



the Hollings Center
for international dialogue

The Iranian Election Results and their Wider Implications

June 17, 2013

Kadir Has University, Istanbul

The Hollings Center for International Dialogue and [The Center for International and European Studies \(CIES\)](#) co-organized a panel discussion on the “Iranian Election Results of 14 June and their Wider Implications” as part of the CIES Elections Panel Discussion Series. The participating experts assessed the outcome of Iran’s eleventh presidential election and the repercussions of the elections for Iran and the wider region, including Iran’s relations with its neighbors and the rest of the international community.

The panelists included:

- **Enis Erdem Aydın**, Editor, Foreign News Service, *CNN Türk*
- **Arzu Celalifer Ekinci**, Dr., Middle East and Iranian Affairs Researcher
- **Ahmet K. Han**, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Kadir Has University
- **Gencer Özcan**, Professor, Department of International Relations, Istanbul Bilgi University
- **Serhat Güvenç (Moderator)**, Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Kadir Has University

Panelists began with an overview of the election process in Iran and the conditions that led to Hassan Rouhani’s victory. Six of the 678 registered candidates passed through the elimination rounds to be eligible to run for Iran’s presidential elections. From these final six candidates, Rouhani (also spelled Rowhani) won by a vote of 50.7 % with a voter turnout of 72%. According to the panelists, the reason for Rouhani’s success was that voters were looking for a leader who would improve Iran’s dire economy and unemployment rate, guarantee civil rights and mend Iran’s isolation from the international community.

Rouhani’s background and his campaign speeches supporting freedom, women’s rights and normalizing relations with the West, portrayed him as a moderate leader and negotiator. As the only cleric candidate, Rouhani was a candidate from within the establishment. He has been a figure in Iran’s political scene since 1979, serving parliamentary and diplomatic posts. He also served as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator, playing a key role in bringing a settlement with the West over Iran’s uranium enrichment program during his term. These attributes, combined with the overwhelming support of former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani and the lack of a strong opposition candidate, led Hassan Rouhani to be elected as Iran’s eleventh President.



The elections are not expected to have immediate effects on Iran's domestic and foreign policy. Arzu Celalifer Ekinçi expressed that "we cannot expect radical reforms but with a good strategy and the formation of an experienced cabinet changes can be made." In the mid-term, cultural and social pressures within Iran may also ease. Hopes are high that Rouhani will keep campaign promises to release political prisoners such as Mir Hussein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, although this not likely to occur in the short-term.



Although some improvements are expected in Iran's foreign relations under Rouhani, changes to Iran's foreign policy will not be significant. As a former diplomat, Rouhani may be effective in creating dialogue with the West and making Iran less isolated. Gencer Özcan expressed the view that U.S.-Iran relations are not as distant as they often perceived. According to Özcan, when they both desire, Iran and the United States do work together as silent partners, especially on issues concerning the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, and currently in regards to Iraq. This silent partnership will continue under Rouhani as well. However, the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq allowed Iran to expand its control regionally. In the words of Özcan, the US presented Iraq to Iran on a "silver platter".

Ahmet Han stated that Obama had been postponing dealing with Iran but may act differently with Rouhani as President. Obama does not feel threatened by issues that are far away and thus does not deal with them. He indicated that Iran holds two assets: denial capability and nuisance capability. Iran may not be able to shape developments in the region the way it desires; but it does have the power to stop developments it does not want. Iran holds enough power to interfere in matters. Iran believes that there are two powers in the world: the United States and Iran. Iran's nuclear capability validates this belief. Iran holds a remarkable government tradition and this complicated structure cannot be easily changed. The US unfortunately does not understand this tradition. Iran will be able to do what it wants because of its nuclear capability. In the viewpoint of the panelists, the Iranian government does not want to develop a nuclear bomb but wants to keep the idea that it will in play to use it for issues concerning the United States and Israel.



The discussion then turned to Iran's relations with its neighbors. The Arab Spring created many opportunities for Iran to become a regional player. According to one panelist, Iran is expected to continue to take advantage of every opportunity created by the Arab Spring to improve and build relationships with Arab Spring countries and increase its influence in the region. Iran's relations with Syria will not change as long as those in power are not anti-Iran. Turkish-Iran relations are expected to remain unchanged and the void left in Iraq will continue to bring Iran and Turkey against one another on foreign policy matters.

While President-elect Rouhani is not expected to make major changes to Iran's foreign policy, he faces many domestic challenges. Iran is in a deep recession, marked by 60% inflation in food prices and a 12% unemployment rate. Rouhani must navigate these challenges despite relatively weak political capital. In the words of one of the panelists, in most countries, people vote to elect a candidate. In Iran, however, people vote to avoid electing other candidates. Rouhani will have to overcome serious

domestic and foreign issues in a well-established political system that rarely accepts systematic changes. The international community will be watching with great interest to see if he succeeds.

For Turkish speakers who would like to read more about the event, [read this article in Zaman](#).