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Centre



IRAN'S ELEVENTH  
PRESIDENTIAL  
ELECTION  
REVISITED:  
THE POLITICS  
OF MANAGING  
CHANGE

ALI ANSARI

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**Cover Image:** Iranian presidential candidate and former chief nuclear negotiator Hassan Rouhani, 1 June 2013. © REUTERS/Fars News.

Iran's Eleventh Presidential Election Revisited:  
The Politics of Managing Change

Ali Ansari

## About the Author

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## Abstract

The election of Hassan Rouhani to the Presidency of the Islamic Republic in 2013 signalled for many a popular rejection of the politics of confrontation endorsed by his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and support for greater liberalism at home and internationalism abroad. With his first term coming to an end and an agreement reached on Iran's nuclear programme, this paper revisits the 2013 presidential election campaign and argues that the process retained much of the intricate management of previous elections. A willingness to 'believe the rhetoric' of the campaign has resulted in a dangerous mismanagement of expectations.<sup>1</sup> This paper follows on from an earlier book: Ali Ansari, *Iran, Islam and Democracy: The Politics of Managing Change*, (London: Chatham House, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier abridged version of this paper, entitled 'A Fragile Opportunity', was published by RUSI in October 2013.

*‘Whether in a democratic or in an authoritarian system...power clothes itself for much of the time in the guise of normality, of routine, of a presence that need not be questioned because it is so much part of the ‘natural’ order of things’.*<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

The first-round victory of Hassan Rouhani in the eleventh presidential elections of the Islamic Republic of Iran took many observers by surprise. One of eight candidates deemed suitable to run by the hardline Guardian Council, he, along with the more openly Reformist Mohammad Reza Aref, was generally regarded as an electoral outlier whose chief function was to reignite interest and enthusiasm among the vast swathe of the Iranian electorate who had become disillusioned by the politics of the Islamic Republic over the last eight years, especially since the electoral debacle of 2009. It was important for the regime, and for the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in particular, to manage a successful election, in order to begin removing the deep political stain of 2009 and to restore a measure of legitimacy, not only domestically, but also in the eyes of the international community. For this, a high turnout and a clean process was vital. The former could only be achieved by providing a measure of perceived competition with real issues that would matter to those parts of the electorate that had come to feel alienated. Rouhani’s campaign, promising a government of ‘prudence and moderation’, and liberally endowed with slogans that were drawn straight from the Reformist playbook, managed just that. His articulate and diplomatic, if occasionally combative, presentation contrasted starkly with the ideologically convoluted and frequently incoherent ramblings of his main hardline opponents.

In the event, a skilful management of popular ‘hopes and fears’ catapulted Rouhani to a successful (if marginal) first-round victory taking some 52 percent of the votes cast with a 72 percent turnout. The public elation that followed has tended to disguise the often complex and fraught political negotiations that facilitated the election. ‘Distress’ had given way to ‘devotion’, such that expectations of the Rouhani presidency were high.<sup>2</sup> It says much of the depth of the despair that the emotional rebound has been so uncritically enthusiastic, but it is also a reflection of the opaqueness of the political process that commentators – both inside and outside Iran – rushed to reimagine<sup>3</sup> and rationalise the past in an effort to explain the election and reinforce (or justify) the enthusiasm that they now felt.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Charles Tripp, *The Power and the People: Paths of Resistance in the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 2–3.

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber talks of ‘a devotion born of distress and enthusiasm’. See S. N. Eisenstadt (ed), *On Charisma and Institution Building: Selected Papers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 23.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘reimagine’ is used deliberately since many of the assessments are founded on perceptions and motives which remain highly speculative.

<sup>4</sup> An excellent example is provided by the Iranian journal *Mehrnameh*, whose post-election issue is boldly titled ‘The second “second” of Khordad’, drawing a direct analogy between Rouhani and Reformist President Khatami whose landslide election victory in 1997 was on the second day of the Iranian month of Khordad (23 May 1997). In this issue, the otherwise sober Iranian political analyst, Abbas



This has resulted in a teleological exercise that has selectively mined the historical record to provide evidence for a promising present and optimistic future. Ironing out the inconvenient details, it provided a simplified narrative of progress – one that effectively continues to this day. In this reading, Ahmadinejad’s presidency was not only an aberration but one of little consequence to the Islamic Republic’s ‘arc of history’.<sup>5</sup> It was even suggested that his presidency represented little more than the normal ebb and flow of factional politics, that the presidential election crisis of 2009 was the exception that proved the rule rather than a signifier of deeper political trends, and that consequently, rehabilitative measures, delivered by a president of high competency, should yield swift benefits. These are narratives that, for good or ill, have sustained Rouhani through his first term. They both reinforce and are reinforced by a particular reading of his election that eschews detail in favour of emphasising a return to ‘normalcy’.

As this paper shows, however, far from marking a break with the immediate past, the details reveal a managed election process that betrays more continuity than change, with clear implications for our understanding of the Rouhani presidency and its capacity to deliver change in the future.

## The Burden of History

Two interrelated events have shaped the public imagination and, by extension, the State’s approach to the politics of elections. The first was the election of the Reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 and its consequences for the political development of the Islamic Republic; the second and more immediate was the haunting spectre of the politically catastrophic election of 2009, with its debilitating consequences for the popular legitimacy of the Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khamenei’s personal standing.

Conflicting interpretations of these events have shaped the opposing narratives used in political debate. Rouhani has tried in many ways to stay in between these two narratives. If he erred on the Reformist side prior to the election, he then proceeded to shift towards more Conservative interpretations, before returning to a more Reformist reading when electoral expediency necessitated it.<sup>6</sup>

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Abdi writes that Rouhani’s election is bigger than that of Khatami, because for the first time in 150 years, an opposition has been formally recognised. Quite apart from the ridiculous timeline, the argument itself is contentious. See ‘Special Issue on the Election 92’, *Mehrnameh* 29, (Tir 1392 / June–July 2013), pp. 98–106.

<sup>5</sup> A contemporary variation on the Whig reading of history as (inevitable) progress. It is a motif that appears to shape Obama’s view of the world, see: Jeffrey Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic Magazine*, April 2016. On the Obama White House’s media strategy see: David Samuels, ‘The Aspiring Novelist Who Became Obama’s Foreign Policy Guru’, *NYT Magazine*, 5 May 2016.

<sup>6</sup> For example, despite the occasional rhetoric to the contrary, normally near election times, Rouhani has done little to progress the release of the Green Movement leaders, Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, parroting the regime line in his first speech as president to commemorate the ‘pro-government’ demonstrations of December 2009, see S.R., ‘Row Harder, Rohani’, *The Economist*, 31 December 2013. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/blogs/pomegranate/2013/12/hopes-fade-iran-s-jailed-reformists> (accessed 17 October 2016).

### **The Ghost of Khatami**

Khatami's dramatic election victories, particularly those of 1997 and the Majlis elections of 2000 when Reformists swept the board, confronted the Conservative establishment with the prospect of real change. Conservative elites sought to undermine him at every turn, effectively defining reform as a heresy – and latterly a sedition – that needed to be uprooted. At the same time, and perhaps more damagingly, those more sympathetic to the idea of reform increasingly identified Khatami as well-meaning but inconsequential and incapable. As a European diplomat, described as coming from a country close to the United States, remarked at the time, in relation to the on-going nuclear negotiations,

These are issues that we have to deal with security people on – in other words the Conservatives... The Reformists have never been in the loop on these kinds of things. Having Conservatives running everything may not be a reflection of the will of the Iranian public, but it will probably make our job as diplomats trying to deal with the people that matter much easier.<sup>7</sup>

The 'Conservative' that the Europeans appeared to be getting excited over was the then head of the National Security team and chief nuclear negotiator, Hassan Rouhani. People simplified and marginalised the Khatami administration and its legacy, blaming failure on him as a putative victim rather than on his ill-judged and occasionally violent hardline stance.

### **The Spectre of Ahmadinejad**

The second set of contested narratives related to the presidential election of 2009. The political fiasco that resulted from this wholly mismanaged election need not detain us here,<sup>8</sup> but the violent clash between Reformists and authoritarian Conservatives was the most serious crisis faced by the Islamic Republic since the end of the Iran–Iraq War and took over six months to suppress. It polarised society, honed competing narratives (emancipation versus sedition), and left tensions and a deep political scar. This haunted the political establishment and made them aware of the need to run elections that were both safe and popular. The trick was to find a man for all seasons; a man of the right who could manage and satisfy the popular yearning for change.

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<sup>7</sup> See, 'Iran Conservatives to Ease Engagements', *AFP*, 18 February 2004.

<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account see Ali Ansari, *Crisis of Authority: Iran's 10th Presidential Election*, (London: RIIA, 2010). See also Farhad Khosrokhavar and Marie Ladier-Fouladi, 'The 2009 Presidential Election in Iran: Fair or Foul?', *EUI Working Papers, Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies* 29 (2012).



## The Campaign

In stark contrast to the election of 2009, the presidential election of 2013 passed off relatively peacefully, much to the satisfaction of the authorities and the elation of those who had voted for Rouhani. What drama there was remained largely off the streets; the televised debates, which had caused such controversy in 2009, now contained sufficient debate to keep both the public and the pundits engaged, while the turnout fulfilled the Supreme Leader's promise of a 'political epic'. According to one news agency, the people were happy and the Leader satisfied and there was undoubtedly a sense of relief all round that matters had not got out of hand.<sup>9</sup> Yet the general sense of satisfaction and self congratulation that followed should not disguise the fact that this election remained among the most controlled and opaque of all Iranian elections, even compared to that of 2009, while the campaign itself, building a momentum over at least six months, was one of the most dynamic ever witnessed in Iran.

### Public Scepticism

The Iranian public tend to be slow burners as far as interest in elections are concerned and even presidential elections don't generate positive interest until quite late in the day. But the situation this time round was different. In the first place, public apathy and scepticism about the integrity of the vote was considerably higher; a view reinforced by Khamenei's assertion that any talk of 'free elections' was seditious and a Western plot.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, much of the grass roots organisation that had been the basis of the Green Movement in 2009 had been uprooted, which meant that any popular mobilisation would be difficult to achieve. The authorities, while anxious to secure a 'legitimising' high turnout were equally – if not more – anxious not to be faced with a rerun of 2009. There is little doubt that the developing chaos of the Arab Spring, and more pertinently, the extensive street protests in Turkey, weighed heavily on the authorities. Khamenei did in fact allude to these regional developments in one particularly bad tempered post-election exchange on the events of 2009.<sup>11</sup>

A number of other factors also undoubtedly shaped the mood. The parlous condition of the economy, despite receipt of unprecedented oil revenues, was a matter of public anxiety and deep consternation among key members of the elite. Indeed, the combination of mismanagement, intensifying sanctions and the continuing political bra-

<sup>9</sup> 'The Election of Rouhani: The People Happy, The Leader Satisfied' [Entekhab Rouhani: Mardom Khosh-hal, Rahbar Razi], *BBC Persian Online*, 21 June 2013.

<sup>10</sup> 'Free Elections; The New Red Line' [Entekhabat Azad; Khat Ghermes-e Jadeed], *Radiofarda*, 29 Dey 1391 / 18 January 2013. 'Free Elections Promote the Interests of the West and Are the Secret of Sedition' [Entekhab Azad, Donbaleh-ye Roye Gharb Ast va Ramz-e Fitneh], *Rooz Online*, 25 Dey 1391 / 14 January 2013.

<sup>11</sup> 'Khamenei Says Those Who Claimed Fraud during the 2009 Elections Should Apologise', *Trend News Agency*, 29 July 2013. See also: 'Iran's Khamenei Lays Conditions for 2009 Protest Leaders' Release', *Iran's View*, 30 July 2013. Available at: <http://www.iransview.com/irans-khamenei-lays-conditions-for-2009-protest-leaders-release/1367/> (accessed 17 October 2016).

vado of a president who seemed only too eager to provoke and annoy almost anyone who mattered, all ensured a broad coalition of somewhat disparate allies increasingly determined on securing change. In this respect Ahmadinejad succeeded where almost no other Iranian political figure had done (except perhaps the last Shah) in uniting almost every significant political faction in the country against him, including key sections of the hardline merchant establishment and the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, widespread elite dissatisfaction with the status quo as represented by Ahmadinejad was critical in the political environment of this election. Khamenei might ignore Reformists, centrist technocrats and traditional Conservatives, but the open criticism of self-styled 'Principlists' was more difficult to dismiss. What made the situation even more serious is that these divisions appeared to extend into the Office of the Supreme Leader itself, the very heart of the autocracy.

### Hardline Divisions

Tentative polling by the authorities had suggested that former President Khatami would still win a landslide should he decide to run.<sup>13</sup> If true, it was a sad reflection not only on Ahmadinejad's failure to erase the 'heresy' of reform, but perhaps more pertinently on the subsequent failure of the authorities to crush reform through the use of force. Moreover Khatami appeared to be gaining support not only from ideological sympathisers such as Hashemi Rafsanjani, but from self proclaimed Principlists such as Ali Motahari, son of Morteza Motahari, one of the leading ideologues of the Islamic Revolution (assassinated in 1979), and certainly no Liberal. Motahari had long been disaffected by the style of politics promoted by Ahmadinejad and had made clear his view that Ahmadinejad's handling of the protests in 2009 had needlessly inflamed matters. For him, Ahmadinejad was just as culpable as Mir-Hossein Mousavi (if not more so) and should as a consequence likewise be held accountable.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the belief that Reformism (as an idea) could simply be eradicated was a nonsense that clearly flew in the face of social realities.<sup>15</sup>

A prominent parliamentarian, Motahari had been scathing about parliament's systematic emasculation and at one stage publicly protested it was nothing more than an extension of the Leader's Office.<sup>16</sup> In the run up to this election, Motahari not only urged Khatami to run, but reportedly accused the Revolutionary Guards of having interfered in the pre-

<sup>12</sup> 'Motalefeh Has Accused Ahmadinejad of a Social Coup d'Etat' [Motalefeh Ahmadinejad ra Motahem beh Koodeta-ye Ejtemai Kard], *Digarban*, 14 Esfand 1391 / 14 March 2013.

<sup>13</sup> 'Khatami Ahead in the Electoral Polling of the Principlists!' [Khatami dar Sadr Nazarsanji-haye Entekhabati Osulgarayan!] *Baztab News*, 23 Bahman 1391 / 11 February 2013. The article argues that non-Principlist candidates are more popular than their Principlist rivals. Such polls are at best taken as suggestive rather than indicative.

<sup>14</sup> 'Ali Motahari: If there is to be a Trial for Mousavi, Ahmadinejad Should also be Tried', *Aftab-e Yazd*, 30 August 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See: Ali Motahari's comments: 'The Existence of the Reformists is a Blessing to the Islamic Republic' [Vojood Eslah Talaban Baraye Jomhuri Eslami yek Nemat Ast], *Iran Labour News Agency*, 7 May 2010.

<sup>16</sup> 'Ali Motahari: The Parliament Has Been Transformed into a Branch of the Leader's Office' [Ali Motahari: Majlis beh Shakheh-ye Daftar Rahbari Tabdeel Shode Ast], *Radiofarda*, 21 Tir 1390 / 12 July 2011.

vious year's parliamentary elections,<sup>17</sup> adding that if politics continued in this manner, the forthcoming presidential elections would be little better than a show.<sup>18</sup> Motahari's pedigree – along with the consensus that he was 'one of us' – undoubtedly protected him, but it also made his comments all the more damning.

What Motahari's comments revealed was that the discomfort with the political situation, which had hitherto been ascribed to seditionists and trouble makers, was now clearly making headway into the heart of the Principlist establishment. Many were now voicing concerns that elections were becoming meaningless. If the political dynamism of street politics was in abeyance, it had been replaced by a far more serious rift within an elite increasingly anxious about the direction of politics, the pressures on the economy and the realities of the regional situation.

There was, in short, a growing clamour for some sort of change.

For his part, Khatami was unsurprisingly again persuaded that discretion was the better part of valour. He declined on this occasion to stand in the election, but decided nonetheless to campaign, publicly condemning the stultifying political atmosphere before urging people to seek salvation in his own mentor, Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>19</sup>

### **Building a Drama out of a Crisis**

The period from Hashemi Rafsanjani's last-minute decision to register through to his disqualification by the Guardian Council remains a classic example of Iranian political theatre. All the analyses that abound – about whether his decision was calculated or spontaneous, tactical or rash – remain speculative. What we do know is that his dramatic last-minute entrance did succeed in galvanising interest in a hitherto lacklustre election cycle, although the excitement generated among the political class was probably higher than in the electorate as a whole.

Until then the Iranian public had been presented with a curious case of political naval gazing by a handful of Principlists seeking to outshine each other in their professed loyalty to the Leader. One group appeared in the forefront – the coalition of the '2+1' – largely on the basis that they had existed for several months with the avowed intent of both

<sup>17</sup> 'Khatami Should Become a Candidate / The Guards Interfered in the Parliamentary Elections' [Khatami Candida Shaved / Sepah dar Entekhabat-e Majlis Takhalof Kard], *Melimazhabi*, 8 Esfand 1391 / 26 February 2013. Available at: <http://melimazhabi.com/?p=38042> (accessed 17 October 2016). Motahari was in fact initially barred from running, only having the decision overturned on appeal: 'Ali Motahari Dismisses the Reasons He Has Been Barred' [Ali Motahari Dalayel Rad Salahiyatesh ra Rad Kard], *BBC Persian Online*, 14 January 2012.

<sup>18</sup> 'Motahari: With the Current State of Politics and the Absence of Critics, the Elections Will Be a Show' [Motahari: ba Edameh-ye Siyasatha-ye Feli va Gheybat Montaghedan, Entekhabat Farmayeshi Meshavad], *Baztab-e Emrooz*, 23 Esfand 1391 / 13 March 2013.

<sup>19</sup> 'Seyyed Mohammad Khatami: With This Atmosphere, if the Prophet of God Came, Difficulties Would Not Be Solved' [Seyyed Mohammad Khatami: Bah een Royeha agar Peghambar-e Khoda ham Biyayad Moshkelat hal Nemishavad], *Kaleme*, 2 Ordibehesht 1392 / 22 April 2013.

formulating a strategy and picking a candidate to champion the Principlist cause in the forthcoming election. These three individuals were former speaker of parliament, Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel; Mayor of Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf; and advisor to the Leader on Foreign Policy and former Foreign Minister, Ali Akbar Velayati. All three had close ties to the Supreme Leader's Office and one (Haddad-Adel) had familial relations, with his daughter married to Khamenei's second son, Mojtaba. If this 'coalition' was intended to excite public opinion or present itself as some sort of substitute political party, then it fell flat on both counts. What disagreements did exist between the three individuals were just not dramatic enough for an electorate that simply did not care about the nuances of Principlist ideology, or even, perhaps more pertinently, about the egos of the various candidates.

In retrospect, this internecine competition appeared dangerously complacent,<sup>20</sup> but it also reflected what many felt, that this was what politics in the Islamic Republic now entailed: a competition between different Principlists arguing over who could better execute the ideology of the State as defined by the Supreme Leader. Indeed, in the absence of anything approaching political parties – the organisations underpinning the Reform movement, and its offspring the Green Movement having been ruthlessly suppressed – the contest was fast resembling a political beauty contest among Principlists loyal to the Leader. One of the most striking examples of this came from the Principlist candidate, Saeed-Reza Jalili, the chief nuclear negotiator who had not joined the coalition but was generally regarded as the Leader's anointed candidate. Jalili clearly relished his position as front runner and repaid the Leader's apparent blessing in kind by making the astonishing gesture of swearing on the Holy Qur'an – albeit after being asked to do so – that he would be happy to sacrifice his life for the Leader.<sup>21</sup>

It should come as no surprise therefore that Rafsanjani's abrupt entry into the race provided something of a jolt to a body politic approaching rigor mortis. While the public remained sceptical, political commentators came alive, hailing Rafsanjani as the one man capable of restoring life and dignity to Iranian politics. As the self-styled 'General of Reconstruction' who had ostensibly rebuilt the country after the devastating eight-year war with Iraq, Rafsanjani was just the man to bring some sanity back to economic policy. What is perhaps most striking about Rafsanjani's late registration was the range of support he appeared to garner.<sup>22</sup> One noted Reformist journalist somewhat euphor-

<sup>20</sup> Hossein Shariatmadari, 'Don't Stand in the Way of the Flood' [Mane' ye Seyl Nashavid], *Keyhan*, 23 Khordad 1392 / 13 June 2013, p.1.

<sup>21</sup> Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Saeid Jalili Swear to Qur'an in Tehran University to Sacrifice his Life for Khamenei!', *You Tube*, 3 June 2013. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_ZUyaL1wfyQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ZUyaL1wfyQ) (accessed 17 October 2016). For a detailed account of Jalili's views and how they mirrored those of the Leader see: 'What Will Be Left of Iran with a Jalili Presidency?' [Ba Rais Jomhur Shodan Jalili Cheh az Iran Baghi Mimanad?], *Radiofarda*, 3 Khordad 1392 / 24 May 2013. Velayati was also extraordinarily deferential to the Leader: see: 'Ali Akbar Velayati: President-Permission Sir' [Akbar Ganji Ali Akbar Velayati: Rais Jomhur-e Agha Ejaze'], *Radiozamaneh*, 31 Farvardin 1392 / 20 April 2013.

<sup>22</sup> 'A Student of Ayatollah Misbah [Yazdi]: Qom is also with Hashemi' [Shagerd-e Ayatollah Misbah: Qom ham ba Hashemi Ast], *Entekhab*, 25 Ordibehesht 1392 / 15 May 2013.

ically argued that Rafsanjani's election would erase the stain of the last eight years and effectively reboot the Islamic Republic, adding for good measure that he now preferred Rafsanjani over Khatami, because the country's problems were fundamentally economic in nature.<sup>23</sup>

Rafsanjani was joined by one other late entry – considerably less surprising but still of interest: Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, Ahmadinejad's chosen successor, who had been effectively campaigning for the better part of two years and was the source of much of the difficulty between the Supreme Leader and his one time protégé. Given Khomeini's dislike of Mashaei, few believed he would be allowed to run. There was however some excitement about the possibility of Ahmadinejad trying to force the Leader's hand through fair means or foul, and a good deal of polite interest in Ahmadinejad's (and Mashaei's) sudden discovery of the rule of law and civil rights (mixed as always with a heavy dose of nationalism), to say nothing of the less than subtle assertion that a Mashaei presidency would inaugurate an Iranian Spring.<sup>24</sup>

### The Election Process

Well over 600 potential candidates registered for the election and prepared themselves for vetting by the austere and wholly unaccountable Guardian Council. Led by the hardline Ayatollah Jannati, most of its twelve appointees were there by the grace of the Supreme Leader (six are appointed by the Leader, and the other six by parliament, but given the monochrome nature of parliament, they were unlikely to nominate anyone who might offend the Leader's sensibilities).

The vetting procedure itself is among the most opaque processes of any election cycle. Iranian presidential elections always draw high numbers of candidates from the serious, to the well-intentioned, down to the outright bizarre, and while the numbers are often used to show how vibrant political life is, in reality they reflect the complete lack of structure in Iranian politics. The majority of candidates can therefore be easily dismissed.

There are no parties through which candidates emerge. Instead, nominees come forward and then seek the endorsement of various factions and groups. In many cases a candidate will appear on several different lists, remaining ambiguous or even contradicting themselves depending on what audience is being addressed. It is therefore often better to talk of political tendencies rather than ideological platforms, although some candidates will clearly lean towards a particular stance or be characterised as belonging to one faction or another.

<sup>23</sup> 'The Destiny of Iran Has Fallen to the Last Chapter of Rafsanjani's Political Life', [Sarnevshst 'Iran' beh Akharin Fasl Zendegeye Siyasi-ye Hashemi Kare Khorde Ast], *Asr-e Iran*, 22 Ordibehesht 1392 / 12 May 2013.

<sup>24</sup> 'Mashaei: General Plans No Longer Answer in the Name of Islam / Ladies and Gentlemen, We Are All Soldiers in the Spring of the Hidden Imam' [Mashaei: Digar Tarh Koleati beh Name Islam Javab Nemidahad / Aghayan va Khanomha-ye Bahari dar Maktab Emam Asr Hame Sarbaz And], *Mehr News Agency*, 11 Ordibehesht 1392 / 1 May 2013.

The first criterion of electability is loyalty to the Leader – which can be a poisoned chalice inasmuch as loyalty will get you through the vetting but rarely garners votes. Rafsanjani, whose relationship with the Leader had been strained since his ambivalent stance on the crisis of 2009, professed as much loyalty as his dignity could permit, even going so far as to suggest that he has asked and received permission to run. His supporters, meanwhile, sought to turn the question back onto the Leader, asking how it might be possible that he opposes the candidacy of such an esteemed servant of the Revolution.<sup>25</sup> Mashaei on the other hand went out of his way to be obsequious.<sup>26</sup>

In the event, it did neither of them much good. Ayatollah Khamenei urged the Guardian Council to work wisely as they always had done, and it was duly announced that both candidates had been disqualified, leaving six avowed Principlists (of various shades), one Reformist, and Hassan Rouhani.

## The Diplomatic Sheikh<sup>27</sup>

While Hassan Rouhani was not an unknown personality, his politics remained opaque. He had been at the heart of the security establishment for the better part of two decades and was even one of the few individuals entrusted with engaging with the ill-fated visit of Robert McFarlane in 1986.<sup>28</sup> He was generally understood to be a Conservative but, like all political appellations in Iran, what this meant depended very much on context. During the Reform administration of Mohammad Khatami, his tenure as Secretary of the National Security Council saw him firmly defined as a staunch, if not hardline, Conservative. But then during the election campaign he became anxious to redefine himself as altogether more moderate. When his Conservative reputation came back to haunt him he was swift to clarify his position on the student demonstrations of 1999. In a memorable and decisive riposte to Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf's assertions, Rouhani stated that he was a jurist not a colonel.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> 'Why Should the Supreme Leader be Opposed?! In his own Words, no one can Approach Hashemi' [Chera Rahbar Moazam Mokhalef Shaved?! Beh Gofte-ye Eshan Hich Kas Bar Ishan Hashemi Nemishavad], *Khatami*, 17 Ordibehesht 1392 / 7 May 2013.

<sup>26</sup> 'No Equivalent to the Supreme Leader Exists in the World' [Hamanand Maqam Moazam Rahbaru dar Donya Vojud Nadarad], *Namna*, 29 Ordibehesht 1392 / 19 May 2013.

<sup>27</sup> Rouhani was given this epithet ostensibly because of his diplomatic expertise. It carried no religious connotations, see: 'Iran's Next President Called 'Diplomatic Sheik' [sic] by Supporters', *Los Angeles Times*, 15 June 2015.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, 'President-Elect Stirs Optimism in Iran and West', *New York Times*, 26 July 2013. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/world/middleeast/president-elect-stirs-optimism-in-iran-and-west.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/27/world/middleeast/president-elect-stirs-optimism-in-iran-and-west.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0) (accessed 18 October 2016).

<sup>29</sup> The allegation was made by Qalibaf in one of the debates eliciting a strong response: Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Dispute between Hassan Rohani and Bagher Ghalibaf about 18 Tir during Last Year Campaign', *YouTube*, 10 July 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HCWSNagmQ> (accessed 30 October 2016). Former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander Safavi was later happy to clarify Rouhani's role in the student demonstrations of 1999: 'The Recollection of Commander Safavi on Rouhani's Role in the Events of 18 Tir' [Ravayet-e Sardar Safavi az Naqsh Rouhani dar Havades 18 Tir], *Khodnevis*, 11 Mordad 1392 / 2 August 2013.



While Rouhani's somewhat abrupt conversion to the tenants of Reformism most obviously associated with Mohammad Khatami did take many observers by surprise, shifts in political emphasis are not unusual in a political environment that has few institutional reference points and no parties. If Rouhani was a Conservative in relation to Khatami, he was certainly a moderate compared to Ahmadinejad, under whose tenure the politics of Iran had shifted so far to the right that most traditional Conservatives felt adrift. Indeed, Rouhani's effective realignment had been in train for some time and was in part a reaction to continued attacks on his tenure and achievements as nuclear negotiator by Ahmadinejad and his supporters. This had previously resulted in a lengthy memoir entitled *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* (whose first edition was deemed too revealing for the censors and resulted in cuts to subsequent editions), which introduced the hitherto discrete cleric as a pragmatic operator hindered as much by incoherence at home as by duplicity abroad.

Rouhani's decision to register as a candidate sparked modest interest, partly because, as already noted, his politics were not entirely clear. He had not positioned himself as the Reformist candidate, a slot reserved for one of Khatami's former Vice Presidents, Mohammad Reza Aref, and his candidacy, along with that of Aref, was generally regarded as tokenistic, intended to convey an aura of competition to a much disillusioned public and to sceptical foreign observers. Any early excitement attached to Rouhani was not directed at him but at his mentor, Hashemi Rafsanjani.<sup>30</sup> With the latter's disqualification, the field seemed ready for yet another 'engineered' victory for the Principlists, although exactly which one might top the list was a matter of some vexed excitement among the hardline press, with some commentators noting that Khamenei really wanted a Velayati-Qalibaf win, and the ever confident *Fars News* pronouncing an 'epic' turnout (with a remarkably accurate prediction of 72 percent) with Jalili and Qalibaf in the lead.<sup>31</sup>

Outside this hallowed circle of Loyalist-Principlists, there was considerable anger at Rafsanjani's disqualification, especially when it was suggested that the Guardian Council had made its decision on the basis of Rafsanjani being too old. Ali Motahari, who had since become the Rafsanjani campaign spokesperson, was sufficiently incensed by the impending disqualification that he angrily denounced the deception taking place, noting that the people had been deceived once before, and enough was enough.<sup>32</sup> In the immediate aftermath of the disqualification he added for good measure that had the Founder of the

<sup>30</sup> Hassan Rouhani, 'Rouhani's View on the House Arrest of Mousavi & Karroubi w/ English Subtitles', *YouTube*, 29 May 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hYwM4Na1HIQ> (accessed 18 October 2016).

<sup>31</sup> 'The Plan of the Supreme Leader's Office is for a President Velayati with Qalibaf as First Deputy' [Barnameye Beit Rahbari Riyasat Jomhuri Velayati va Moaven Avali Qalibaf Ast], *Digarban*, 24 Ordibehesht 1392 / 14 May 2013. 'Qalibaf and Jalili in the Lead / Participation in South Khorasan Province Reaches 91%' [Qalibaf va Jalili Dar Sadr / Mosharekat dar Khorasan Jonubi beh 91% dar Sad Resid], *Fars News*, 13 Khordad 1392 / 3 June 2013.

<sup>32</sup> 'In the Last Election We Deceived the People, Enough' [Dar Entekhabat Gozashteh Mardom ra Fareeb Dadeem, Digar Bas Ast], *Kaleme*, 28 Ordibehesht 1392 / 18 May 2013.

Islamic Republic stood, he too would have found himself disbarred.<sup>33</sup> The establishment, for its part, appears to have calculated that in disbarring both Mashaei and Rafsanjani they could argue that one had been sacrificed to prevent the other from running. But perhaps more important was their assessment that the disqualification would result in no street protests – something for which they had prepared, with the security forces warned of the re-emergence of ‘sedition’ on an even grander scale than 2009 (a trope that reappeared with some vigour for the 2016 Majlis elections).<sup>34</sup>

In the event, the establishment breathed a sigh of relief and congratulated itself on its careful management. Not only did protests not happen but Ahmadinejad’s much-vaunted threat to unleash his ‘supporters’ also failed to materialise.<sup>35</sup> The most intriguing revelation was the reported existence of a tape in which Ahmadinejad confessed that election fraud had been imposed on him against his will in 2009. The number of votes he had acquired was remarkably close to a figure previously stated by one of his aides.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the veracity of the report, the website in question was immediately banned and Ahmadinejad’s Office quickly denied the existence of any tape.<sup>37</sup> For many, the report simply confirmed what they already suspected and Ahmadinejad’s denial was regarded as a tactical retreat in an effort not to antagonise the Guardian Council. Yet, even after Mashaei’s disqualification, Ahmadinejad proved unusually tight-lipped, opting instead to appeal to the Leader. Rafsanjani meanwhile opted for the moral high ground with a statesmanlike stoicism which pushed him further into the category of ‘political martyr’.

As Motahari’s comments revealed, the ‘disenfranchised’ elite was proving a hard nut to crack. What determined the decision to regroup around Rouhani is difficult to discern. Post-facto analyses always tend to see more method in the madness than may have existed in the chaos of the political process. In Iran, perhaps more than elsewhere, calculation is

<sup>33</sup> ‘Motahari: If Ayatollah Khomeini Had Registered, He Too Would Have Been Disqualified’ [Motahari: Ayatollah Khomeini Agar Sabt Nam Mikard, Rad Salahiyat Meshod], *Radiofarda*, 1 Khor-dad 1392 / 22 May 2013.

<sup>34</sup> ‘The Head of the IRGC Political Office: The Likelihood of Riots on the Russian Model’ [Rais Daftar Siyasi Sepah: Ehtemal Voghuh Shoresh-haye Model Rusi], *Radiofarda*, 28 Ordibehesht 1392 / 18 May 2013. ‘The Flag of Sedition in the Hands of the Deviant Current / The People of the West do not Accept the Zionist Regime’ [Parcham Fetneh Emrooz dar Dast Jaryan Enherafi Ast / Mardom Gharb Regime Zionisti ra Ghabol Nadarand], *Fars News*, 6 Ordibehesht 1392 / 26 April 2013.

<sup>35</sup> ‘An Eventful Evening for Taking a Step towards Creating Mr Khamenei’s Political Epic’ [Shabi Por Hadese Baraye Gami be Jelo dar Jahat Sakhtan Hameseh Siyasi Agahiye Khamenei], *Rangin-kaman*, 31 Ordibehesht 1392 / 21 May 2013. ‘Tehran on the Night of the Announcement of the Disqualified’ [Tehran dar Shab Elam Esami bee Salahiyat ha], *Rooz Online*, 31 Ordibehesht 1392 / 21 May 2013.

<sup>36</sup> ‘The Curious Revelations in the Speech of an Ahmadinejad Supporter’ [Ramzgeshayi az Sokhan-rani yek Tarafdar Ahmadi Nejad], *Rahesabz*, 23 November 2009.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Why Did Ahmadinejad’s Office Deny the Tape?’ [Chera Daftar Ahmadinejad Navar ra Takzib Kard?] *Rooz Online*, 12 Ordibehesht 1392 / 2 May 2013. ‘The Suspension of the Baztab’s Activities following the Publication of Documents Pertaining to Fraud in the Election of 2009’ [Toghif Faaliyat ‘Baztab’ dar Pey Enteshar Khabari az Asnad Taghalob dar Entekhabat-e 88], *Kaleme*, 10 Ordibehesht 1392 / 30 April 2013. ‘The Office of the Iranian Presidency Denies Any Knowledge of Election Fraud’ [Daftar-e Rais Jomhuri Iran Agahi u az ‘Taghalob-e Entekhabati’ ra Takzib Kard], *BBC Persian Online*, 30 April 2013.

always mixed with a heavy dose of opportunism and whether the momentum came from below or was directed from above, it is highly unlikely, after 4 years of the most severe repression, that the popular mood would have gained any traction at all, had a fractured political elite not been receptive. But discomfort in 2009 had translated into anger in 2013 at continuous political marginalisation (to say nothing of the insults that had been heaped upon them by Ahmadinejad and his allies) and became a real anxiety over the worsening economic crisis facing the country.

This mixture of anger and anxiety was undoubtedly encouraged by the embers of discontent that continued to express themselves among key sectors of the population, most obviously students who chafed under the oppressive atmosphere. There were indeed some early indications that the popular mood of discontent and anxiety could once again be whipped into a political movement, not only in Rouhani's early engagement with student groups,<sup>38</sup> but most strikingly at the funeral of a leading Reformist cleric, Ayatollah Taheri, in Isfahan, when crowds chanted slogans demanding the release of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, the dominant themes of these meetings and the subsequent rallies were the issue of electoral fraud, the oppressive political atmosphere and the particular fate of Mousavi and Karroubi.<sup>40</sup> The events of 2009 were constantly in people's minds, both on the streets and among the elites.

At the same time, it was palpably clear that for such latent discontent to be effectively driven to the polls, a much greater effort would have to be made to overcome engrained popular scepticism. Two developments were necessary: unity among key elements of the elite and the promise of dramatic change.

The first step was to foster a new progressive alliance bringing together the Centrists (Rafsanjani) and the Reformists (Khatami). Having earlier admonished the electorate not to disengage from the political process, Khatami decided, along with Rafsanjani, to throw his weight behind Rouhani's candidacy in a bid to consolidate the opposition to the Principlists. Between them they attracted extensive support from the wider bureaucracy and from students and activists. Khatami's support was to prove critical in two ways: first in

<sup>38</sup> Hassan Rouhani, 'Rouhani's View on the Popular Protests after 2009 Elections w/ English Subtitles', *YouTube*, 6 May 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0CluzrbPJk> (accessed 19 October 2016).

<sup>39</sup> 2009 Iranian Revolution, "Mousavi & Karoubi Must Be Freed" Protests at Funeral of Ayt. Taheri', *YouTube*, 4 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iMoXCOvN2n8> (accessed 19 October 2016).

<sup>40</sup> Golbarg Bashi, 'Speech of Hassan Rouhani in Mashhad Presidential Rally (12 June 2013)', [Sokhanrani Hassan Rouhani dar Hamayesh Entikhabati Mashhad (22 Khordad 92)], *YouTube*, 12 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj5i40jsf0> (accessed 19 October 2016). Bahman Kalbasi, 'Mashhad - 12 June - Speech of Rouhani' [Mashhad - 22 Khordad - Sokhanrani Rouhani], *YouTube*, 12 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yble-i9Tx-c> (accessed 19 October 2016). Sitad Salam, "If there is Fraud, there will be an Uprising in Iran, Beheshti Stadium Mashhad, 12 June 2013" ["Age Taghalob Bashe, Iran Qiyamat Mishe" Varzeshgah Beheshti Mashhad, 22 Khordad 1392], *YouTube*, 12 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFGmz-JwPqmw> (accessed 19 October 2016).

ensuring the withdrawal of the Reformist candidate, Aref, and secondly in convincing a sceptical public to participate. Having previously noted that his precondition for participation was the release of political prisoners, Khatami now made the case that a Rouhani victory would create the best opportunity for that release to happen, adding that the political prisoners themselves supported this move.

For his part, Rouhani played his role almost to perfection, careful not to antagonise any of the key constituents, be they from the left or the right of the political spectrum. His promises grew increasingly dramatic and there is little doubt that he grew into his role as the torchbearer for reform.<sup>41</sup> His assured performances in the televised debates, which, despite a lacklustre start (largely due to the curious quiz show format devised by state television), grew increasingly confident, and only served to cement his credentials as a thoughtful practitioner.<sup>42</sup> This contrasted favourably with the poor performances of his rivals, especially Jalili, whose intellectual incoherence elicited the popular joke that Iranians could finally empathise with Catherine Ashton's pain.<sup>43</sup>

While momentum did build into a popular crescendo on 14 June, the post-election elation at Rouhani's first-round victory has tended to disguise the final part of the equation that had to be carefully managed, which was the hardline establishment itself, principally but not limited to Khamenei, who were by no means reconciled to a Rouhani victory won on the back of slogans they assumed were confined to the dustbin of history. Rouhani sought to anticipate these problems by writing a private letter to the Leader to assure him of his fidelity to both him and the Revolution.<sup>44</sup> But even then, in the days leading up to the vote, there were suggestions by the Guardian Council that the qualifications of candidates could be reviewed, and it subsequently transpired that the Minister of the Interior, charged with administering the elections, had come under intense pressure from the Guardian Council, who had indicated they were keen to have Rouhani disqualified.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>41</sup> '70 Key Statements Rouhani Must Not Forget' [70 Jomleh-ye Kelidi keh Rouhani Nabayad Faramush Konad], *Iran Emrooz*, 11 July 2013.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Electoral Debates' [Manzereh Entekhabati], *Babakdad*, 10 Khordad 1392 / 31 May 2013. 'IRIB Transformed the Most Important Political Event into an Entertainment' [Seda va Sima Mohemtarin Etefagh Siyasi ra be yek Barnameye Sargarm Konande Tabdil Kard] *Etemad*, 11 Khordad 1392 / 1 June 2013.

<sup>43</sup> 'The People and the Televisual Presence of Veleyati, Jalili and Rouhani' [Mardom va Hozur-e Television-e Velayati, Jalili va Rouhani], *Peyknet*, 7 Khordad 1392 / 28 May 2013.

<sup>44</sup> 'Bahonar: Rouhani Sent a Letter to the Leader One Week before the Election' [Bahonar: Rouhani yek Hafteh Pish az Entekhabat beh Rahbari Nameh Nevesht], *Radiofarda*, 2 Tir 1392 / 23 June 2013. See also: *Fars News*, 8 Khordad 1392 / 29 May 2013.

<sup>45</sup> 'The Minister of the Interior Was in the Last Hours Put Under Immense Pressure' [Vazir Keshvar dar Sa'at Akhar beh Shedayat zir Feshar Bud!], *Rahdigar*, 8 Tir 1392 / 29 June 2013.

## Election Day

Past experience suggested to many that there was nothing certain about a Rouhani victory. A high turnout was not guaranteed even with all the assurances and promises to the electorate, and even Rouhani's most ardent supporters felt the best they could expect was a second-round contest. The Principlist strategy seems to have been to achieve just this, after which a unified hardline candidate would sweep up the votes. Moreover, anxieties remained concerning the position Khamenei would take.

### A Fractured Elite

In the run-up to the vote, only Ali Akbar Nateq-Nouri, a traditional Conservative with few moderate strings to his bow, had been confident of a first-round win for Rouhani as he went to cast his vote. Nateq-Nouri's certainty was the first clear indication that the mood in the Leader's Office had changed, and that, given a high turnout and no prospect of state interference, Rouhani's platform would be secure. Once seen as a likely successor to Hashemi Rafsanjani, Nateq-Nouri had famously been defeated in Khatami's landslide election victory in 1997, among the first of the Leader's preferred candidates to suffer humiliation at the hands of the electorate. He had since sought succour and gainful employment in the Supreme Leader's Office where he established his credentials as a shrewd purveyor of the political scene – a reputation in part earned by the fact that he kept himself well out of the limelight. Over time, his dislike of the politics of Ahmadinejad grew stronger than his objections to Reformism, and he was further incensed by Ahmadinejad's accusation in 2009 that he and his family were involved in financial corruption.<sup>46</sup> Like many others, he had some personal scores to settle, but was also emblematic of a deeply concerned elite.

It can be surmised that, subject to assurances about his own position, Khamenei had finally recognised the urgency of the situation, faced as he was by an elite rebellion of unprecedented reach and no doubt realising that people throughout the region, from Egypt through to Turkey, were in a turbulent mood. There are two indications that this was indeed the case. In the days leading to the vote, Khamenei made an unprecedented appeal to the electorate to come out and vote, discarding his usual bombast to appeal to voters to vote for the honour of their country, even if they did not believe in the regime.<sup>47</sup> This was an extraordinary exercise in outreach which did not go unnoticed and reflected the deep anxiety Khamenei must have felt – anxiety which came in part from the realisation that observers both within and, perhaps more importantly, outside the country, had long dismissed the election as little more than political theatre. Casting his ballot, Khamenei made a remarkable comment which revealed just how affected he had become by the criticism, notifying his American critics in particular – in distinctly undiplomatic

<sup>46</sup> Robert Tait, 'Iran's Supreme Leader Blasts Ahmadinejad for Corruption Claims', *The Guardian*, 4 June 2009. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/jun/04/ahmadinejad-debate-backlash> (accessed 19 October 2016).

<sup>47</sup> Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Ayatollah Khamenei Call Opponents of Islamic Republic to Vote!', *YouTube*, 14 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6RRv2f5yr4I> (accessed 19 October 2016).

language – that they could effectively ‘go to hell’.<sup>48</sup> Less colourfully, and consequently less noticed by those overseas, was his pointed remark that no one, not even members of his family knew his voting intentions. Whether this was intentional or not, it was taken by a number of domestic observers to indicate that his son Mojtaba, the *bête noire* of Iranian electoral politics was neither privy to nor influencing his decisions.

### The Result

The result was of course a dramatic victory in the first-round, with a turnout that satisfied the Leader’s demand for a ‘political epic’. Compared to 2009, the votes took considerable time to count, with the Ministry of the Interior formally announcing the results late afternoon the following day. One of the problems for observers was a lack of clarity over the precise number of votes needed by Rouhani to surpass the 50 percent mark, with some discussion over whether this meant 50 percent (plus one vote) of the entire eligible voters or simply of those who had voted. When it was confirmed that it was the latter figure that mattered there was then the question – in the absence of any electoral register – of knowing how many people had actually voted. The figure of 72 percent that was eventually released was of course entirely in line with the figure predicted by *Fars News* some time before and, the truth is, in the absence of any objective means of assessment (and the paucity of foreign journalists in stark contrast to 2009), there is no way of verifying the figures. We do know that, unlike 2009, there was no attempt to present the process of counting as one that was heavily computerised, and the announcement of the results, though perhaps a few hours slower, was broadly in line with the announcement of results in elections before 2009.

The extended process on this occasion was put down to several factors, the most popular being that the Ministry of Interior was actually counting the votes this time round. But alternatives included the suggestion that the Ministry did not want to announce too early in the day so as to preempt and prevent celebrations (not entirely credible given that celebrations took place later that evening). The more probable suggestion was that last-minute fine tuning of the figures was taking place to reduce Rouhani’s margin of victory, so as to not humiliate the Principlist candidates. There was some precedence for this in 1997, when it was widely believed that Khatami’s staggering landslide had a few million votes shaved off and added to Nateq-Nouri’s paltry total. The margin of victory was both significant enough to ensure a first-round victory, and marginal enough to encourage the view that Iran’s electorate was diverse and that Rouhani’s mandate was limited. It also ensured of course that Khamenei’s position as final arbiter between the factions was assured.

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<sup>48</sup> ‘Iran Chooses Replacement for Mahmoud Ahmadinejad: Ayatollah Khamenei Casts His Vote, Telling the US “The Hell with You”’, *The Independent*, 14 June 2013. For the full comment see: Manuchehr Lenziran, ‘Ayatollah Khamenei Cast His Vote and React to USA: The Hell They Don’t Accept!’, *YouTube*, 13 June 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JQ92phPOTyg> (accessed 19 October 2016).



The immediate victor in this election was in many ways Khamenei himself. For all his anxieties, the electorate had delivered a healthy turnout, which had served to heal the scars of 2009. No one had complained and no one had protested. Indeed, the fact that the small margin of victory – albeit in the first-round – had not elicited any protests from the Principlists suggested that they were both more politically mature and lawful than Mousavi’s supporters. Popular elation and elite relief testified to a country slowly awakening from a nightmare, and an extraordinary exercise in retrospective rationalisation took effect almost immediately. Khamenei, who was immediately shielded from any responsibility for the previous eight years was ‘thanked’ by almost everyone on the political spectrum (including former President Khatami) for having managed the ‘political epic’ with such finesse, with perhaps the most ironic chants of ‘Dictator, Dictator, Thank-you, Thank-you’ coming from a populace elated that he had chosen not to interfere after all.<sup>49</sup>

The corollary of that of course was to heap all responsibility for the past eight years onto the ‘deviant current’, and the personality of Ahmadinejad in particular, as Loyalists suddenly found themselves on the wrong side of the curve and swiftly moved to disavow him. One even went so far as to protest that he had been ‘forced’ to support Ahmadinejad.<sup>50</sup> The other major exercise in the historical settling of scores was the insistence that the epic of 2013 had effectively proved all those protestors in 2009 wrong.<sup>51</sup> Rouhani, who had been more circumspect in the campaign, now spoke of the protestors in derogatory terms, and added for good measure that the political slate had been wiped clean.<sup>52</sup> Others, including Khamenei himself, were more forceful, demanding an apology from his critics, encouraging his supporters to go further in urging repentance or the prosecution of all

<sup>49</sup> ‘What Days Four Years Ago: Participation in Elections, 1392: Continuing the Popular Movement of 1388 or against it? In Favour or not?’ [Chahar Sal Pish Cheneen Rouzha-ye: Sharkat dar Entekhabat 1392: Dar Emtedad Harekat-haye Mardomi Sal-e 1388 ya Aleye An?], *Zamaneh*, 6 Tir 1392 / 27 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/79571#.Uj7GmBZQXA5> (accessed 19 October 2016). ‘Iran Updates: Khatami Thanked the Supreme Leader, Rowhani Vowed to Empower the Islamic Republic’, *Iran’s View*, 23 June 2013. Available at: <http://www.iransview.com/iran-updates-khatami-thanked-the-supreme-leader-rowhani-vowed-to-empower-the-islamic-republic/1176/> (accessed 20 October 2016). ‘Rouhani on Television: I Hold the Hands of All Moderates, Reformists and Principlists Warmly / A Special Humble Thanks to the Leader of the Revolution’ [Rouhani dar Television: Dast ham Etedalgarayan, Eslahtalabn va Osulgarayan rah be Garmi Miferasham / Sepas Vije Manarzani Rahbar Enqelab Bad], *Entekhab*, 25 Khordad 1392 / 15 June 2013.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Kochakzadeh: We Were Forced to Support Ahmadinejad’ [Kochakzadeh: Majbur Shodeem az Ahmadinejad Hemayat Koneem], *Fararu News*, 7 Tir 1392 / 28 June 2013.

<sup>51</sup> ‘The Election of 2013 has sent those who Claimed Fraud in 2009 to the Grave’ [Entekhab 92 Edaye Taqalob dar Entekhabat 88 ra be Gorestan Sepord], *Digarban*, 28 Khordad 1392 / 18 June 2013. One of the most curious exercises in this respect was the interview with Saeed Hajjarian in which he stated categorically that there had been no fraud – a phrase that made the headline – but added that there had been a ‘systematic duping’: ‘There Was No Fraud in 2009 / It Will Be Difficult for Rouhani to Keep his Votes / I Read Kayhan Everyday’ [Dar Entekhabat 88 Taqalob Nashod / Hefz ara Baraye Rouhani Kare Sakhti Ast / Har Rooz Keyhan ra Mikhonam], *Tasnim News*, 20 Mordad 1392 / 11 August 2013.

<sup>52</sup> ‘Rouhani with his Congratulations has Denied there was Fraud in the Elections, the Protests of 2009 were only Street Camping’ [Rouhani ba Tabrik beh Monker Taghalob dar Entekhabat, Eterazhaye Sal 88 ra Ordukeshi Khiabani Khand], *Digarban* 24 Mordad 1392 / 15 August 2013. ‘Rouhani: The Spectres of the Election of 2009 Have Been Removed’ [Rouhani: Shebahat Dar Bareye Entekhabat 88 Shosteh Shod], *Enghelab Eslami*, 20 Shahrivar 1392 / 11 September 2013.

leaders of 'sedition' – including, it might be added, former President Khatami, who Rouhani first thanked, and then, deciding that discretion was the better part of valour, moved to distance himself from, such that he declined to invite him to his inauguration.<sup>53</sup>

Despite being a government elected on a popular mandate of 'reform', it quickly disowned the Reformist administration of Mohammad Khatami as its political progenitor, and publicly portrayed it as 'extremist', similar to that of Ahmadinejad. Right wing commentators were especially keen to emphasise this, in part to justify their own support of Rouhani, but also to dampen some of the momentum for change that had once again been unleashed.<sup>54</sup> Even Khatami was keen to contain expectations, fearful no doubt that popular momentum would undo Rouhani's presidency, just as, he would have argued, it had undone him a decade earlier.<sup>55</sup> But if anyone could be counted on to dampen the popular enthusiasm it was the hardline editor of *Kayhan* newspaper, Hossein Shariatmadari, who in a biting editorial made it clear that Rouhani was 'one of us' and that those who hankered after substantive change were likely to be disappointed.<sup>56</sup> Khamenei, for his part, soon backtracked on his 'national' call to arms when days after the vote he pointed out that all those who voted, even those who in his own words did not believe in the system, did by their actions, trust in the political order that is the Islamic Republic.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup> For Khamenei's ill-tempered comments see: Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Ayatollah Khamenei: Why Mousavi and Karoubi Do Not Apologize!', *YouTube*, 29 July 2013. Available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcL1Z-s2wjQ> (accessed 20 October 2016). Reformists were quick to respond: 'Tajzadeh: Those Who Need to Apologise to the Nation Are Those Who Have Brought Iran to this Deplorable Situation' [Tajzadeh: Kesani Bayad az Melat ozr Bekhahand ke Iran Rea beh een Vaziat Esfenak Keshandehand], *Sahanews*, 5 August 2013. 'Hossein Shariatmadari's Attack: Why Did You Thank Khatami?' [Hamle-ye Hossein Shariatmadari beh Rouhani: Chera az Khatami Tashakor Kardi?] *Asr-Iran Online*, 10 Tir 1392 / 1 July 2013. 'Asgarowladi: Mousavi and Karroubi Should Repent this Month' [Asgarowladi: Mousavi va Karubi Dare Een Mah Tobeh Konand], *Sahamnews*, 12 July 2013. 'Keyhan: Time to Prosecute the Leaders of Sedition' [Keyhan: Vaght Mohakemeh-ye Saran Fitneh Ast], *Entekhab*, 29 Khordad 1392 / 19 June 2013.

<sup>54</sup> 'Rafighdoust: The Style of Rouhani's Politics is nothing like Khatami / Ahmadinejad Won't Remain in Politics because He Has no Social Base' [Rafighdoust: Mashi-ye Siyasi Rouhani Shabiye Khatami Nist / Ahmadinejad dar Siyasat Nemimanad Chun Payegah-ye Ejtemai Nadarad, *Khabar Online*, 23 Tir 1392 / 14 July 2013.

<sup>55</sup> 'Khatami's Warning against Raising the Expectations of the People' [Hoshdar Khatami Nesbat beh Bala Bordan Sath Togha'at Mardom], *DW.de*, 29 June 2013.

<sup>56</sup> 'Unlikely Fellow Travellers' [Hamrahan Nahamrah], *Kayhan Editorial*, 27 Khordad 1392 / 17 June 2013.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Voting of Those Who Don't Believe in the System Is Indicative of Their Trust in the Islamic Republic' [Rai Dadan Kesani ke be Nezam Eteghadi Nadarand, Neshaneh Etmad Anha beh Jomhuri Eslami Ast], *Digarban*, 5 Tir 1392 / 26 June 2013.

## A New Dawn of Prudence, Moderation and Hope?

If Rouhani campaigned on a platform of prudence, moderation and hope, it would be fair to say that the response to his victory, especially among foreign observers, was high on hope and less clear on moderation and prudence. Much like the general relief that greeted Obama's dramatic election victory in the USA, the bar had been set so low that the mere fact that the new president was thoughtful and articulate was almost a revolution in itself. In the context of a government that thought nothing of fabricating their academic qualifications, the fact that Rouhani actually did finally receive a doctorate (albeit from Glasgow Caledonian rather than Glasgow University as Rouhani's website initially suggested) was read as progress (he had nonetheless been using the title for some years before that). Similarly, while boasts of his language fluency were wildly exaggerated, compared to his predecessor, he was clearly fluent in at least two languages.<sup>58</sup>

Nevertheless, if Rouhani campaigned with periodic poetic flourishes, he has since governed in (a very cautious) prose. On issues sensitive to the political establishment, he has been careful to tread lightly and to err on the side of caution when clarity might be expected. A good example of this were his comments on Israel and the Holocaust. Attending the Jerusalem Day (Quds Day) march in Tehran in 2013, Rouhani was careful in his choice of words, avoiding the bombast which had come to characterise his predecessor. Talking of a wound on the body politic of Islam, and the pain caused by the occupation of Al-Quds (Jerusalem) and Palestine, Rouhani found his words over-interpreted by both foreign and domestic journalists. Iranian journalists rushed to impose a narrative of 'removal' more akin to Ahmadinejad, while a number of foreign observers concluded generously that all he was talking about was the occupied territories.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, when asked by an American interviewer if he believed the Holocaust had occurred, Rouhani demurred and said he was not a historian.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>58</sup> The view that Rouhani was a linguist of considerable ability was often repeated, see for example: Fraser Nelson, 'Made in Glasgow: The New Iranian President, Hassan Rouhani', *The Spectator*, 15 June 2013. Available at: <http://blogs.spectator.co.uk/2013/06/iran-may-have-just-elected-a-glasgow-man-as-president/> (accessed 20 October 2016). However, the two languages he would appear to be proficient in are Persian and Arabic. For his mastery of English, see: Ryan Reza Razavi, 'Rouhani Speaking in English!' *You Tube*, 27 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjUueOWT-GzQ> (accessed 20 October 2016).

<sup>59</sup> Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani Comment about Israel in Quds Day', *You Tube*, 2 August 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LotuwjT2Cq0> (accessed 20 October 2016).

<sup>60</sup> See: AussieNews1, 'Hassan Rohani Interview with American NBC (Farsi)', *You Tube*, 21 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t73yPTnZdxY> (accessed 30 October 2016). In a subsequent interview on *CNN*, Rouhani condemned 'whatever criminality they [the Nazis] committed against the Jews', studiously avoiding the word Holocaust and continuing to stress that he was not a historian: Josh Levs and Mick Krever, 'Iran's New President: Yes, the Holocaust Happened', *Amanpour*, 25 September 2013. Available at: <http://amanpour.blogs.cnn.com/2013/09/25/irans-new-president-yes-the-holocaust-happened/> (accessed 30 October 2016). On the controversy around his judicious use of words and their interpretation by *CNN* among others, see: Arash Karimi, 'Rouhani's Holocaust

Such ‘prudence’ and ‘moderation’ might be better understood in the context of the realities of Iranian politics, and measured against them rather than against more abstract notions that may be applicable in the West. Rouhani became president at a time when the culture of deference to the authority of the Supreme Leader reached levels unprecedented since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini, and many would argue that Khamenei’s involvement in the day-to-day management of the state is perhaps even greater than that of his predecessor.<sup>61</sup> Hossein Shariatmadari’s pointed comments aside, Ayatollah Khamenei has himself since reiterated the centrality of his position in an extensive series of fatwas issued on his website which reiterated with no ambiguity that obedience to the *vali-e faqih* was the equivalent to obedience to the Prophet of Islam.<sup>62</sup>

There is no ambiguity about this statement. Nearly a decade of consolidation has ensured that those institutions of accountability which might restrict the leader’s powers – most obviously the Assembly of Experts – have been largely emasculated, and the string of congratulations and expressions of gratitude, to say nothing of Rouhani’s insistence that he has ‘full authority’ to pursue his policies, are all indicative of the fact that even if Khamenei’s power has retreated, his authority remains intact. In many ways, this is the deal that has been struck to ensure a smooth transition of executive power, an executive power that is nonetheless more prime ministerial than presidential in character. Indeed throughout Rouhani’s first term, while Khamenei has shown ‘heroic flexibility’, he has been quick to rebuke his President when necessary and, perhaps more importantly, Rouhani has been quick to fall back into line.<sup>63</sup> In sum, Rouhani’s election should not be read principally as a setback for Khamenei’s authoritarian approach and exercise of power. If Khamenei was forced to bend, it was more the result of what might be classically termed a ‘baronial

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Comments on *CNN Spark Controversy*, *Al-Monitor*, 26 September 2016. Available at: <http://iranpulse.al-monitor.com/index.php/2013/09/2894/rouhanis-holocaust-comments-on-cnn-spark-controversy/> (accessed 30 October 2016). See also: Max Fisher, ‘Hassan Rouhani’s Jewish Problem’, *Washington Post*, 26 September 2013; Adam Levick, ‘Hassan Rouhani Did Not Use the Word “Holocaust”’, *YouTube*, 6 October 2013. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFdx00uj1IU> (accessed 30 October 2016).

<sup>61</sup> A good recent example of this development was the secretary of the National Security Council, Ali Shamkhani, declaring that Iran’s presence in Syria was a result of a divine ‘revelation’ received by Khamenei. Contrary to this declaration, such ‘revelations’ are normally the preserve of prophets. ‘The Iranian Military Presence in Syria Is Based on a Divine Revelation to Ali Khamenei’ [Hozur Nezami Iran dar Soorieh Bar Asas ‘Vahe Elahi be Ali Khamenei’ Ast], *Saham News Online*, 11 Khordad 1395 / 31 May 2016. For details of this development see: Ali Ansari, ‘L’Etat C’est Moi: The Paradox of Sultanism and the Question of Regime Change in Modern Iran’, *International Affairs* 89, 2 (2013), pp. 283–298.

<sup>62</sup> The full list can be found here: ‘The Latest Fatwas of the Leader in Relation to the Use of the Internet, Satellite Dishes, Working with Zionist Companies’ [Tazetarin Fatva-ye Rahbari dar Baraye Estfاده az Internet, Mahvareh, Moameleh ba Sherkat-ha Zionisti], *Tasnim News Agency*, 8 Mordad 1392 / 30 July 2013.

<sup>63</sup> ‘The Leader of Iran’s Riposte to Those Who Say that Tomorrow’s World is One of Dialogue not Missiles, [Hoshdar-e Tond Rahbar Iran be Kesani ke Mogoyand Donyaye Farad Donyaye Mozakereh Ast na Moshak], *BBC Persian*, 30 March 2016. See also: ‘I Proclaim without Hesitation that the Leader is Leader of Us All / According to Religious, Legal and National Tradition, We Are All, in Totality, His Disciples’ [Ba Serahat Elam Mikonam, Rahbari, Rahbar-e Hameye Mast / Tebgh Mayarhare Shari, Qanunin va Melli, be Tor Kamel as Rahnamoodhaye Ishan Tabiat Mikoneem], *Entekhab*, 9 Farvardin 1395 / 28th March 2016.

revolt' born of political dissatisfaction with Ahmadinejad and the dangerous economic malaise that was a consequence of his presidency, than of any sudden affectation for democratic values.

In 2009 the elites held firm and united behind a leader faced with the prospect of a popular upheaval. Their interests lay in stability, and however much some may have criticised the detail and the handling of the situation, ultimately they held together. But the bitterness that emerged in 2009 came home to roost in 2013, and the anger was made all the more acute by a weakening economy exposed by damaging sanctions that hurt revenue. Much has been made of Hashemi Rafsanjani's speech in which he blamed the Syrian regime for using chemical weapons on its own citizens. Of equal interest is the bleak picture Rafsanjani paints of the Iranian economy.<sup>64</sup> Even allowing for a degree of exaggeration as one administration replaces another, the scale of the economic crisis facing Iran is striking. All the more so when one considers the magnitude of the oil revenue enjoyed by Ahmadinejad – far in excess of anything enjoyed by his predecessors spread lavishly in acts of patronage which made the select few very rich, at the expense of structural investment in the economy. The opportunity cost of the last eight years will undoubtedly be scrutinised by Iranian economists for some time; suffice to say that the books are only now being properly assessed, and the early revelations are not positive.<sup>65</sup>

It was this economic urgency that drove Rouhani's election, helped maintain a pragmatic – if Conservative – alliance behind him, and provided him with his political *raison d'être*. It should come as no surprise, even if it has been a disappointment to his Reformist supporters, that the economy has remained his priority. It has shaped his choice of cabinet – as he drew on a range of technocratic expertise largely affiliated to Rafsanjani's 'Servants of Construction' – and driven his policy choices, including the important decision to re-establish the Plan and Budget Organisation, unceremoniously abolished by Ahmadinejad in 2007. Most obviously it shaped his approach towards foreign policy.

Few appointments reflect this better than Rouhani's appointment of Mohammad Javad Zarif as Foreign Minister. Zarif is widely regarded as one of the most competent diplomats in the Iranian Foreign Ministry, well versed in the cultural norms of the West, and of the USA in particular. Just as Rouhani's task has been to normalise Iran's domestic politics after the turmoil of Ahmadinejad, so too has Zarif's task been to reset Iran's foreign relations, specifically through the lifting of sanctions and the rebalancing of the Republic's

<sup>64</sup> Manuchehr Lenziran, 'Controversial Video of Hashemi Rafsanjani Speech about Syria', *YouTube*, 2 September 2013. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3nou\\_VLLKA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c3nou_VLLKA) (accessed 30 October 2016). MEMRITVVideos, 'Hashemi Rafsanjani: Syrians Were Bombed with Chemicals by Their Own Government', *YouTube*, 3 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.memritv.org/clip/en/3967.htm> (accessed 30 October 2016). See also: 'Hashemi: In the Last Eight Years We Have Lost \$800bn', [Hashemi: Dar Hasht Sal Gozashteh 800 Milliard Dollar az Dast Raft], *Radiofarda*, 10 Mordad 1392 / 1 August 2013.

<sup>65</sup> 'Ahmadinejad's Weaknesses Have Put Iran Back 16 Years' [Zaaf-haye Ahmadinejad Iran ra 16 Sal Aqab Bord], *Digarban*, 10 Shahrivar 1392 / 1 September 2013; 'Reserves of Basic Goods, 15 Days or a Few Months, Who Is Accountable?' [Zakhireh-ye Kalahaye Asasi; 15 Rooz ya Chand Mah, Che Kesi Pasokhgoost?] *Kalame*, 27 Shahrivar 1392 / 17 September 2013.

international economic relations. Important distinctions emerged within the elite about the precise aims and possible consequences of this development, which reached fruition in July 2015 after some two years of lengthy, tortuous negotiations. But these differences were subsumed for the period of negotiations, on the basis that a termination of the sanctions regime against Iran was necessary – if for no other reason than to eliminate the international consensus that Ahmadinejad's administration had, by dint of herculean mismanagement, succeeded in corralling against Iran. All this new found 'realism' in both domestic and foreign policy was justified by Khamenei on the basis of a narrative of 'heroic flexibility', a phrase alluding to the compromises made by the second Shi'a Imam, Hassan, generating perhaps more heat than light, and allowing some to enthusiastically suggest that Khamenei had indeed turned over a new leaf.<sup>66</sup> But the limitations of what Khamenei insisted was a transactional arrangement with no ramifications for broader US–Iran relations, were soon to become apparent.

## Postscript: The Politics of Managing Change

The tendency to read into events what one wishes is not a failing unique to analysts of Iran, nor, one might add, is it limited to observers, frequently affecting those practitioners and participants who seek to make sense of the chaotic political environment within which they operate.

For many Iranians, the Ahmadinejad presidency was nothing short of a catastrophe that did untold damage to the political and economic fabric of the country. The trauma was so deep and the need for salvation so great, that Rouhani represented the great hope of the nation – the person who would restore balance and a measure of harmony to the politics of the country. The expectation was matched by an unusual degree of realism and compromise on the part of many who were happy to defer demands in the anticipation that substantive and meaningful change would come eventually.

Rouhani for his part, while promising much (especially at election time), has been happy to defer the more difficult aspects of his election platform on the basis that one must walk before one runs and that excessive demands will only result in a destructive reaction, much in the same way as the Conservative reaction undid the Khatami presidency. Much of this is a tendentious reading of the Khatami presidency, which also implies that Khatami was instinctively a much less able steward of change and the country's affairs than his putative successor. It conveniently ignores the enormous pressures placed on the Khatami presidency from a variety of Conservative-dominated institutions, not least the assassination attempt on his chief strategist, Saeed Hajjarian, rendered paraplegic by the attempt.

<sup>66</sup> 'Ayatollah Khamenei: Now Is the Age of "Heroic Flexibility"' [Ayatollah Khamenei: Zaman 'Narmesh-e Gharemani' Ast], *Khodnevis*, 26 Shahrivar 1392 / 17 September 2013; 'Heroic Flexibility Is Only a Tactical Change' [Narmesh Gharemaneh Tanha yek Taghir-e Taktiki Ast], *Digarban*, 28 Shahrivar 2013 / 19 September 2013.



The reality is that Rouhani has not even begun to attempt some of the changes that Khatami pursued, and his tentative forays into political and economic reform have resulted in some vigorous kick-back from hardline institutions, not least the Supreme Leader. Despite promising to deal with the house arrest of Green Movement leaders for example, there has been no progress over the last three years. Initial suggestions that he would seek to address the rights deficit with the appointment of a special presidential envoy to investigate the drawing-up of a charter of civil rights have come to nought<sup>67</sup>, while the first drafts of a law defining ‘political crimes’ were derided by Iranian lawyers for giving more rights to officials than to the people.<sup>68</sup>

Those anxious for change find that the horizon keeps receding. Rouhani initially indicated that the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) would be the ‘key’ to unblocking all of Iran’s problems and gave the suspension of sanctions as a deadline. Following this, a new deadline was given – victory in the parliamentary elections. Increasingly now, the sense is that people will have to wait for Rouhani’s re-election in 2017.

While periodic political successes have dampened criticism and maintained a sense of momentum, there is palpable frustration in some quarters at the lack of substantive progress on a number of issues, not least from the Green Movement leaders’ themselves, most obviously Mehdi Karroubi, who issued a scathing letter in the aftermath of the parliamentary elections demanding some resolution to his situation and a willingness to submit himself for trial.<sup>69</sup> At the same time, with every apparent success, Rouhani faces the paradoxical prospect of mounting criticism as he fails to make the substantive changes that are required to deliver the results he has promised. A good example of this paradox is the state of the economy, which is currently languishing in a recession not of his own making, but being blamed on him as a consequence of raised expectations. Excitement at the JCPOA in July 2015 and the trumpeted lifting of sanctions in January 2016 have in reality resulted in much less movement in the economy than might have been expected,<sup>70</sup> while

<sup>67</sup> ‘The President Delegates His Legal Deputy to Prepare a Charter of Citizen’s Rights’ [Mamoriat Rais Jomhur be Moavenat Hoqoqi Jahat Taheye Manshor Hoqoq Sharvandi], *ISNA*, 31 Shahrivar 1392 / 22 September 2013.

<sup>68</sup> The full draft can be read here, ‘Political Crimes’ [Jorm Siyasi], *Tasnim News*, 31 Shahrivar 1392 / 22 September 2013. Available at: <http://www.tasnimnews.com/Home/Single/146499>. For legal concerns see, ‘The Draft Law on Political Crimes Does Not Conform with the Views of Lawyers’ [Tarih Jorm Siyasi ba Didgah ye Hoqoqdanan Montabegh Neest], *Kalame*, 1 Mehr 1392 / 23 September 2013.

<sup>69</sup> ‘Iranian Opposition Figure Karroubi Appeals for Court Hearing over ‘Election Rigging’, *The Guardian*, 11 April 2016.

<sup>70</sup> See interview with Sadeq Zibakalam: ‘Rouhani Does Not Have a Successful Economic Record / His Record in the Social and Cultural Fields is even less Successful than the Economy’ [Rohani Karnameye Movafagh dar Eqtesad Nadarad / Amalkard-e Rais Jomhur dar Hozeye Ejtemai va Farhangi az Eqtesad Ham na Movafaghtar Ast] *Fars News Online*, 25 Mordad 1395 / 15 August 2016. From his critics, such as Mohammad Javad Larijani (brother of the Speaker) come warnings of tougher sanctions yet to come: ‘We Should be Ready for Extensive Sanctions from America / The Foreign Ministry Has Tough Times Ahead Protesting against the Americans / America, instead of Lifting the Sanctions, Has Given Us a Handful of Sweets’ [Montazer Tahreemha-ye Besyar Azeem-e Amrika Bashim / Vezarat Kharej Roozgar-e Sakhti Baraye Shekayat az Emrika Darad / Emrika be Jaye Raf Tahreemha ‘ab

Rouhani, having boasted of the imminent peace dividend, finds himself with less cover for failure in energising the economy or implementing coherent political reform. In short, his management of expectations has been less than ideal, driven by immediate political expediency and perhaps most curiously dependent on others to deliver.

If one determining factor characterises the Rouhani presidency to date, it has been his tendency to approach problems indirectly, at most enabling others to take the necessary action, but rarely taking the lead himself other than to provide a rhetorical frame of reference. It can be argued that in light of the failures encountered by both Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, this 'indirect' approach is the best way to encourage a system with a proven track record of resisting change to be teased into it. Yet neither of his predecessors were as radical as posterity pretends, and both were criticised in their own time for the deferential manner in which they sought to handle the Conservative centres of power. Both became frustrated by their inability to move things forward. Khatami's approach was considered more threatening because of its overtly political dimension and Rouhani's approach has much more in common with Rafsanjani's tendency to see salvation through economic reform. But, arguably, Rouhani has been even less proactive than his erstwhile mentor, looking to change the broader environment – such as sanctions relief – with a view to enabling wider reforms.<sup>71</sup> Sanctions relief as he has liked to argue, is the key that will unlock Iran's potential. This potential moreover will be realised by the attraction of foreign investment which will open the way for more general domestic investment. But this is a somewhat simplistic reading of Iran's economic predicament which even his own ministers have found troubling and which the initial suspension of sanctions has exposed as hollow.<sup>72</sup>

There is a logic to Rouhani's rhetoric of recovery, and like both Rafsanjani and Khatami, he will have to confront it sooner or later. If he is genuine about developing Iran's economy and bringing prosperity to its people, steps will need to be taken to adapt Iran to the international economic environment – including some form of reconciliation with the USA, with which it seeks to integrate and from which he seeks investment. Iran will, in short, have to make itself more transparent, accountable and, above all, competitive. It would seem unlikely that for all his caution, Rouhani is oblivious to this reality, given

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Nabat-e Dastedar Dade], *Tasnim Online*, 25 Mordad 1395 / 15 August 2016. 'The JCPOA, by way of an Experience, Has Proved the Pointlessness of Negotiating with the Americans' [Barjam, be Onvan-e yek Tajrobeh, Binatijeh Boodan Mozakereh ba Amrikaya ra Sabet Kard], *Entekhab Online*, 11 Mordad 1395 / 3 August 2016.

<sup>71</sup> There is one striking difference however. While Khatami's administration actively sought to engage with the USA socially and economically, if not politically, Zarif has claimed that Rouhani's administration has no desire to engage with the US economy. An aspiration which is frankly at odds with the globalised economy in which we live.

<sup>72</sup> 'The Joint Letter of the Ministers to the President: Take Urgent Decisions on the Economy' [Nameh-ye Moshtarak-e Vazir be Rais Jomhur: Tasmim Zarbol Ajal Eqtesdai Begereed], *Mehr News Online*, 12 Mehr 1394 / 4 October 2015. The salary scandal, in which it transpired some officials were in receipt of monthly salaries of up to \$200,000 has hit the administration particularly hard with many incredulous that in four years he has been unable to curtail such excesses, see: 'Salary Scandal Forces Resignations at Iranian Banks', *Financial Times*, 5 July 2016.

the people he has surrounded himself with and his own aspiration to follow the current JCPOA with further 'political' ones.<sup>73</sup> But some have begun to question his willingness to grasp the nettle and address these issues.

Rouhani would like foreign direct investment to trigger a wider change in Iran's economic environment, which will in turn catalyse political reform through the need for more transparency, accountability, stability and taxation. In this sense, he has taken a step back from his mentor Rafsanjani, who focused on the domestic economy, and Khatami, who shifted towards broader political economy. For Rouhani, the trigger will be foreigners investing, for which sanctions relief has been the enabling factor. But it is increasingly apparent that this is an insufficient ignition for an engine that has lain dormant for so long. What is required are internal reforms that will engage the outside world, and herein lies the problem his predecessors encountered. Such reforms are identified with 'regime change' by much of the hardline establishment, including the Supreme Leader, who regards any attempt to change behaviour and policy to be tantamount to 'sedition' and wholly against the principles of the Revolution (as they see them). Indeed they left Rouhani in no doubt of this in their aggressive response to his suggestion of successive JCPOAs.<sup>74</sup> Until this ideological block is addressed, Iranian politics will fail to escape from a seemingly perpetual dialectic of reform and reaction towards a new 'synthesis' of ideas for a world that has moved on. Paradoxically, the Revolution will have singularly failed to 'revolutionise itself'.

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<sup>73</sup> See Rouhani's press conference: 'JCPOA 2 Should Start to Bring Prosperity for Iran / We Do Not Want a Subordinated Parliament to the Government / Americans Should Be More Active for Implementing JCPOA', *Official Website of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 6 March 2016. Available at: <http://www.president.ir/en/92328> (accessed 20 October 2016). See also Zarif's Admission: Rick Gladstone, 'Iran Not Seeking Entry to U.S. Financial System, Envoy Says', *The New York Times*, 20 April 2016. Available at: [http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-mohammad-javad-zarif.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/21/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-mohammad-javad-zarif.html?_r=0) (accessed 20 October 2016).

<sup>74</sup> More benign criticisms have sought to portray Rouhani (and Zarif) as latter day Mosaddeqs – well intentioned but dangerously reliant on American goodwill. Khamenei has gone further and berated those who have advocated further 'negotiations' – the two most prominent individuals being Rouhani and Rafsanjani – as either ignorant or stupid. 'The Meaning of Ayatollah Khamenei's Harsh Response to Rouhani's Proposal about JCPOA 2' [Mani ye Pasokh-e Tond Ayatollah Khamenei be Ezharat Rohani dar More'd-e Barjam Do], *BBC Persian Online*, 16 March 2016. 'The Harsh Warning of the Leader of Iran against Those Who Say the Future is one of Negotiations not Missiles' [Hoshdar Tond Rahbar-e Iran be Kesani ke Migoyand Donya-ye Fard Donya-ye Mozakereh Ast na Mooshak], *BBC Persian Online*, 16 March 2016.

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