



## Post-election Analysis

# IRAN

## Presidential Elections 14<sup>th</sup> June 2013

**Luciano Zaccara**

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Successive presidential elections with surprising and unexpected results (1997, 2005 and 2009) have now made clear to academics, journalists and governments that it is impossible to predict Iranian election results. None of the analysis prior to the June 14 elections took into account the possibility that the *hojatoleslam* and doctor<sup>1</sup>, Hassan Feridon - better known as Rouhani - would win outright in the first round. However, many were those who predicted that Rouhani might compete in a second round against the current mayor of Tehran, Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, or even that this latter might win in either the first or second rounds. Some bolder analysts even asserted that Saeed Jalili, the current nuclear negotiator, could win, thanks to the direct support of Leader Ali Khamenei and the *Pasdaran*, as in 2005 with Ahmadinejad. Following the election, many analysts have attempted to decrypt the results, trying to shed light on the reasons for yet another surprise and especially, to discover the keys that will help predict what might happen during Rouhani's presidency or in future elections.

After directly observing six consecutive elections, the present author was surprised by the result. This report is a provisional explanation of the official results published by the Interior Ministry on 15 June and ratified by the Guardian Council on 20 June.

Firstly, the apathetic mood that existed barely a week before the elections made a low turnout likely, especially in Tehran. It was difficult to find people convinced of the need or point of voting and above all, people who had made up their minds to vote for one of the eight Guardian Council-approved candidates<sup>2</sup>. Even after the two live televised debates between the eight candidates, on 31 May and 5 June, people seemed unmotivated. However, on 7 June, day of the epic, final four-and-a-half hour debate, there seemed to be a dramatic shift. The foreign-policy centred subject of the debate, allowed the candidates to bare their teeth. Besides the direct accusations of foreign policy mismanagement against some of them, including Hassan Rouhani, Saeed Jalili or Ali Akbar Velayati – all three of whom have held responsibilities in foreign affairs in different periods of the Republic – several items of dirty laundry were also aired, chiefly related to the student repression of 1999, when Ghalibaf, as chief of police, was directly responsible.

The debate left Ghalibaf weakened, as well as Jalili who on several occasions had displayed his more conservative and less charismatic side. None of the conservative candidates had been a clear favourite and neither did any seem to enjoy the direct support of the Leader Khamenei, who perhaps before recommending one candidate to his faithful followers, was waiting for one to stand out. Not even Gholam Haddad Adel's withdrawal<sup>3</sup> from the race a few days later seemed to improve the chances of the remaining conservative candidates. The "coalition of three" formed by Ghalibaf, Velayati and Haddad Adel, with a commitment for two to withdraw so as to aid the one with the greater chances, was left null and void by the showdown between the two who stayed in the race.

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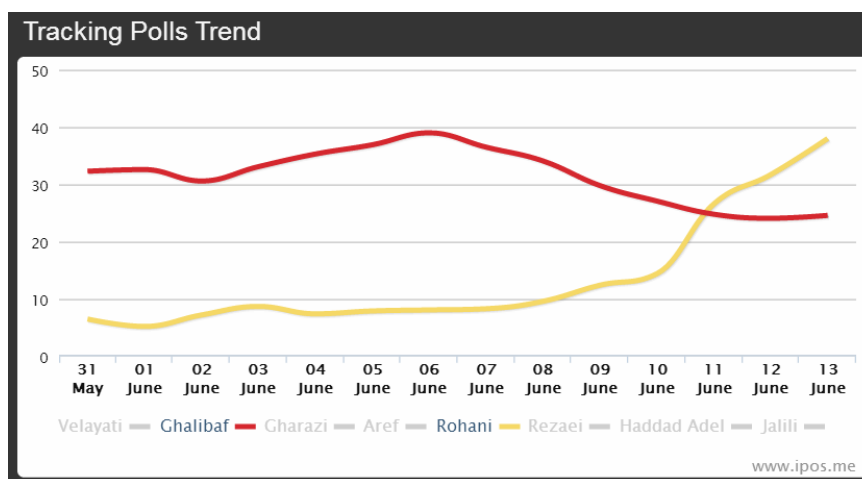
<sup>1</sup> The controversy on the veracity of the PhD degree obtained by Rohani has been positively solved with a congratulation message published by the authorities of Glasgow Caledonian University. Available at: <http://www.gcu.ac.uk/newsevents/news/article.php?id=59642>.

<sup>2</sup> The eight candidates were: Hassan Rohani; Mohamed Bagher Qalibaf; Said Jalili; Mohsen Rezaei; Ali Akbar Velayati; Mohamar Gharrazi; Mohammad Reza Aref and Gholam Hadad Adel.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.presstv.ir/detail/2013/06/10/308193/haddadadel-quits-presidential-race/>

On the opposing side, those candidates who in theory went in at a disadvantage benefitted from the third debate. Rouhani – who had never called himself a reformist, but did enjoy their support – and especially Aref – the only reformist candidate – kept their calm and were those who responded best to the questions and attacks of their rivals. On 11 June, just three days before the elections, Mohammad Reza Aref withdrew from the race<sup>4</sup>, giving his explicit backing to Rouhani. In a move that stunned the conservatives, the two ex-presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami seem to have decided that Rouhani was the most likely to win, and that were he to do so, he would be the best placed to muster the support of the more conservative sectors and even the clerics at Qom<sup>5</sup>. Moreover, he could do so without direct confrontation with the Supreme Leader, given that Rouhani is his own representative on the National Security Council. With this decision, Rafsanjani brilliantly brought to an end four years of political Calvary and ostracism, installing one of his closest allies within reach of the presidency. The conservatives' lack of unity or, better put their longing to compete to become the Leader's preferred candidate, undermined Ghalibaf, Jalili and Velayati. Neither the opinion polls nor the results mentioned them as the favourites of a majority of Iranians.

Nor did the polls predict an outright winner in the first round. The only poll that could be considered scientific, carried out by IPOS<sup>6</sup>, did signal the upswell of support for Rouhani after the debate. From barely 8.1% on 6 June, before the last debate, his support rose to 14.4% on 10 June (the day Aref pulled out), only to then climb swiftly to 26.6% on 11 June and to 31.7% on 12 June, the last day polls were conducted. On the contrary, his principal rival Ghalibaf's support plummeted following the debate. From 39% on 6 June, he plunged to 24.4% on 12 June. In the following table the trends of both can be clearly appreciated.



It was clear that the debate and especially Aref's decision to withdraw from the race were the main factors that drove the vast numbers of undecided voters to the polls on 14 June. On 12 June - the final day of the campaign - it

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-22851764>

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.iransview.com/unified-iranian-reformists-behind-rowhani-the-worst-news-for-principalists/927/>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://ipos.me/>

was clear that what had been a battle was now a duel between Rouhani and Ghalibaf, although there was not the same pre-electoral passion as in 2009. The impossibility of predicting the result was due, in this case, to the fact that the decision to vote, and vote Rouhani, was made on election day itself. It was not difficult to find people declare that they had voted Rouhani when a week before they had said they would not vote. With an official turnout of 72% - less than the 84% announced in 2009 - the 2013 presidential elections managed to fulfill the first of the goals established by the political class: re-legitimation of the political system, recuperation of the population's trust in elections and especially in election results, which was lost to a large extent in 2009. As a result, the president-elect is also legitimate in the eyes of the international community, which lost no time in congratulating him, as well as the Iranian people for their choice. That said, the narrow margin with which Rouhani won – barely 50.7% - will not allow Rouhani an independent presidency. Instead, he will need the consensus of all the political sectors to make a success of his administration. His first press conference and the round of meetings he has been having since 16 June with other political leaders are a clear sign of his restricted room for maneuver and of the limited prospects of proper change that can be expected of his presidency. And yet, Iran always surprises, and after his inauguration in August, there could be more surprises in his ministerial lineup.