



PERSONALITIES AND CHARACTERISTICS: IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2017

Anu Sharma

Research Associate, CAPS

The political climate is again tense and unpredictable in Iran as the nation will be witnessing the 12th presidential elections which are scheduled to be held on May 19 this year. The Council of Guardians that consists of a powerful body of jurists and clerics began a five-day vetting process on April 16, 2017, and announced the names of six people who will be in the race for Presidential elections. Apart from the current President Hassan Rouhani, Ebrahim Raisi (close ally of Supreme Leader of Iran), Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf (Mayor of Tehran), Eshaq Jahangiri (First Deputy of Rouhani), Mostafa Agha Mirsalim and Mostafa Hashemi-Taba (both low profile politicians, ultra-conservative and centrist, respectively) are in the race for Presidency of Iran.¹

One of the most interesting aspects of the current Iranian presidential elections had been that the former *firebrand* President of Iran Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had also registered his candidacy. However, the Guardian Council has

disqualified the candidacy of Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad's failed attempt to return in the race has fostered the already dangerous rifts amongst the Iranian regime's senior ranks.² At the same time, this indicates a new *nadir* in the deteriorating relations between the Iranian establishment and former President Ahmadinejad. It is pertinent to mention here that during his two terms in office from 2005 to 2013, there were threats against Israel and expansion of Iran's nuclear programme that caused constant tensions with the West, thereby ensuring Iran's political and economic isolation. In 2009, Ahmadinejad's re-election was followed by one of the largest protests to hit the country since the Islamic Revolution in 1979. Ahmadinejad left office in August 2013 after two turbulent four-year terms, leaving the country divided domestically, isolated internationally and struggling economically. This year all eyes were on the Council of Guardians to see if it approves Ahmadinejad's candidacy to these elections,

considering that he registered in defiance to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

Hassan Rouhani, the incumbent President of Iran also faces re-election for his next term in a boisterous race against the conservative candidates who have criticised Rouhani's policies related to the landmark nuclear agreement with the P5+1 countries. Hassan Rouhani had come to power in 2013 with the key promise to resolve the nuclear issue and he has been able to fulfil his key pledge with a comprehensive agreement and the end of the western sanctions that is bound to benefit Iran in the long run. At the same time, the foremost question being asked by the Iranian (domestic politics) experts is whether this deal is enough for Rouhani to win this election? The answer seems "no". Though President Rouhani has been able to pull Iran out of stifling sanctions but he has yet to deliver on wider political, economic and social reforms; the discontent about the same was also visible in the speech given by Supreme leader Ali Khamenei on March 20, this year.³ At the same time, the slow pace of the economic progress taking place under the deal has somewhat tainted the brand of diplomatic engagement championed by President Rouhani, Foreign Affairs Minister of Iran Mohammad Javad Zarif, and their class of moderates.

Iranian political structure is a complex one based on the theocratic presidential form of government. Iran's president is the second most

important person in the country after Supreme leader Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in major state affairs. However, the president's powers are limited by the clerics in the country's power structure as well as the authority of the supreme leader. It is the supreme leader—not the elected president—who controls Iran's armed forces and makes decisions on security, defence, and key foreign-policy issues.⁴ However, the Guardian Council, with the authority to interpret the constitution, also has vetoing power over the legislation passed by the parliament. It is tasked with ensuring the laws passed in the parliament are in accordance with Islam. The Guardian Council also scrutinises the qualification of candidates for the presidency and the parliament, and most importantly on their "demonstrated belief in Islam, their commitment to the revolution and its ideals."⁵

In Iran, Presidents serve four-year terms and cannot serve more than two consecutive terms. On May 19, 2017, the vote will determine whether Hassan Rouhani remains the President for next term or a new candidate succeeds him as the president of Iran. To win, a candidate must win more than 50 percent of the vote to claim victory. If no candidate wins an outright majority, a runoff will be held a week later between the two candidates with the most votes in the first round.⁶

The president is an influential player in the Iranian regime despite the limits on his power.

The president heads the Supreme National Security Council, which sets Iran's security and defence policy, including managing the country's nuclear portfolio as well as Iranian support to Syria and other nations of concern to Iran. The president (notwithstanding the political ideology he follows, i.e. whether reformist, moderate, conservative, or hardliner) has the legal authority to help shape Iranian foreign policy across the board. Consequently, in the past, economic, cultural, security, and foreign policies have varied under each presidential administration. However, the Guardian Council and Iran's security services have been able to successfully restrain the major attempts at reform.⁷ The opposition has been criticising Rouhani's regime for the nuclear deal and its economic achievements on the pretext that the positive effect of the deal has not trickled down to the common man. At the same time, conservatives in Iran have suffered losses in the 2013 presidential elections and 2016 parliamentary elections.

Ebrahim Raisi—another major candidate in this race—is a conservative Iranian cleric and the current custodian and chairman of Astan Quds Razavi.⁸ He is also emerging as the front runner in this presidential election due to his proximity with Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with the closeness he shares with the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). However, in the parliamentary elections last year the people of Iran had voted in favour of Rouhani's foreign

and nuclear policy discourse thereby giving an impression that he still stands a chance to serve the second term as President of Iran.

Politics in Iran has always been marked with uncertainty in global and western perspective since the Iranian Revolution in 1979. At the same time, Iran's regional foreign policy also affects the agenda of the presidential candidates with which they try to persuade the voters. In the current scenario, President Rouhani's candidature might result in uniting the moderates in the country against the hardliners and conservatives who seem divided over Ghalibaf and Raisi.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ "Iran's Guardian Council starts vetting presidential election hopefuls", April 16, 2017, <http://theiranproject.com/blog/2017/04/16/irans-guardian-council-starts-vetting-presidential-election-hopefuls/>. Accessed on April 19, 2017.

² HeshmatAlavi, "Iran's 2017 Election: Ahmadinejad's Candidacy Signals the Regime's Weakening", *The Diplomat*, April 19, 2017, <http://thediplomat.com/2017/04/irans-2017-election-ahmadinejads-candidacy-signals-the-regimes-weakening/>. Accessed on April 19, 2017.

³ "Ayatollah Khamenei chides government's economic record", *al-Jazeera*, March 21, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/ayatollah-khamenei-chides-government-economic-record-170320184129011.html>. Accessed on April 21, 2017.

⁴ Saeed KamaliDehghan, "Hassan Rouhani faces tough re-election race as candidate list closes" *The Guardian*, April 16, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/16/iran-hassan-rouhani-face-tough-re-election-race-as-candidate-list-closes>. Accessed on April 19, 2017.

⁵ “Explainer: Iran’s complex political system”, *al Jazeera*, February 29, 2012, <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2012/02/20122715367216980.html%20>. Accessed on April 19, 2017.

⁶ Frud Bezhan, “A Guide to Iran’s Presidential Election”, May 14, 2013, <http://www.rferl.org/a/guide-iran-presidential-election/24996324.html>. Accessed on April 20, 2017.

⁷ “Iran: Situation reports”, September 23, 2016, <https://www.criticalthreats.org/briefs/iran/iran-presidential-election-tracker-updates-and-analysis>. Accessed on April 19, 2017.

⁸ *Astan-e-qods-e-Razavi* is a *Bonyad* or autonomous charitable foundation in Mashhad, Iran. The administrative apparatus of this organisation is considered to be the longest and lasting organization since the martyrdom of Imam Reza about 1200 years ago. Over the years, *bonyad* has grown into a conglomerate employing 19,000 people and running auto plants, agricultural businesses, and many other enterprises.