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The Conservative Predicament in Iran

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Following a stormy election campaign, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani was reelected for a second term of office. Rouhani won 57 percent of the votes, while his main rival, the conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi, received less than 39 percent of the vote. Rouhani's sweeping victory in 23 out of the 31 provinces throughout Iran was particularly striking in view of the high voter turnout – about 73 percent, one of the highest rates ever recorded in presidential elections in Iran. In the country's ongoing political struggle between the pragmatic/reformist camp, which seeks change, even if limited and gradual, and the conservative camp, which fears change and is determined to block it, Iranian citizens preferred the more moderate candidates. In the elections for local councils, which were held concurrently with the presidential elections, candidates for lists identified with the reformist camp also recorded impressive achievements. For the first time in 14 years, reformist candidates (including a record number of six women) won all 21 seats in Tehran's city council. The reformists were also victorious in other central cities, including Isfahan, Shiraz, Karaj, Yazd, Tabriz, and even the holy city of Mashhad, the home of presidential candidate Raisi.

The results of the elections are the latest development in a line of defeats that conservatives have suffered in recent years. In the 2013 presidential elections, Rouhani won a surprising sweeping victory. With the support of the reformist camp, Rouhani already had a strong lead after the first round, beating opponents such as Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, and the former secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, Said Jalili. In the parliamentary elections of February 2016, the moderate candidates who supported President Rouhani increased their presence in the Majlis dramatically, from a negligible faction of less than 30 representatives (out of 290) to a significant bloc of over 100 representatives. In a sweeping victory in Tehran province, the reformist list won all 30 seats allocated to the province.

Moreover, even during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), the religious conservative establishment faced unprecedented challenges. The riots of 2009

that erupted following charges of fraud leveled by the reformist opposition regarding the results of the presidential election aroused the most severe political crisis that Iran experienced since the Islamic Revolution, and confronted the regime with a serious challenge to its legitimacy and stability. Furthermore, even Ahmadinejad, who was elected president with conservative support, emerged fairly quickly as a significant problem for the conservative regime. His controversial conduct on matters of religion, such as his decision in April 2006 to permit the entry of women to soccer stadiums, together with his messianic and anti-clerical perceptions, aroused sharp criticism among religious leaders. His emphasis on the national-cultural component of Iranian identity rather than Islam and his challenge to the status of clerics were considered by the conservative establishment as a real challenge, and even earned him, along with his allies, the label "the deviant current."

The difficulty faced by the conservative right in its efforts to recruit the support of the Iranian public can be explained by the conservative failure to provide a relevant response to demands regarding economics and individual freedoms. Relieving social and economic distress and achieving political freedom were some of the most important objectives of the Islamic Revolution, but even in its 38th year, the Iranian regime has so far failed to satisfy the desires of the citizens, and the gap between the public and the Revolutionary institutions has widened. Even with the economic improvement that followed the nuclear agreement, most Iranian citizens find it hard to see actual results and continue to demand better conditions, above all, a solution to the severe unemployment crisis. In addition, there is a growing gap between the regime's institutions and the religious establishment on one side and the younger generation on the other. Many young people are moving away from the Revolution's values and adopting a Western life style, in spite of the government's efforts to halt what they see as a cultural attack by the West. Another social trend troubling the religious establishing is the process of secularization underway in Iranian society in recent years, combined with the erosion of the status of the clerics.

The economic and social distress of Iran's citizens and their demands for change have not gone unnoticed by the religious-conservative establishment, which recognizes the need to provide a response. In the last presidential elections, the most prominent conservative candidates, Raisi and Qalibaf, adopted a populist economic approach in the attempt to recruit potential voters, particularly among the lower classes. As such, they followed in the steps of former President Ahmadinejad, who was elected on the strength of his promises to work toward a more just division of state resources, economic improvements for weak levels of society, and a struggle against economic corruption. But not only did Ahmadinejad's economic policy fail to improve Iran's economic situation; it actually made the situation worse, evidenced by the dramatic increase in inflation and decline in economic growth. Iranian citizens in 2017 indicated that they have tired of empty promises and slogans about social justice and the "resistance economy," and demand

practical solutions to their troubles. Moreover, the economic approach of the conservatives hurt those candidates among the middle class, which forms the backbone of Iranian society and was severely hurt by Ahmadinejad's economic policy.

In their efforts to gain popular support, particularly among younger voters, conservative candidates made extensive use of social networks, notwithstanding the suspicion toward them by the conservative camp, perceived as tools of the Western "cultural attack." Ebrahim Raisi went the furthest, when he posted a picture of himself together with the well-known Iranian rapper Amir Tataloo. This was apparently intended to improve his image among the young, but mostly aroused mockery of the conservative religious leader, who was accused of opportunism.

The conduct of the conservative candidates in the election proved that they recognize the widening gap between the religious-conservative establishment and the public, and the need to strengthen their ties. The election results, however, showed that it is not enough to scatter slogans or use social media to recruit public support, particularly among groups considered the traditional supporters of the reformist camp – including the educated urban middle class, young people, and women. The conservative right is losing the support of the Iranian public, and in order to regain it must adjust its world outlook to the changing reality. To that end, the conservatives could well adopt the path of Rouhani, himself a religious conservative, who has recognized the need to adapt ideology to the times. Although he is committed to the path of the Revolution and the political concept of "the rule of the Jurisprudent," he does not rule out limited changes in certain areas, such as limiting the enforcement of an Islamic dress code, and a certain increase in individual freedoms and openness towards the West, even toward the United States.

During his first presidential term, Rouhani encountered significant opposition from the conservative establishment for his efforts to promote even the slightest changes. The reluctance on the part of the conservatives – led by Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the religious establishment, and the Revolutionary Guards – to accept any change is evidence of their refusal to relax the Islamic-revolutionary dogma. As these elements control the main centers of power, the prospects for change appear remote, at least as long as Khamenei is at the helm. Moreover, the challenges facing the conservative camp do not at this stage amount to a substantive threat to regime stability or even to the continuation of the conservative hegemony, thanks to their control of institutions that are not publicly elected, including the security and law enforcement apparatus. But adapting revolutionary ideology to the constraints of reality is the key to survival of the system. Economic improvement requires far reaching structural reforms, including limiting the involvement of the Revolutionary Guard in the economy and letting Western companies into Iran. The public's growing demand for greater individual freedom means limiting both the enforcement of Islamic law and government interference in civilian lives. The Iranian regime can respond to public demands even without extensive political reforms,

but in the long term, ignoring the deep social and demographic processes underway could widen the wedge between the public and the regime and eventually threaten regime stability.