim, then there should be social justice built into us, and no need for confrontational 'class struggle'. It is the West, where capitalism and greed became the 'golden calf', where

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individual reigns supreme, requiring class struggle. Just as the Soviet Union argued this line, and didn't fit the western model, neither does Iran.

The essence of Iranian political discourse is: ape the West or struggle to mold democracy in an Islamic context.

Iranian populism

On many issues, Iran rates favorably with the West. Though plagued from the start by a brutal and senseless war launched by Saddam Hussein in 1980 (enthusiastically abbetted by the West), there is still much to admire in post-revolutionary Iran:

- * Peasants were given land and created thousands of cooperatives.
- * Agricultural prices were raised and the country became self-sufficient in cereal production.
- * The literacy campaign meant all Iranians can now read and write.
- * Roads, electricity, clean water, and health clinics came to villages.
- * The poorest peasants now have some access to modern consumer goods.
- * Life expectancy went from less than 56 in the 1970s to 70 in 2000.
- * Infant mortality went from 104 per 1,000 to 25 per 1,000.
- * The UN praised Iran's birth control program which began in the 1990s.
- * For workers, basic goods are subsidized, there are labor laws regulating the work week and providing job security, and May Day rallies are celebrated with socialist slogans.

As was the case in the Soviet Union, external subversion of the system is resisted by the majority, though not necessarily by the economic elite. Vigilance in defense of the revolution is essential. God forbid a Gorbachev. Russia's fate after the collapse of Communism is no advertisement for a bright future.

Iran holds Middle East key

Much as we may criticize Obama for caving in to banksters and continuing Bush's war legacy, he clearly recognized that on Iran (and Cuba), effective US participation in world events required wresting power from US 'hard-liners'--and he acted on it. Iran's new maturity and diplomatic smarts is providing the opportunity for an intelligent US president to undo some of the mess the neocons and Reagan-Bush left behind. By staring down the Israeli lobby and proceeding (cautiously) with a 'detente' with Iran, he has opened the door to genuine progress on Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. Maybe even Palestine.

Saudi perfidy is every day clearer. All the petrodollars in the world can't bring peace. The world must prepare for a radical adjustment to the world's last holdout of absolutist monarchy, and Iran will be a model for devout Saudis yearning for genuine elections, a dignified role for women, and an end to divisive sectarianism and backroom support for terrorism. All the hot spots in the Muslim world will benefit from a recognition of Iran as a world player. There is no Shia arc, a 'spectre haunting the Middle East', to paraphrase Winston Churchill from Cold War days.

a shorter version of this is at [AHTribune](#)