

How Much Has the Trump Presidency Influenced Iran's Election?

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Brief Analysis

As Iranians prepare to go to the polls, three experts discuss how the current campaign compares to past ones and what the outcome might mean for U.S. interests.

On May 17, Patrick Clawson, Nader Uskowi, and Elham Gheytanchi addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Clawson is the Institute's Morningstar Senior Fellow and director of research. Uskowi is a visiting fellow at the Institute and a senior policy advisor at CENTCOM. Gheytanchi is a professor of sociology at Santa Monica College and has written extensively on Iranian politics. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

PATRICK CLAWSON

Despite the similar [economic focus \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/vanishing-islam-in-irans-election\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/vanishing-islam-in-irans-election) of Iran's previous and current presidential elections, there are some dramatic differences between 2013 and 2017. When Hassan Rouhani won his first term, the economy was framed as a byproduct of foreign policy -- Iran's economic problems were blamed on his predecessor's failure to accept President

Obama's offer of nuclear negotiations. Rouhani and other "moderate" candidates argued that reaching a nuclear deal would help repair the economic damage done by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's hardline government.

In this year's election, many observers assumed that Rouhani's rivals would focus on criticizing his "naive" trust in the United States, arguing that American negotiators had no intention of delivering on their promises and that the solution to Iran's problems is self-reliance. Yet while there has been some talk of the need for a "resistance economy" and domestic resource development, much of the campaign rhetoric has centered on mudslinging between candidates about corruption, injustice, and inequality. The West has received very little blame for the country's economic problems, with candidates instead focusing on mismanagement and graft at home.

Regarding social and cultural matters, some of the campaigns have complained about issues such as undue interference with educational institutions and restrictions on women (e.g., at sporting events). These complaints have resonated among the public, with little pushback from conservative politicians. This silence is somewhat surprising given that social issues remain important to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who has long worried about cultural invasion from the West (or "Westoxification" in the conservative parlance). To the extent that such issues have been raised in the election, they are largely tied to the notion that the West does not recognize Iran's "rightful" place in the world. And even then, the campaigns have issued relatively few complaints or outbursts of nationalist sentiment in response to President Trump's stance toward Iran.

NADER USKOWI

May 17 was the last day candidates were allowed to formally campaign, and the most recent withdrawal (by reformist candidate Eshaq Jahangiri) makes it unlikely that the race will go to a second round of voting. Yet Iranian elections have a history of surprises. In 1997, for example, candidate Ali Akbar Nateq Nuri visited Moscow a week before the vote instead of campaigning at home because he was so confident he would win. Mohammad Khatami wound up winning instead. Subsequent victories by Ahmadinejad and Rouhani were relative surprises as well.

In the past few days, hardliners have made a massive push to frame the election in terms of "revolution vs. counter-revolution" discourse. Conservative and regime media outlets have repeated stories that right-winger Ebrahim Raisi is the only candidate capable of upholding the country's revolutionary standards. Even Rouhani has taken a very hard line in promoting revolutionary ideals, despite his relatively progressive attitudes on certain cultural and social issues. For example, he recently noted that Iran had to decide between war and progress (though he avoided getting any more specific about foreign policy).

Whatever the outcome, very little will change the day after the election. If Raisi wins, the only real shift will be a more hardline tone from the president; Iran's actual policies will likely continue as is given the president's limited powers. If Raisi loses, however, it would be a symbolic loss for the Supreme Leader, who has made a substantial push to promote him through the media and other propaganda.

ELHAM GHEYTANCHI

While regular elections give legitimacy to the Iranian regime, they are not considered fair by international standards. All prospective presidential candidates are required to undergo vetting by the powerful Guardian Council to determine their eligibility. For this election, the twelve council members -- who are largely appointed by the Supreme Leader -- approved only 6 out of 1,600 applicants. Four candidates remain as of this writing: Rouhani, Raisi (who is being touted as a potential successor to Khamenei), Mostafa Mir Salim, and Mostafa Hashemi Taba. Notably, women and minorities (e.g., Sunnis and Kurds) have not been permitted to run for the past thirty-eight years. For example, Azam Taleghani, a woman who has applied for candidacy a number of times, has never qualified.

Rouhani has the support of about a quarter of the population, including many women, a large cadre of reformists backed by Khatami, and minorities such as Kurds, Sunnis, and Baluch. Another quarter of the population backs Raisi, in line with their tendency to support the Supreme Leader for ideological reasons; indeed, Raisi's target audience is the working class and rural populations. The other candidates are not expected to win.

Raisi's main strategy has been to focus on the economy, attacking Rouhani for his failed promise that nuclear negotiations with the West would bring better jobs. He has raised questions about who actually benefited from the nuclear deal and called for action against these "thieves." His rhetoric aims to galvanize a public disenchanted with the rampant nepotism, bribery, and inflation that have fostered a growing gap between the poor and the wealthy.

Despite the prominence of economic issues, foreign relations are still very relevant to voters. Rouhani is the candidate of *taamol* (meaning to cooperate and reach a compromise), while Raisi is the candidate of *taghabol* (to confront), indicating very different approaches to the status quo -- more or less the Persian equivalent of "revolution versus evolution." Yet the Supreme Leader has largely restricted Rouhani from commenting on foreign affairs. The president has therefore highlighted the nuclear deal as the reason why Iran is no longer isolated, faces no threats of war, and benefits from greater foreign investment and employment opportunities, while his rivals discount those claims.

Nationalism is also very much alive in this election, which can be attributed at least in part to the rise of the Trump administration. All candidates, including Rouhani, have emphasized the need to preserve Iranian pride and national security. Some figures have stoked tensions by depicting any opposition to the Supreme Leader as a Western-orchestrated insurrection.

Finally, an underreported topic this campaign season has been the city council elections that are happening at the same time as the presidential vote. Thus far, the results have indicated significant cultural and political changes at the local level; for example, women have been winning council seats in greater numbers, and grassroots campaigns have made headway in some areas.

This summary was prepared by Emily Burlinghaus. ❖

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