

The Election of Hassan Rouhani: A New Dawn for Women's Rights in Iran?

Written by Haideh Moghissi

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HAIDEH MOGHISSI, AUG 22 2013

Iran has a new President, Hassan Rouhani, who with a pledge of 'path of moderation', *e'tedal*, won 75% of the votes in the first round of elections in June. He and the high-ranking clerics who supported him, repeatedly call Rouhani's elections as representing 'national reconciliation.' Under the conditions where all seven candidates had been past or present high office holders and had been pre-screened for suitability by the Guardianship Council, the term 'reconciliation' could mean only one thing: Faced with mounting economic problems, back-breaking sanctions, nuclear negotiation deadlocks, the threat of war, rising popular discontent, and the ever-increasing infighting among the ruling clerics, they grudgingly 'reconciled' with having a less rigid and least hated figure as president.

Despite the known fact that the office of president does not have real authority in areas most interesting for the West, such as foreign policy, Hassan Rouhani's victory has raised hope for a new dawn in relations between Iran and the world powers. Yet a more interesting question is what Rouhani's election means to Iranian people, in particular to women, and would this election result represent a turnaround in women's day-to-day life?

Presidential Elections in Iran

In the absence of political parties, a free press and freedom of associations and expressions – and with the overarching, non-negotiable authority of the Supreme Leader – presidential elections in Iran are reduced to a ritual of people going to the booths to vote strategically for the least-dangerous hand-picked candidate of the establishment.

Most Iranians do not expect that the election of a new president will bring meaningful changes to the regime's policies. However, despite the restricted choices, the elections still energize voters. First, because it is in pre-election periods and during candidates' televised debates and rallies that the deep internal clashes among the ruling clerics, and the extent of the corruption and abuse of power by high-ranking officials, surfaces. Second, people use the relative opening of the political space during elections to show their frustration and discontent. In this context, as voters do not have the choice to put a candidate in office who has the good of the people in mind, they rally around the candidate who shows the least rigidity on issues of civil liberties, is more inclined to avoid the erratic management of the economy, and more prepared to open up the country to the outside world. This often means choosing the candidate who is least favoured by the Supreme leader and the clerical establishment, was the case in the 1997 election of Mohamad Khatami; was true in the 2009 votes for Mir Hossain Musavi which was blocked by election fraud in favour of Ahmadinejad; and it was also the case in the recent election of Hassan Rouhani. In all these three protest voting, issues of women's rights as well as the repressive policies against the youth played a defining role in mobilizing voters.

Women and 2013 Elections

The people's disenchantment with the clerical-military alliance was so formidable in the June 2013 elections, that until the third televised presidential debate which opened up social and economic issues, the elections seemed not to be taken by the citizens as relevant to their life. As a matter of fact, the first brainstorming session of women activists, *Neshast Ham Andishi Zanan*, was hastily put together only three days before the elections in order to

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proffer women's most important demands. The gathering included both secular and self-identified Muslim women, independent activists as well as women linked to the former governments and a representative from Rouhani's campaign office. They could only debate which issues of women's rights had more strategic importance to be presented as women's demands. This contrasted the leadership role women (and youths) assumed during the three previous presidential elections, in particular in the 2009 election, in which women activists entered full-force onto the political scene with a well-thought-out strategy, under the banner of 'women's coalition movement' (*Jonbesh-e Hamgerai'i*) and 'demand-based movement', *Jonbesh motalebeh-mehvar*, without supporting any presidential candidate, and succeeded in mobilizing many change-seeking individuals and groups from within the civil society.[1]

Who could blame women for their reluctance to put forth the same energy in the 2013 presidential elections? Eight years of Mohamad Khatami's hesitance and inaction had little tangible outcome for women who had supported his candidacy and for halting Islamists' advances against women's social and political rights. True, Khatami showed more leniency towards the media and publishing houses, and young women (and men) found a respite from harassment by the morality police and Hezbollah thugs. This assisted the emergence of various loosely organized women's groups, and energized the famous 'The One Million Signatures Campaign'. The campaign, which following the path taken by Moroccan women earlier, involved collection of a massive petition demanding reforms such as the abolition of polygamy, equal rights for women as witnesses in courts of law and in divorce, the joint custody of children, and increasing the minimum legal age of responsibility to 18 (currently it is 15 for boys and nine for girls, subjecting them to harsh punishments included in the criminal law, or Qisas). This being the case, nonetheless, throughout that period the issues of women's rights became a stick in the hands of the more conservative clergy to beat Khatami and members of the reformist camp for endangering Islamic values. For instance, the conservative-majority in the parliament managed to pass two anti-women pieces of legislation in that period that prohibited writings in defense of women's rights outside the confines of Shari'a and create division between the sexes outside. Also of note was legislation intensifying sex segregation in medical facilities, which in effect further reduces women's access to medical care.

Women's Issues during Ahmadinejad's Period

The disappointment with the reformists, however, did not prevent women from playing a remarkably active role in the attempts to block Ahmadinejad's presidency in 2005, and again in 2009. The eight years of Ahmadinejad's military-security-based administration, widely considered as the darkest period of the Islamists' rule since Khomeini's death, had ruinous consequences for women and the women's movement. It pushed back the movement at least by one decade. The severe crackdown on journalists, assaults against institutions of higher education and student activists, rule by illegal presidential decrees backed by terrorist gangs who were on the state's secret payrolls, cancerous corruption, mishandling and theft of public funds were the highlights of the period.

One of the first actions of Ahmadinejad's conservative-dominated parliament was to add an item in Iran's fourth economic plan that called for removing obstacles to 'gender justice' in legal, social and economic areas necessary for women's protection[2]. The President also submitted to the *Majlis* (parliament) a new Family Protection Bill, in August 2007, to make it easier for men to marry second, third and fourth, wife without the consent of the first wife.[3] Several years of campaigning by women stopped the passage of some of these items in the new bill.

Among other draconian measures taken against women in this period was the closing of journals aimed at women; filtering feminist sites and weblogs[4]; jailing women's rights activists; the introduction of Sexual Segregation policy (*Tafkic Jensiati*) in institutions of higher education, and closing to women 70 fields of higher education such as electrical engineering, hotel management and computer science. These policies aimed at pushing women out of work places and public spaces. Other measures included barring women under 30 from getting a passport; excluding women athletes from participating in international competitions and forbidding women from attending soccer stadiums where men played; as well as the foundation of 'The Office for Extension of the Culture of Hijab and Decency' in the Ministry of Interior with 27 branches active in imposing Islamist dress codes and punishing non-compliance. The dramatic increase in the number of stoning women and men to death on charges of adultery, and hanging political activists and others charged with drug trafficking, made Iran second to China in the number of executions.

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The devastating impact of the anti-women regulations and policies in this period should be clear. The unimaginable violence used by the security forces in dealing with the post-2009 street protests and rallies, indiscriminate beating, arrests and torture that drove people out of the streets inevitably negatively affected the vitality of the women's movement. Several well-known activists ended up in prison or left the country and those who remained, dispirited, had to be cautious or at least temporarily retreat from campaigning.

Strategic voting for Hassan Rouhani

It was amidst this demoralizing climate that Iranian citizens entered the 2013 presidential elections. The seven candidates for presidency who passed the ideological screening of the Guardianship Council, except for one, belonged to the camp within the power-elite that is identified as Principlists, *Usoolgra*. They are divided into two factions of traditionalists and hardliners. The absence of a serious candidate from the camp of the so-called Reformists, and the astounding rejection by the GC of Hashemi Rafsanjani (two times President before Khatami, known as a pragmatist Principlist) seemed to have been the last straw for the dispirited and incensed voters discouraging their participation in the elections. But, as we now know, a serious maneuvering behind the scenes by the reformist Khatami and traditional Principlist, Rafsanjani, who supported Rouhani against Khamenei's candidate, the hard-liner Jalili, and the withdrawal of the only candidate from the reformist camp, A'ref, in favour of Rouhani, made him the only candidate who could defeat the hardliners. The resulting strategic voting once more offered the office of the president to a person who was not the choice of the establishment.

It is important to bear in mind the factors that facilitated Hassan Rouhani's victory – most notably why the Supreme Leader did not resort to conniving practices in favour of his man, Jalili, as he did in the 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad. First and foremost, Rouhani is one of the most trusted men within the establishment and hence presents no threat to the Supreme Leader's monopolized authority. Rouhani has served in all branches of the regime. In addition to having been a Member of Parliament for 20 years, and Chief nuclear negotiator under President Khatami, he has been a member of the Assembly of Experts; member of the Expediency Council; the Secretary of the National Security Council; the Commander of the Air-defence System during the Iran – Iraq war; Deputy Commander of the Armed Forces, and the Chief of Staff of the most important and largest corporation of the Revolutionary Guards (involved in infrastructure, refinery; pipelines, dams, etc.).

More pressing factors were also at play to impose the compromises on the traditional Principlists in favour of Rouhani, central to which was the crippling economic crisis derived mostly from misguided policies of Ahmadinejad's administration that oversaw the squandering of Iran's enormous oil revenues funding small populist projects at the cost of halting large-scale industrial and infrastructural projects; rising hyperinflation estimated at 31% in 2013; a doubling of unemployment[5]; a dramatic decline in real wages[6]; and the crippling sanctions in response to the country's nuclear program. Added to all this is the stunning corruption of the ruling clerics and their family members, including Khamenei himself. The ordinary people in Iran blame the regime for all these issues, including the isolation of Iran from the world community. It was against the backdrop of the regime's most serious crisis of legitimacy and widespread anger and resentment, accentuated by the 2009 election fraud and the brutal suppression of protesters, including Ahmadinejad's rivals Mausavi and Karrobi who have remained under house arrest, that the 2013 presidential election was played out.

Women Voters and Hassan Rouhani

Women as active participants in all post-revolution political events, have not only suffered devastating consequences of the social, economic and political policies of the regime, but have been pressed hard as a result of the cultural and moral crusades of the regime aimed at bringing every area of women's private and social lives under state control through re-Islamization policies. [7] The fact is that the share of women in the total economically-active population dropped from the pre-revolution figure of 14.8 per cent in 1976 to 12.7 percent in mid-1990s, which means that despite dramatic population growth, female participation rate is still below the pre-revolutionary figure[8]. The rate of women's unemployment in urban areas is reported to be three times that of men.[9]

In 2013, as in previous elections, in absence of a democratic alternative to the patriarchal religious regime, women

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had to choose the candidate who appeared as less rigid and least socially conservative among the front-runners. They may not have harbored many hopes for meaningful reforms in favour of women under Rouhani. But, they hoped that if he does not open the space wider for them, he at least would not close tighter the existing spaces. Rouhani's repeated pledge of 'reducing political tension' and forming a government of 'prudence and hope' appealed to many. Rouhani did not specifically address the legal and social discrimination against women except in abstract terms, but he criticized the view that 'equates Hijab with women's morality', *Effat*, and spoke unequivocally against sexual segregation of university classes, arguing that 'it has no place in today's complex society with interconnected relations.' [10]

Rouhani's Political Agenda

Whether Rouhani will act upon his criticisms and address the country's political, economic and socio-cultural problems depends on whether or not one believes in the Islamic regime's potentials for self-correction. The strong words of Khamenei against the release of political prisoners of the Green Movement, in particular Mousavi and Karrubi, conditioning their release to 'asking forgiveness' (*Toubeh*) signals serious limitations the new President will face in administering his government of 'prudence and hope'. The fact that following Khamenei's opposition, he withdrew the names of four candidates from his cabinet list, and used the term 'Mutiny', *Fetneh*, in reference to the Green Movement when introducing his cabinet members to the parliament have already turned off many people. Worse still, he selected Mustafa Pourmohadami as the Minister of Justice amidst strong objections, including those of three international human rights organizations – Human Rights Watch, Reporters Without Borders, and the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. Pourmohadami was previously appointed by Khomeini to the three-men 'death committee' in 1988 and assigned the job of clearing the prisons of the political prisoners who refused to renounce their political beliefs. He sent thousands of prisoners to their death.

Rouhani has not included women in his list of cabinet ministers. But a staunch conservative woman, Elham Aminzadeh, a former Member of Parliament has been appointed as his Deputy on legal affairs. This appointment denotes why the formation of a Ministry for Women that has been hinted during Rouhani's campaign has not been enthusiastically received by the women's rights activists. They are rightly concerned about who would be appointed as the minister and what would be the mandate of such ministry. The appointment of Aminzadeh does nothing to reassure them.

Yet, signs of revitalization of the civil society, women activists, university students and academics, artists and others are already evident. Immediately following Rouhani's elections, over 600 women issued a statement outlining the criteria they wanted to see used in the selection of cabinet members. Among the criteria were the commitment to removing discriminatory barriers used against women, members of ethnic and religious minorities, and others, and not having a past record of anti-women behaviors, words and actions. Also in an open letter to the new President, 781 university professors from 55 universities, 30 women among them, put forth their demands for restoration of independence of universities from political interference and ideological appointments, academic freedom, halting sexual segregation policy and the use of ideological screening in appointment and promotion of academic staff.

The Future of Women's Rights in Iran

In the end, if the Islamic regime has failed in the past to overcome women's resistance to gender roles as defined by the self-proclaimed guardians of Shari'a and to the social, legal and moral codes of conduct, it will certainly not be able to change easily now. The very fact that we witness the resumption of collective undertakings of women activists and groups, after a period of unorganized and individualized activity of a few, warrants cautious optimism. True, women activists are still segmented and political divisions and personality clashes are yet to be overcome. What is important is that the loosely organized women's groups have renewed the debates over the best strategy for mobilizing support around the cause of women that is crucial for pushing back the assaults against women's basic rights. In a two-part article, Noushin Khorasani centers on whether apart from activism on issues directly related to women's rights, women should participate in the 'general' struggle for democracy and social justice. Khorasani identifies three sets of demands. The first set of demands relates to the general issues of human rights, at the top of which is 'removing the police-security net' from society. The second set of demands relates to women and men's

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rights to a decent life – free from poverty and misery. And finally, the demands related to women's entitlement to equal rights in law and to nondiscriminatory access to all areas of social, political and cultural life. Khorasani argues that demanding gender equality and freedom for women, without having obtained essential rights and freedoms as humans, is neither possible nor could it be a sound strategy for women's movement. In a society in which the inalienable rights of people as humans are not recognized and respected, she writes, demanding equal rights for women means 'equal rights in death penalty or equal treatment in the Islamic law of retribution', *Qisas*, according to which, for example, the blood money (*dieh*) payable to the family of the victim for the death of a man is twice than that for a woman.

Conclusions

Surely the struggle for 'rights to claim rights' – Hanna Arendt's profound concept – is a struggle that Iranian women have carried on to no avail for over a century. This of course does not, and should not, mean prioritization of issues of rights. It only means that legal and social equality for women everywhere has been linked to the transformation of socioeconomic structures, a legally-protected toleration of difference, a recognition of individual rights, and the acceptance of the moral agency and ability of the individual to make their own choices. When women have secured the space they need to articulate their demands and oppositional discourses such a transformation will begin to materialize. The Islamic regime in Iran has proved incapable of reforming itself. An opening in the suffocating, tightly controlled political space, no matter how limited, is crucial for change-seeking individuals to regroup, get prepared and mobilize forces for launching a decisive challenge to the regime and eventually replace it with a secular democratic one. We have to wait and see if women along with other activists can secure a breathing space even within the most limiting conditions inherent to a totalitarian religious state, to claim their humanity and rights.

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Haideh Moghissi is Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies, and a Pierre Elliot Trudeau Fellow at York University in Toronto. She was a founder of the Iranian National Union of Women and member of its first executive and editorial boards, before leaving Iran in 1984. Her *Feminism and Islamic Fundamentalism: The Limits of Postmodern Analysis* (Oxford University Press, 2000 and Zed Press, 1999), winner of Choice Outstanding Academic Book Award, has been translated to multiple languages.

[1] Over 35 women's and social justice groups and over 600 activists and intellectuals rallied around the coalition, with gender as its central theme.

[2] *Shahrvand weekly*, Vol. 14, No. 914, August 20, 2004, p. 5

[3] *Mut'a* is a pre-Islamic custom, sanctioned by the Prophet. It constitutes a verbal or written contract between a man and woman who is hired for a fixed pay and a fixed period and is essentially a partnership for pleasure, much in the same way as hiring a prostitute, except that it is sanctioned by law. The partners can part when the contract is expired, or when the man so wishes, without divorce procedures. The institution of *Mut'a* was abolished after the Prophet's death, but it has been carried on through the centuries by Shiites. The Iranian Shiite jurists support the *Mut'a* as in their view it prevents adultery and fornication.

[4] In September 5, 2008 four women activists were sentenced to 6 months imprisonment each, for their activities in feminist blogs, *zanestan* and *change for equality*.

[5] *CheshmAndaz-e Iran*, No. 79, July 2013, p. p. 48.

[6] *CheshmAndaz-e Iran*, No. 77, March, 2013.

[7] 'Women and the 1979 Revolution: Refusing Religion-Defined Womanhood' *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Volume 29, Number 1, pp. 63-71.

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[8] For a thorough analysis of female labour force participation in post-revolution Iran see, Farhad Nomani and Sohrab Behdad (2006) *Class and Labour in Iran*, Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, Chapter 6, and also, Haideh Moghissi and Saeed Rahnema 'Working Class and Islamic State in Iran' *Socialist Register*, 2001, Pp. 197-218.

[9] For an excellent analysis of unemployment among women in Urban areas see Feminist School website, October 2, 211.

[10] Rouhani's interview with Chelcheragh Magazine

About the author:

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