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The enigma of elections in Iran: Reconciling domestic differences and sustaining a balanced foreign policy

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In less than three days Iranians are casting their vote to choose the next president of Iran. Four years after the turbulent 2009 elections the outcome of this election is viewed in Iran as the most uncertain since the Islamic Republic was established. Not only do the voters are irresolute about their choice but also the biographies of the presidential candidates make the outcome of elections irresolute.

Additionally the participation of voters in these elections is under question. This has been the case in the last two presidential elections and every time the participation of voters has been higher than expected. However this time, due to the fact that the reformist leaders remain under house arrest for nearly two years after the 2009 elections, pro-reformist voters are expected to abstain from voting at large.

It is noteworthy that out of the seven candidates (Aref, Ghalibaf, Gharrazi, Jalili, Rezaei, Rowhani and Velayati) the majority comes from the conservative wing. According to the latest unofficial polls Velayati and Ghalibaf are on the lead on behalf of the conservative wing but Jalili is also a strong candidate who may make the difference. Given the unpredictable character of Iranian political mind, it is impossible to make predictions about who is going to win the elections. Especially after the 2005 and 2009 elections results, the risky task of predictions was recently attested in the disqualification process of candidates of the competence of Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, perhaps the most successful Iranian politician of the same political caliber as that of the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic. Moreover, Hadad-Adel's withdrawal just four days prior to the elections confirms the concept of political surprises and unexpected developments in various political procedures.

A noteworthy development in these elections process was the candidacy of Dr. Hooshang Amirahmadi, a US-based Iranian academic who became the first candidate in the presidential election in Iran residing outside the country, and more specifically in the US, which is the number one antagonist of Iran. Although Amirahmadi was disqualified a few weeks prior to the elections, he sent the message both to Iran and the Iranian diaspora that there is room for political initiatives and maneuvering for every Iranian who is interested in supporting his country actively.

As for the elections it is very likely though that the new president will emerge after the second round, due to take place on 21 June. Given the type and the number of candidates, whose biographies give them almost equal chances to be elected, as well as the alleged unwillingness of a major percentage of moderate Iranians to cast their vote, it is very difficult to have a winner from the first round of elections. It is therefore expected that the two first

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candidates from the first round will contest for the presidency in the second around.

In these elections the Supreme Leader is expected to act again as a catalyst in the election process and for stability in the country in the aftermath of elections. Given the tight security measures that have been taken by the state months ahead of the elections, in combination with a lack of will and disappointment of the reformist party about the political climate in the country, the prospects of having the phenomenon of 2009 turbulence are not very likely.

With regard to the importance of this election for the future of Iranian politics, the main task for the new president is to bridge the gap between the conservatives and reformists, by bringing the reformists back to government work. Most of the presidential candidates have this conciliatory profile and they know that given the foreign political and economic pressure on the nuclear programme of the country, Iran can overcome these foreign policy difficulties only when all political wings are united.

As for the future relations between Iran with the West, the importance of these elections cannot be overestimated. And this is due to the fact that regardless of who is elected, the foreign policy of the country is drawn on a long term basis by the Supreme Leader and his advisory board, in consultation with the elected president. Thus the new president is expected to continue the same defiant policy but this time he must be able to address crucial issues, such as that of the tremendous economic deficiency of Iran and the way to preserve Iran's geopolitical tactical advantage in the Middle East in combination with balancing its deteriorating relationship with the West.

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