



Spotlight on Iran



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Analysis of the Iranian presidential election: researchers engage in discourse at a conference of the Iranian Sociological Association

On June 23 the Iranian Sociological Association held a special conference on “sociological analysis of citizens’ behavior in Iran’s presidential election”. During the conference, a number of prominent Iranian researchers discussed various aspects of the recent presidential election campaign.

Among other things, the researchers discussed the factors that led to Hassan Rowhani’s victory in the election, the unreliability of the public opinion polls held in Iran ahead of the election, the constant surprises in Iran’s presidential election results, and the social trends reflected in the recent presidential campaign.

All researchers who took part in the conference are politically aligned with the reformist camp. Nevertheless, their lectures offer interesting insights on the factors that influence the voting patterns of Iran’s citizens and the processes undergone by the Iranian society that may partially explain the election results.

On June 23 the Iranian Sociological Association held a special conference on “sociological analysis of citizens’ behavior in Iran’s presidential election”. During the conference, held at the Department of Social Sciences in the Tehran University, a number of prominent researchers discussed various aspects of the recent presidential election campaign. All researchers who took part in the conference are politically aligned with the reformist camp.

A “tsunami” of support for Rowhani on the eve of the election

Dr. Mohammad-Ali Hazeri, a sociologist at Tehran’s Tarbiat Modares University, talked in his lecture about the swell of public momentum in support of Hassan Rowhani during the last few days before the election, the unreliability of public opinion polls held in Iran ahead of the election, and the political and social trends that led to Rowhani’s victory.

Hazeri discussed the considerable increase in public support for Rowhani in the days leading up to the election, saying that it was a very fast development that took place in the last day or two prior to the election, which generated an unprecedented “tsunami” of support for Rowhani. The building momentum in favor of Rowhani, Hazeri said, was evident in that support for Rowhani spread face-to-face even quicker than it did on the media.

Hazeri noted that the election once again proved the failure of the non-professional public opinion polls conducted in Iran. He argued that the field of public opinion polls in Iran is underdeveloped and problematic, and that many of the polls are conducted in a non-professional, biased (“engineered”) manner.

Speaking about the political and social developments that led to Rowhani’s victory, Hazeri said that at first Tehran’s Mayor Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf enjoyed the support of the urban middle class thanks to his role as mayor and to his views. As the election approached, some of the support of the urban middle class shifted from Qalibaf to Rowhani as a result of a change in the mayor’s stated positions. In the last days of the election campaign Qalibaf was increasingly forced to take into account the demands of various groups at the expense of the demands voiced by the urban middle class. Rowhani consequently became a symbol for this social sector, which gave him its support.



Hazeri had praise for the conduct of the reformist leadership ahead of the election and argued that creating a coalition between Mohammad-Reza Aref, the reformist candidate who withdrew from the race days before the election, and Rowhani demonstrated the rationality of the reformists, which contrasted with the conservatives' preference for personal interests over collective logic. He said that the voices of two opposing factions were heard among the reformists ahead of the election: one faction wanted to participate in the election unconditionally and at any cost, while another, radical faction called for boycotting the election. The reasonable and non-populist conduct of the reformist leadership allowed both parties to agree on a reasonable, realistic position that allowed maximum reformist participation yet not at any cost (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92040201152>/حاضر ی-انتخابات-سال-92-نماد-پیچیدگی-جامعه).

The presidential election as a manifestation of the Iranian society's "movement potential"

Political sociologist and journalist Hamid-Reza Jalaeipour discussed the difficult state of affairs faced by the reformists ahead of the election and the sociological implications of the election campaign.

Jalaeipour noted that, starting in 2009, the Iranian society became subject to unprecedented monitoring and pressure from the radical hardliners, and that in the year prior to the election there was intense pressure exerted on reformist politicians wishing to take part in the election, including former President Mohammad Khatami. Consequently, the reformists' participation in the election was marked by intense pressure on both the activists as well as on social networks and the media. That

pressure led to despair among the middle class and kept it from making itself heard for a long time.



According to the top Iranian sociologist, the presidential election is evidence of the “movement potential” inherent in the Iranian society. While it is not, Jalaeipour believes, a “society of the masses”, there are influential elements working inside it. More than a revolutionary, rebellious society that produces desperate citizens, the Iranian society is one with a movement potential. He argued that while individualistic tendencies are growing stronger in a significant portion of the Iranian society, it is “institutionalized individuality”, meaning that all individuals in the society conduct themselves in an organized manner, which had an influence on the recent presidential election campaign.

Jalaeipour noted that the reformists recognized the social reality in Iran and conducted themselves cautiously. They intensified the process of creating discontent in society, all the while understanding that the people would take part in the election despite the discontent. The reformists announced their intention to take part in the election despite the events of 2009, but decided to run candidates with whom the public was well familiar, such as Khatami and Rafsanjani. Rafsanjani’s disqualification by the Guardian Council turned the citizens’ hope into public concern that led to support for Rowhani, Jalaeipour said.

Like Dr. Hazeri, Dr. Jalaeipour also discussed the importance of the coalition between Aref and Rowhani as a factor that influenced the election results. He noted that the coalition started to form among young people from various provinces working in the campaign headquarters of the two candidates. They were the ones who called for a

coalition to be formed, which was finally made possible thanks to Mohammad Khatami's leadership. That led to a high voter turnout and considerable support for Rowhani in various villages and provinces, such as Gilan and Sistan-Baluchistan (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92040201147/>تحليل-جلایی-پور-از-انتخابات-ادعای-تبانی).

The election surprise and the desire for change as a decisive factor in Iran's voting patterns

Dr. Ali Rabi'i, a lecturer at the Tehran University and commentator on political affairs, who used to be an advisor for former President Mohammad Khatami, discussed the difficulties involved in predicting election results in Iran, caused among other things by the fact that the study of the political behavior of Iranians is greatly underdeveloped. He said that there is not enough voter behavior research conducted in Iran, which is why the results of the last several election campaigns (in 1997, 2005, and 2013) could not be anticipated in advance and came as a surprise. If election results in other countries can usually be anticipated, election results in Iran are almost always a surprise. He said that more attention should be given to studying the actual factors that are responsible for how people behave in the elections.

Dr. Rabi'i also criticized the way public opinion polls are conducted in Iran, arguing that the polls are conducted mostly by semi-government bodies or defense institutions, and that some of the polls are associated with the candidates themselves and are therefore used for propaganda.



Rabi'i went on to analyze the voting patterns of the Iranian people, saying that the last several election campaigns are a reflection of the desire for change that is rooted in the Iranian society. Khatami's surprise victory in the 1997 election was the result of the desire for change, he said. Ahmadinejad's victory in the 2005 election was also made possible thanks to the voices of those who demanded change. In Khatami's case, it was the middle class' demand for change that propelled him to presidency, while Ahmadinejad represented the resistance to the status-quo that had existed in Iran since the revolution. The recent election was marked by the failure of Ahmadinejad's policy and the growing social pressure, which together precipitated a new wave of desire for change. The demand for change became even stronger when, at the end of the school year, three million students came back home to their cities and villages in time for the election.

Rabi'i added that when the Iranians feel that someone has been wronged, as Rafsanjani was in the recent election, their tendency is to give more support to that person. A sense of public indignation has a great deal of influence on people's voting decisions. The results of the election were influenced, according to Rabi'i, by the wrong inflicted on Rafsanjani, the public indignation that grew even stronger after his disqualification, and the renewed wave of desire for change which, coupled with mounting concerns among various sectors of the society about the economic crisis, strengthened the support for Rowhani.

Rabi'i also spoke about the influence of the TV debates held during the election campaign, saying that during the debates the citizens felt that Rowhani could represent their demands and speak on their behalf about their needs and desires. Rabi'i concluded by expressing his concern over the exaggerated expectations from the new government, which may prove problematic for it (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92040201194> (علی-ریبیعی-انتخاب-مردم-اغلب-انقلاب-گونه-بوده)).

Support for Rowhani: not just the urban middle class

Dr. Hadi Khaniki, a communication expert at Tehran's Allameh Tabataba'i University, said in his lecture that Rowhani won the election even though he had the fewest media opportunities. He was able to obtain considerable support even in the most remote villages, where mobile ballot boxes were used for the voting, and among different sectors of society, including students, martyrs' families, and periphery residents. The reformists, he said, were able to exploit the limited opportunities and overcome the

security and political restrictions they were facing by running candidates who had their own independent media.

Speaking about the support Rowhani was able to achieve among different social classes, Khaniki said that prior to the election some people speculated that the lower classes of the Iranian society would vote differently than the middle class due to the support they had received from the government in the past several years. That speculation proved to be false, and people belonging to the weaker sectors of society, from backward regions and the periphery, supported Rowhani even more than residents of Iran's big cities.



Khaniki attributed the public support for Rowhani to the society's concerns about the future and its desire for stability. He noted that one of the characteristics of the presidential election campaign was that no candidate defended the current state of affairs in the country—all of them expressed their concern about the situation (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92040201196/> هادی-خانیکی-با-آمدن-هاشمی-به-انتخابات-صفی).

The election as a manifestation of the Iranian society's rationalization

Nasser Fakouhi, an anthropologist at the Tehran University, argued that the election represents “the victory of social fact [a term drawn from the work of French sociologist Émile Durkheim] over political fact”. He said that, for the past several decades, the Iranian society has grown dependent on political institutions, and every social cause has become dependent on a political cause. The Iranian society came to consider money the solution to all its problems and grew dependent on the state. Even the Islamic revolution could not shake the system or the society's dependence on the

state. It is the populist policy pursued by the government in recent years that has brought about a change and led to the rationalization of society.



The recent election is evidence that the political establishment, too, has come to the realization that the Iranian society has undergone a change. Sixty percent of Iranians are young people, many of them university-educated, and it is no longer possible to keep governing the society the same way that the state did during the Qajar dynasty (which ruled Iran since the late 18th century to the early 20th century). Even those who did not vote for Rowhani came to the polling stations seeking to cast a rational vote (<http://isna.ir/fa/news/92040201209/> (فکوهی-باید-از-فرصت-حضور-روحانی-استفاده-کرد-مؤیدفر)).

