The Significance of Iran’s 2017 Presidential Election

By G. Reza Ghorashi

What election?

Many casual observers’ reaction to Iran’s presidential elections would be “What election? Are there real elections in Iran?” The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has a notorious human rights record, which many international studies rank among the worst in the world. Amnesty International, for example, writes:

*The authorities heavily suppressed the rights to freedom of expression, association, peaceful assembly and religious belief, arresting and imprisoning peaceful critics and others after grossly unfair trials before Revolutionary Courts. Torture and other ill-treatment of detainees remained common and widespread, and were committed with impunity. Floggings, amputations and other cruel punishments continued to be applied. Members of religious and ethnic minorities faced discrimination and persecution. Women and girls faced pervasive violence and discrimination. The authorities made extensive use of the death penalty, carrying out hundreds of executions, some in public. At least two juvenile offenders were executed.*

Human Rights Watch in its 2016 World Report writes:

*Repressive elements within the security and intelligence forces, as well as the judiciary, retained wide powers and continued to be the main perpetrators of rights abuses. Executions, especially for drug-related offenses, increased sharply from previous years. Security and intelligence forces arrested journalists, bloggers, and social media activists, and revolutionary courts handed down heavy sentences against them.*

It is quite natural to be skeptical about a meaningful election in the IRI. To make matters worse, one should note the “extreme vetting” that the “Guardian Council” imposes. This 12-member Council (six of them clergy appointed by the Supreme Leader) is akin to the Supreme Court in the US. Its role is to interpret the IRI constitution, with emphasis on making sure that all the laws passed by legislators conform to Islamic Sharia. One of its minor responsibilities is to oversee proper conduct of elections by the executive branch. In the early 1980s the Council interpreted this supervisory role to include filtering of candidates for parliament (*Majlis*) and the presidency. By this, they mean much more than making sure that candidates meet basic qualifications such as age, or lack of criminal records. The Council makes sure that candidates are “genuine believers” and “actual followers” of the Supreme Leadership principle, and are capable managers of the executive branch, and… many more subjective criteria. It was this process that denied ex-president Ahmadinejad a chance to run for re-election after eight years in office!

Despite all of the above, there *is* a meaningful and real election for the few candidates (six out of sixteen hundred in this round) who have gone through the filtering successfully.

To understand this point, one must remember that Iranian society is a rather complex phenomenon that does not fit the typical molds. Iran’s first attempts to enter “modernity” go back almost 200 years. The first attempts to establish a modern economy were in the mid-19th century. In 1907 the Constitutional Revolution established a constitutional monarchy and an elected
parliament. The new constitution was based on French and Belgian ones. The first few parliaments were freely elected and very representative of the society. Recognized religious minorities were (and still are) entitled to elect their own representatives. All along the way, however, a major force opposed to any move towards modernity and secularism was the Shi’a clergy establishment. There were some high-ranking clergy who were moderate and would support modest reforms. But the majority of clergy and their institutions (Houza, i.e., seminaries) were actively opposed to modern ideas. Their opposition to the Constitutional Revolution resulted in the public hanging of their leader Sheikh Fazollah Nouri, whose authority at the time (1909) was comparable to that of the Pope for Catholics. He, and the majority of Shi’a clerics, opposed democracy and elections and considered elected offices anti-Islamic.

Subsequent to the Constitutional Revolution and under the Pahlavi dynasty (particularly the first one, Reza Shah), clerics lost a lot of their social influence. A modern and secular education and judiciary took two main instruments of power out of their hands. Gradually the top clergy and Houza accepted a limited form of secularism. They stayed away from politics unless showing up to support the Shah’s regime. The “last hoorah” by “political Islamists” was (junior) Ayatollah Khomeini’s opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah’s White Revolution (a series of economic and social reforms) in 1962. This was not welcome by most high-ranking clerics, who condemned Khomeini, although they managed to convince the Shah to spare his life and instead send him into exile (something they all regretted later on!). At the time of the 1979 Revolution, the Shi’a clerics’ numbers had dwindled to about 20,000 (compared to close to half a million today). Their social role was reduced, and their base of support was among the less educated, less affluent rural population.

The 1979 Revolution was not Islamic in the sense that it did not raise the culturally and socially pre-modern demands that later were imposed on a public that in many ways was ahead of the Islamists. On the eve of the Revolution Iran’s economy and society were “modern” in that the country had an acceptable level of industrialization, and some secularism and tolerance. Its polity, however, was lagging due to the fact that the Shah’s regime was autocratic and would not tolerate dissent, nor permit the formation of a genuine civil society and democracy. The 1979 Revolution was meant to bring the polity to par with the economy and society.

For the first few months after the revolution Iran was the most democratic country in the Islamic world. The first few elections were free and secular, and leftist groups could participate. When Islamists, acting on Khomeini’s orders, tried to force female government employees to use Islamic dress code (Hijab) at the workplace, there was a major backlash. On March 8th (international Women’s Day) of that year (1979), less than a month past the revolution, there was a spontaneous march by tens of thousands of women protesting the order. Khomeini was forced to retreat and settle for “voluntary” Hijab. The first May Day after the revolution, 600,000 people marched in the streets of Tehran. Khomeini, who originally had opposed the May Day parade,
backed off and claimed, “God himself is a worker!”

But then, Islamists started a bloody three-year campaign to turn Iran into an “Islamic” society. Their qualms with the Shah were not so much over political or economic issues; they opposed “westernized” (modern) socio-cultural changes.

It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the reasons for the success of Islamists and the demise of the Left in Iran. Suffice it to say that its lack of a genuine program beyond some cliché “socialist” slogans, and lack of respect for (“bourgeois”) democracy and the rule of law, cost the Left and seculars dearly. Since that first couple of years, it has been various factions of Islamists (“reformers,” “hard-liners,” “moderates”) that have been challenging each other. Although they have succeeded in reversing many aspects of modernity already in place, not all has been lost. One major survivor is the belief that people are the source of power and will express it via their vote. The hardliners of the IRI, the Supreme Leader included, are not fond of this belief in elections and democracy. They have said so on numerous occasions. They simply can’t do away with it. They have tried to limit it by filtering and disqualifying moderate and reformist candidates. Occasionally they “engineer” the election results. They did so in 2009 to re-elect Ahmadinejad. It turned out to be very costly. There were massive protests and the opposition “Green Movement” was born. Another fraudulent election would have been too costly for the Supreme Leader and his supporters. Forcing the regime to have a decent election is one of the few democratic rights that Iranian citizens have kept.

The Supreme Leader claims victory after every election, and thanks voters for showing their support and approval of the Islamic Republic. The reality is that many people vote even though they despise the regime. Due to brutal suppression of any form of opposition by the IRI’s security forces, there are no peaceful and legal means for dissent inside Iran. Even though women overwhelmingly supported Rouhani, no female minister was appointed (Ahmadinejad had three women in his cabinet), which was disappointing. Without elaborating, Rouhani said he “could not” appoint a woman -- presumably because they would not be confirmed by the Majlis. However, he promised to increase the number of female undersecretaries and governors, To a limited extent he has fulfilled this promise, appointing a number of women to high-ranking positions that do not require the Majlis’s confirmation.

The elections are a form of referendum on the IRI. By participating and voting for the candidate that they perceive as being furthest from the Supreme Leader and his hardline supporters, citizens show their dissatisfaction with, not support for, the Leader. In this sense the Supreme Leader is a major loser of recent elections. This round, too, Raisi, the candidate that the Leader supported in every way but naming him (officially the Supreme Leader is neutral), and for whom hardliners campaigned by all means available to them, lost by a 14% margin (43% for Raisi compared to Rouhani’s 57%). Next to the sheer fact of holding the election, this outcome is its second major consequence.

The next Supreme Leader?

The third major consequence of the 2017 election was that people by proxy were electing the next Supreme Leader – or lack thereof. The current Supreme Leader’s health is fragile and it is very likely that he will become incapacitated within the next four years. According to the IRI Constitution, a council of three – the president, the head of the judiciary, and one of the clergy

10 Ervand Abrahamian “May Day in the Islamic Republic,” http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/04/may-day-in-the-islamic-republic.html#iixzz4sCr7xEwk
members of the Guardian Council – will take over until a new Supreme Leader is chosen. Many observers believe that the various factions of the IRI will not agree on a single person. The supreme Leader has a lot of power per the Constitution. On top of that, both the first (Ayatollah Khomeini) and the current one have extended their power far beyond what the law permits. Many in “reformist” and “moderate” camps are unhappy about this extensive power, which is used against them and in favor of the hardliners’ agenda. Even among hardliners there are several factions with serious differences. In last election, they could not agree on a single presidential candidate. Consensus on a candidate for the Supreme Leader position will be very difficult, if not impossible. The closest to a consensus would have been if Raisi had defeated Rouhani and become president. In fact, many observers thought Raisi’s candidacy for president was a rehearsal for his eventual role as the next Supreme Leader. Had he been elected president, it would be hard to argue against his mandate. Besides, he would be the third hardline member of the council that leads the country in case of death or incapacity of Ayatollah Khamenei. The head of the judiciary and all clergy members of the Guardian Council are already in the hardliners’ camp. Raisi’s defeat was a double barrel loss for the Supreme Leader and his hardline supporters. Its significance may grow drastically in the long run if it turns out to be the beginning of the end for the office of Supreme Leader. This office and its overwhelming power, legal or otherwise, is the number one obstacle to democracy in Iran.

The difference between the two top candidates should be the most important aspect of any typical election. This is not the case in Iran, however, because elected offices, president and parliament, have limited power. The real power is in the hands of non-elected bodies such as the Supreme Leader, the judiciary, Friday Imams, the security apparatus, Revolutionary Guards, Basij Militia, and several major religious foundations, all of whose heads are appointed by and report to the Leader.

Nevertheless, the difference between the two candidates was not without importance. The yardstick is not what could be achieved under each, but rather what disaster will be avoided. This, in a sense, is the story of Rouhani’s first term as well. He was attacked by his opponents for lack of achievements. Many of his supporters criticized him for falling short in fulfilling his campaign promises of four years ago. Yet, in the end they voted for him. A closer look at his record shows that things were not as bad as his rivals portrayed them during the campaign. Voters chose him over his opponent because there is a glimmer of hope that things may get better this time. They saw no possibility of improvements under a president Raisi.

The economy under Rouhani

The Rouhani administration’s major accomplishment in his first term was completion of the “nuclear deal” – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – with the major world powers. This prevented Iran’s economy from imploding. To force the IRI to negotiate, the Obama administration imposed a set of comprehensive and crippling sanctions on top of what was already there. The result, as the following tables show, was an almost 7% negative rate of growth in GDP, and a 40+% inflation – a combination that no peacetime economy has managed to survive. At the same time oil production and exports, the major source of desperately needed foreign currency, were going down. JCPOA enabled IRI to stop and modestly reverse this economic free fall. The following charts show the state of the Iranian economy pre and post JCPOA.

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12 For details of JCPOA see www.treasury.gov/resource-center/sanctions/Programs/Documents/implement_guide_jcpoa.pdf
The improvements are of limited scope for several reasons. Generally, economic changes are time-consuming and difficult to achieve. Secondly, although JCPOA removed sanctions imposed due to Iran’s nuclear program, it did not remove all of the sanctions that US government has imposed on IRI in the last 38 years. Because of these other sanctions, IRI’s re-entry to the global economic scene is not full-fledged. Many major corporations, banks in particular, are reluctant to engage with Iran for fear of violating these US-imposed sanctions. Even under Obama the US side was not enthusiastic in clarifying what constitutes a violation of sanctions and what is kosher. This purposeful vagueness has limited desperately needed foreign investment in Iran.

But the main obstacle to a more robust economic growth is Iran’s own troubled economic structure itself. Iran’s is a rentier economy. The real source of revenue is oil exports. By controlling the oil industry, the state controls the economy. Iran’s economy was suffering from
“Dutch disease” (excessive dependence on a single commodity) even before the 1979 Revolution. If anything, the revolution tilted the state-economy relation more toward the state. With the fall of the Shah, almost all captains of industry and commerce – as well as high-ranking officials including many with knowledge of modern economics – fled from Iran for fear of retribution. Suddenly the state oversaw all major economic enterprises. In addition to owners, most of top management had also left. They were replaced by (mostly young) revolutionaries whose credentials were the number of years that they had fought against Shah’s regime. The long and costly war with Iraq that began with Saddam’s invasion of Iran in 1980 imposed a “war economy” that further increased the state’s economic control. Governmental and pseudo-governmental institutions (religious and non-religious “foundations”) controlled ¼ of Iran’s economy. The other ¼ heavily depended on the state for its survival. Therefore, Iranian society, which is in many ways modern, faces a pre-modern state that is savvy in using modern means to continue its existence and push its agenda.

There are a number of power centers in IRI that act as autonomous economic units. They are not accountable to the public and or to elected officials. They don’t pay taxes, yet receive a number of subsidies, mostly in the form of lower priced foreign currency. The Supreme Leader’s office is more or less accepted by many as the “real” government. The Revolutionary Guards have their own financial empire and governing apparatus. They control ports of entry to the country. This enables them to import goods, some of them banned, duty-free without even being registered and/or recorded. The new nomenclatura (Aqazadeha, children of the ruling clergy) has monopolized foreign trade, and are exclusive distributors of imported items in domestic markets. Corruption is rampant. The worst offenders are the numerous “non-profit” foundations controlled by the above-mentioned power centers.

In short, Iran’s main economic problem is lack of transparency and accountability. There is a lot that one can and should say in criticizing capitalism and the market mechanism. But there are situations so bad that market economy is an improvement. In the case of IRI, which is a rentier state, reliance on market rationality is not as bad as total arbitrariness of connections to power centers. Rouhani has had precious little success in bringing transparency and accountability to Iran’s economy. Those agencies and individuals who benefit from this murkiness are too powerful for the president to make them accountable. Indeed, some of his cabinet ministers have benefited from this situation in the past. Some high-ranking technocrats have been paid huge salaries and perks. Rouhani’s opponents tried to make this “corruption” an issue in the elections. The problem is that their own records are worse than those of Rouhani’s allies! Raisi is head of the richest religious endowment, which owns and operates dozens of the largest businesses in Iran and the region. He admitted that his organization has not paid any taxes. The rampant corruption, a characteristic of ideological regimes that count on “decency” of the leaders instead of legal checks and balances, is beyond the reach of the Rouhani administration. It requires fundamental structural changes that will metamorphose IRI to something that it is not: a real democracy.

Rouhani’s foreign policy

One might think it more likely that Rouhani’s second term would make a notable difference in the realm of foreign policy. Here, too, there are major obstacles beyond the Rouhani administration and the executive branch of IRI. JCPOA (the nuclear deal) was about more than just curbing Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Originally it was an attempt to bring the IRI back from pariah status to

14 “One Hundred Years of Oil Income and the Iranian Economy: A Curse or a Blessing?” http://www.econ.cam.ac.uk/people-files/cto/km418/100_Iranian_Oil.pdf
being a normal member of the global community. The main thrust of Obama’s foreign policy doctrine was engagement and primary reliance on “soft power.” At one point in time, it seemed that normalization of relations between Iran and the US was on the negotiating table. This would benefit the people of both countries, and was good for regional and global peace. But it had many enemies. Neo-cons and all those in favor of a more militaristic foreign policy in the US opposed it because they would lose a good "excuse" for more military spending. The same is true for Benjamin Netanyahu and the extreme right in Israel that would be denied this "existential threat." The despotic regimes of Saudi Arabia and other regional countries would not be happy either. Russia and China, too, would lose an economic bonanza in selling goods and arms to Iran, and an occasion to demand favors from the US in return for using their leverage to keep IRI from causing trouble.

Inside Iran, too, hardliners were very much opposed to this deal. Their hatred for modernity, disguised under a high dose of anti-Western and anti-US xenophobia, has for years created a siege mentality that they have used to suppress any dissent and label criticism of the IRI as “foreign conspiracy.” The easiest way to deny a demand for democratic right is to discredit it by linking it to “Western” countries, particularly the US. Merely talking to foreign officials or even to media such as the BBC has sent some human rights activists to jail. It was out of desperation and fear of total economic collapse that Khamenei relented and let negotiations take place. He never fully endorsed them and limited their scope to merely scaling down nuclear activities in exchange for removal of those sanctions that were choking Iran’s economy. He expressly forbade the negotiating team to go beyond this and bring other issues, particularly normalization of relations with the US, onto the table. Hardliners even tried to make attacking JCPOA an election issue. When they realized there is strong support for the agreement, they switched to questioning its promised benefits. Here too, they were not successful. A public opinion poll by the Center for International Security Studies at Maryland conducted a survey of over 1000 Iranians on the perceived effects of the agreement in June 2016, a year after its signing.  

As the above tables show, despite the overwhelming acknowledgement that JCPOA has not improved people’s living conditions (73.7%), they are, however, optimistic that it would (18.1% very optimistic + 47.9% somewhat optimistic = 66%). This optimism, which Rouhani built up in his campaign by promising more “engagement” with the rest of the world, was in sharp contrast

16 http://www.cissm.umd.edu/sites/default/files/IranianPOOneYearAfter-FINAL-071316.pdf
to the harsh rhetoric of Raisi. Voters overwhelmingly approved Rouhani’s engagement approach over hardliners’ confrontational one.

Unfortunately, in the realm of foreign policy, as with the economy, Rouhani’s ability is hampered. Here too, the same forces limit him. Internally it is the Supreme Leader who has already started attacking any rapprochement in foreign affairs. Of more significance, however, is the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States. As a candidate Trump harshly criticized JCPOA and promised to scrap it the first day of his presidency. Although he has not yet fulfilled this promise (having on two occasions renewed the suspension of sanctions, as the agreement requires), his rapprochement to Saudi Arabia and setting up of an “Arab NATO” to fight “terrorism” (read IRI) in his summer 2017 trip to the region does not bode well for the IRI. More importantly, in case the Trump administration needs a diversion, IRI is a low-hanging fruit. A skirmish with Revolutionary Guards in the Persian Gulf could divert attention from many major issues.

The fact that JCPOA is a multilateral agreement between 5P+1 and Iran, however, and Trump's extreme lack of credibility should help IRI. Also, as the recent row between Qatar and the Saudis and some of their allies shows, “Arab NATO” is not easy to pull off. Overall, President Rouhani's “engagement” approach decreases chances of a confrontation between IRI and its regional rivals but does not eliminate it. Here too, the Rouhani administration has limited abilities because the US and Saudis are calling the shots.

**Domestic social issues**

Rouhani’s most questionable record of accomplishment, or lack thereof, is in regard to citizens’ rights. Candidate Rouhani in 2013 made many promises to “open up” the domestic social environment and improve women's and minority rights. These promises were as influential, if not more so, in his election as were economic and foreign policy ones. While a few promises were fulfilled, most were not.  

Nowhere is this mixed bag more apparent than in his internet access policy, a key issue of interest for Iranian youth, who compose a large segment of the population. They are tech-savvy and rely on the internet to compensate for limited meaningful cultural and social life. In 2013 Rouhani promised better and faster access. But again “Rouhani has had relatively little control over internet censorship. Following civil unrest in 2009, internet policy decisions became increasingly centralized under the office of the Supreme Leader. Now a Supreme Council of Cyberspace is the ultimate decision-making body on the internet. The council includes Iran’s judiciary and Revolutionary Guards, but not the president. One result of this setup has been a confusing patchwork as some platforms are blocked, some surveilled, and some permitted.”

Critics of Rouhani here are mostly his supporters, not his hardline opponents (simply because the latter were the main reason for his failure). But this fact did not prevent the hardliners from reminding the public of Rouhani’s (failed) promises during election campaigns.

Compared to foreign policy or the economy, it seemed here that the Rouhani administration has a better chance of success because he does not need to lock horns with major world powers, or deal

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17 On the status of the promises, see https://rouhanimeter.com/en/. According to this survey, 32% were “achieved,” 18% were “compromised,” 16% “not achieved,” 16% “in progress,” 9% were “inactive,” and 8% were “stalled.”
19 Tasnim news agency, close to the Revolutionary Guards collected what it claims were Rouhani’s promises. Accordingly, there were 101 political, 152 economic, 159 socio-cultural, 19 sports, and media 16 related promises.
www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1392/05/13/110968
with stubborn stagnation and inflation in an economy that was structurally flawed. But it turns out that here he confronted more resistance by forces that were using whatever it takes to halt any real openings toward a modern and secular society. The judiciary branch using self-proclaimed authority, the security apparatus by claiming national security, Friday Imams in the name of Islamic values, and the Supreme Leader just because of who he is, have time and again thwarted attempts to ease the restrictions on youth, women, or religious and ethnic minorities. Thus, women are banned from going to sport stadiums; concerts with permits issued by government are cancelled; Sunnis don’t even have a mosque in Tehran; many journalists are in jail; and on and on. Human Rights Watch in its 2017 Report on Iran wrote:

"Despite three years in his office, President Hassan Rouhani has not delivered on his campaign promise of greater respect for civil and political rights. Executions, especially for drug-related offenses, continued at a high rate. As Rouhani faces elections for a second term in May 2017, the hardline factions that dominate the security apparatus and judiciary continued to crack down on citizens for the exercise of their rights, in blatant disregard of international and domestic legal standards. Iranian dual nationals and citizens returning from abroad were at particular risk of arrest by intelligence authorities, accused of being "Western agents.""

President Rouhani has blamed the hardliners for blocking social reforms and openings. While true, this does not exonerate him and his administration. Some of his cabinet members such as the Minister of the Interior (in charge of the police force among other things) have a human rights record as blemished as any of the hardliners. It was in response to his supporters’ criticisms that he has taken some steps. In December 2016 he fulfilled one of his major electoral promises and issued a “Citizens’ Rights Charter.” The charter, which has 120 articles, emphasizes the right to a “decent life” — including the rights to freedom of speech, access to information, health services, a clean environment, holding rallies, and clean water. Expressing his pleasure over the move, Rouhani said, "I have stood by my promises regarding youth, women, and religious and ethnic minorities.” He also described the charter as a great step toward implementing the constitution, remarking, “The government was committed to implementing the rule of law from its first day in office. The Charter on Citizens’ Rights is the result of opinions taken from lawyers, experts and the public, and has the potential to evolve.” He added, “No one [individual], no group and no media is exempt from the law. Everybody has equal rights before the law and it recognizes no 'favorites.'"

The problem is that the Charter is not itself a law. It is not binding and there are no sanctions for violating its articles. It seems more like a wish list that candidate Rouhani put out.

**Conclusion**

Will the Rouhani administration be able to improve its record in the second term? If the past is any guide the answer is negative. The main problem for past presidents has been their limited power in comparison to that of the Supreme Leader and unelected power centers. Citizens’ rights, the economy, and foreign policy are still the three significant challenges for President Rouhani’s second term. With respect to violating citizens’ rights, things could get even worse. The unhappy citizenry has no means of registering its disapproval of the state of affairs other than showing up every four years and voting for the candidate that it perceives furthest from the Leader and these

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22 Article 1-1: “All Iranian citizens, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, wealth, social class, race, etc. enjoy citizenship rights and the foreseen guarantees in rules and regulations. This Charter will have no effect on the other rights of Iranian citizens and citizens of other countries as determined in other rights and regulations or international conventions (to which Iran has joined according to regulations).” Source: [www.iranhrc.org/en/iranian-rights-english-translation-of-draft-citizenship-charter](http://www.iranhrc.org/en/iranian-rights-english-translation-of-draft-citizenship-charter)
power centers. Usually a short while after the elections hardliners find some excuse to crack down on the limited freedoms that people enjoyed for the few weeks up to elections.

At first glance it seems same pattern may be repeated this time. Already the Supreme Leader has asked conservative students not to hesitate to criticize the government. Using military language, he has told them they should “fire at will.” So far the conservative media claims this is only about verbal criticism. Yet, the fact that he has come out so early – and swinging so hard – indicates that things may be different this time. This quick and harsh response may be a sign of weakness, not strength. The landslide victory of Rouhani was a defeat for the Leader and for the hardline candidate that he supported. Also, this round of candidate-debates was “gloves off.” Never before has the lawlessness of the judiciary, the security apparatus, and the Revolutionary Guards been so harshly and openly criticized in an official IRI venue. Many human rights activists and journalists have got lengthy jail sentences in the past for much milder and less revealing criticism of these institutions. Indeed, the Supreme Leader several times asked candidates “not to cross the lines.” He regretted that “things were said [by Rouhani] that should not have had been said.” Knowing that his victory was due to these criticisms and the promise to “do better” this time, Rouhani can be more persistent.

Finally, and more significantly, activists and supporters of Rouhani have learned a valuable lesson. Last round, after Rouhani’s victory, they presumed “mission accomplished” and sat out, expecting the Rouhani administration to fulfill promises of improved citizens’ rights. Whether it was unable or unwilling to do so is not important. It did not happen. Citizens have learned a valuable lesson: They have not “gone home” this time. They keep writing letters and posting their demands on social media.

Iran’s economic problems are due to domestic and external factors. Lack of transparency and mafia-like control by quasi-state institutions are the main domestic obstacle. The US government’s uncooperative policies and attitude are the main external factors. A Rouhani administration, far from perfect, is a better option than would be that of a hardliner like Raisi. France’s Total oil company recently signed a five-billion-dollar deal, giving a symbolic vote of confidence to the Rouhani administration.23

The most significant contrast between a “moderate” Rouhani and a would-be “hardline” Raisi administration is in foreign policy. Fiery Trump rhetoric is amazingly similar to that of an IRI hardliner. In contrast, the Rouhani-Zarif team has kept the rhetoric down and appears to be the adult in the room. Iran has declared that even if Trump nullifies the nuclear deal, it will continue to adhere to it.24 This has made it more difficult for the Trump administration to make a case for breaking up the deal, despite Trump's numerous declarations.25

In short, the IRI under Rouhani is not a democracy, nor does it have any major elements of secularism. To achieve an acceptable minimum for a secular democracy Iran will have to go through so many drastic and fundamental changes that it will no longer be an “Islamic” republic! The office of Supreme Leader will cease to exist. Non-elected institutions of power controlled by the conservative Shi’a clergy or military/security apparatus will have to be disbanded. Major changes in the constitution will be required. The list can go on and on. The election of Rouhani, rather than Raisi, keeps a glimmer of hope alive that scant democratic institutions and traditions that exist in Iranian society – despite and not because of the Islamic republic – have a chance to survive, and hopefully to thrive.

24 https://financialtribune.com/articles/national/72013/iran-to-stay-in-nuclear-deal-even-if-us-Quits
25 https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2017-09-08/the-art-of-renegotiating-the-iran-nuclear-deal