Iran and the Nuclear Deal

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Iran's grass-roots politics and the nuclear deal

By Mohammad Ali Kadivar, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and Ali Honari, VU University Amsterdam

The recently agreed-upon nuclear framework between Iran and the P5+1 world powers is a great example of how grass-roots participation at the level of domestic politics can interact with important changes at the level of international politics. The nuclear breakthrough could not have happened without important developments that led to the election of Iran's President Hassan Rouhani in June 2013. If this agreement turns in to a comprehensive deal by June 2015, it will have important ramifications for Iranian domestic politics.

Grass-roots activism was crucial for the results of the 2013 election in different ways. First, grass-roots pressures convinced reformist leaders to support a candidate in the election despite the disqualification of Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was initially the first choice for the reformist camp. Second, grass-roots participants in the electoral campaigns of Rouhani and the other reformist candidate, Mohammad Reza Aref, pressured the two to make an alliance and stay in the election with a single candidate. Reformist backing was crucial for Rouhani's electoral victory. According to polls before the election, Rouhani was a runner-up candidate until the day the reformist coalition headed by former president Mohammad Khatami endorsed him. After this endorsement, his support skyrocketed and continued until election day. Finally, the mass mobilization after the disputed election of 2009, later called the Green Movement, perhaps contributed to the rather clean voting process in 2013. The protest mobilization of 2009 signaled both the high costs of fraud as well as Iranian's strong desire for a fair and free election. From this perspective, the rather healthy polling process in 2013 was a result of 2009's large protest wave.

Rouhani's victory had important effects on the conditions of civil society forces and democratic activists in Iran. True to promises in Rouhani's electoral platform, the level of state repression, which had intensified since 2009,

remarkably decreased after the election. After 2013, new newspapers with moderate or reformist orientation came into being. The policy of barring students from higher education because of their political activities ended due to diligent insistence from the new Ministry of Sciences. Accordingly, activists and politicians perceived that the level of repression had decreased and that they would therefore not be prosecuted for organizing private meetings. When reformist groups were able to have a public convention in January 2015 for the first time after six years, Khatami stated that under the new administration the context is more favorable for gatherings and activities of different groups and organizations. As such, there appears to be a greater frequency of public protest about issues such as violence against women, teachers' salaries and air pollution.

Another important part of Rouhani's electoral platform was addressing the nuclear dispute with the United States and European powers, lifting the sanctions and improving the economic conditions of the country. Rouhani's administration immediately started the process of negotiations to reach an agreement with the P5+1 and successfully acquired the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei for the negotiation process. The framework that Iran and the P5+1 have agreed upon – and potential comprehensive agreement, in turn – will have important effects on the condition of civil society forces in Iran.

First, the nuclear breakthrough seems to have revitalized hope and enthusiasm in achieving more political gains for the democratic forces. Recent scholarship about social movements stresses the importance of emotions, such as hope, in shaping the dynamics of participation and activism. The violent crackdown on the peaceful demonstrations of 2009 resulted in an atmosphere of disappointment and disillusion among advocates of democratic change about achieving victories either

through elections or contentious mobilization. The electoral victory of 2013 was an important event in bringing hope back to the camp of change-seekers, and the current nuclear breakthrough is another significant sequence. Celebrations in the streets of Iran's capital city Tehran, as well as commentaries on social media and reformist newspapers, were full of hopeful reactions to the nuclear deal. The reformist Shargh newspaper, for example, published an op-ed with the title of "Hope in Days after Lifting Sanctions." Etemad, another reformist paper, also described people's reaction to the deal as the "Return of Hope."

Second, while many journalists and social media users praised Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister, for reaching a deal, a group of reformists interpreted the agreement as an outcome of the collective effort of supporters of democratic change and as a sign of their individual efficacy. A study of voters in the 2013 election suggests that the sense of individual efficacy played an important role in changing the decision of individuals from boycotting to participating. A statement released by a group of reformist activists after the recent nuclear agreement also described the agreement as the result of "insight and shrewdness of citizens who, despite all jails and prisons, all pressures and limitations, did not become hopeless, stayed in the field, and by stressing the necessity of dialogue between Iran and the US, helped to resuscitate hope and prudence instead of threat and fear."

Third, some reformists have taken reaching a deal as a sign of the effectiveness of electoral politics in Iran. Whether electoral politics present an opportunity for democratization has been an ongoing debate within different factions of the democratic opposition in Iran since at least 2000. Such debates have considerably affected the alliances within the democratic movement since 1997. After the fraudulent election of 2009 and severe crackdown on the protesters, many Iranians concluded that participating in any elections in the Islamic Republic is just meaningless. On the other hand, the unexpected victory of Rouhani in 2013 was interpreted as evidence for the basic effectiveness of the electoral process. In this

context, participants of 2013 election have perceived the nuclear agreement as further evidence for the effectiveness of elections in Iran, as illustrated in by Iranian social media users' posts on outlets such as Twitter and Facebook. For example, one of these users pointed out that the "real victory" happened in June 2013.

Other users have connected the nuclear deal to the upcoming parliamentary election in February 2016. A prominent reformist activist wrote that the next round of the battle for political change would be the elections for both the parliamentary and the Assembly of Experts. Comments from other reformist activists and politicians also show that they perceive the nuclear breakthrough as a big boost for the victory of reformist and moderate alliance in the 2016 parliamentary election. Reformists appear to expect that this international success could give more leverage to Rouhani's administration in domestic politics against hardliners and potentially open up space for reformists organizing around elections and collective action without direct political demands within civil society. While it does not seem likely that the Guardian Council will approve prominent reformist figures to run for the election, it is possible that moderate figures in the same vein as Rouhani – or less known reformist politicians – will be able to pass the filter of the Guardian Council.

While the democratic opposition within Iran still suffers from organizational weakness and the lack of a unifying long-term strategy, the nuclear breakthrough seems to have recharged the emotional battery of reformist activists and supporters and contributed to an optimistic perception about short-term electoral progress.

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