NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTE

Iran's June 14, 2013 Elections

Preliminary Post-Election Analysis

National Democratic Institute – Washington DC – June 20, 2013

On June 14, 2013, Iranian citizens went to the polls in the country's 11th presidential and 4th city and village council elections. As mandatory term limits prohibited the current president from seeking re-election and in light of the mass protests and subsequent violent government crackdown following the 2009 presidential runoff, the 2013 presidential elections received considerable domestic and international attention. The elections concurrently filled more than 126,000 council seats.

According to public accounts, voting commenced as planned at 8 AM on June 14. While polls were originally scheduled to close at 8 PM the Ministry of Interior, citing higher turnout than expected (official figures suggest a turnout rate of 72.7 percent of eligible voters), extended the voting period until approximately 9 PM in the provinces and 10 PM in Tehran. With the closing of the polls, ballot counting commenced, with results being transferred to central tabulation centers without public scrutiny. Results by province were announced by the Ministry of Interior as they were received. On the afternoon of June 15, Hassan Rowhani, a cleric and diplomat known for his role as Iran's nuclear negotiator, was officially declared the winner with 50.68 percent of the vote in a first-round victory. Results by county were posted to the Ministry of Interior (MOI) website several days later; although the data remains available, links to it from the MOI site have reportedly been removed without explanation.

There is clearly a deep-seated desire on the part of Iranians to vote in fair elections and to have a chance to choose their political leaders. That they participated in the 2013 process with such apparent enthusiasm is a testament to their tenacity and desire for change. Though voters' choices were severely limited ahead of time by the Guardian Council and the electoral system lacks safeguards for ensuring the integrity of ballots, it would appear that the country voted en masse for the candidate that they perceived would be most likely to bring change. That Rowhani's victory was so decisive would suggest a widespread desire for reform across all segments of society.

Unfortunately, the opacity that pervades the entire electoral process in Iran – reinforced by the preeminent role of the Guardian Council and Supreme Leader in all political processes – means that truly independent analysis is not possible. The lack of independent oversight mechanisms, whether official or through citizen monitoring, the throttling of internet access during the period immediately preceding and during election day and the heavily controlled official media ensured that commentary on elections and reports of any fraud or violations were kept to a minimum.

Iran does not invite credible international organizations to observe the election process from within the country and does not allow independent citizen monitoring, so analysis of election results is limited to publically available information and official sources in Iran. The official

turnout figure – 72.7 percent – is very high and deserves further scrutiny. Iran does not use a voters list but allows all eligible voters to vote with proper identification. If this percentage of all eligible voters did, in fact, vote, it would indicate very high interest in elections and/or an intimidation factor where some citizens may feel compelled to vote. Most countries calculate turnout figures as a percentage of registered voters; even using that calculation, 72.7 percent would be a relatively high turnout figure. While it is possible that the figures are accurate, the unusually high rate could invite skepticism.

News reporting and monitoring of social media during and since the election have not indicated broad public concern about the veracity of results, nor have they shown or indicated widespread fraud or intimidation. There has been little reporting about election-related violence or disturbances. No reports of formal objections or appeals filed within the 72-hour window for official complaints following the election have been publicized.

The absence of reports does not mean that there were no such incidences; rather they have not been brought into the public domain. Accusations of infractions during the electoral process such as pressure by authorities on government employees to vote and attacks on candidate offices and volunteers have emerged anecdotally but cannot be properly investigated or corroborated.

Although the elections seemed to have passed peacefully and with minimal public outcry, there was little or no attempt on the part of authorities to address the shortcomings of the overall process to assure citizens that their electoral system is more democratic. Elections for the Islamic Consultative Assembly of Iran, the Iranian equivalent of a parliament known as the *Majlis*, are anticipated for 2016. That vote could provide an opportunity to correct the significant shortcomings in Iran's election system and help the process to conform more closely to international practices and reflect international agreements and covenants signed by Iran.

Issues of Concern and Recommendations for Future Elections

- *Candidates for President were vetted in advance by the Guardian Council and several potential contestants were disqualified for arbitrary reasons.* Qualifications required to stand for President as outlined in the constitution include: Iranian origin; Iranian nationality; administrative capacity and resourcefulness; a good past-record; trustworthiness and piety; and convinced belief in the fundamental principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the official religion of the country. During the five-day candidate registration period, 686 people officially submitted applications to stand as candidates; of these, only eight were approved by the Council. No explanation for exclusions was provided. Two approved candidates subsequently withdrew their candidacies. This closed vetting process limited voters' choices and calls into question the fundamental principle of a free election. Outside of confirmation of minimal requirements, governments should not make determinations of who can stand for office.

- *Independent, domestic, non-partisan observation of election processes was not allowed, nor were qualified international observers invited to witness election processes.* Since the

mid-1980s independent, non-partisan, citizen observers, as well as international observers, have played a critical role in enhancing public confidence and increasing transparency in the electoral process. These contributions have been codified in the *Declaration of Global Principles for Nonpartisan Election Observation and Monitoring by Citizen Organizations* as well as the *Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation*. Both of these documents were launched at the United Nations reflecting the global consensus of the central role citizen and international observation play in credible elections.

While the new Central Executive Election Board (CEEB) was created for the 2013 elections to supervise the work of the Ministry of Interior, it remains far from independent. According to a recent amendment to the election law, the CEEB is formed five months before the end of the incumbent president's term and consists of: the Minister of Interior, who chairs the board; the Prosecutor General; the Intelligence Minister; a Member of the *Majlis* Assembly Board of Directors (who serves as an observer with no voting rights); and seven civilian trustees (nominated by the *Majlis* and approved by the Guardian Council). The Ministry of Interior remains fully responsible for executing and managing the logistics of the elections, and the Guardian Council can intervene if it is concerned with the preparations for or conduct of elections.

The establishment of independent election commissions is becoming a more common trait of elections worldwide, playing an important role in advising on election administration or even taking over management responsibility as unbiased arbiters to address electoral concerns and lending credibility as a neutral actor in a process that is viewed skeptically by the public.

Even if there is general consensus around the specific outcome of this particular presidential election, the creation of independent oversight mechanisms and opportunities for citizen monitoring would enhance the credibility of the process and build public trust.

- *As in past elections, no registry of qualified voters was created and voters could cast their ballot at any polling station.* As there is no requirement to register to vote, no voter cards are issued and any eligible voter can choose to appear at any polling station on election day and vote. To do so, a citizen presents his or her birth certificate, or *shenasnameh*, to verify that he or she is an Iranian citizen and 18 years of age or older. The Ministry of Interior estimates that 50 million people of an estimated total population of 74.8 million were eligible to vote in these elections. The lack of a voter registry deprived election officials of an important check on illegal or double-voting. The ability to vote at any station also necessitated the printing and distribution of excess ballot papers, which creates opportunities for ballot box stuffing and other forms of fraud. With several exceptions, such as refugees, international norms allow for the designation of polling stations based on place of residence to be one of the few parameters that can be rightfully placed on citizens' ability to register to vote.

- *Results for individual polling stations were not publicly posted, and the compilation of final results once again took place behind closed doors with no independent supervision.* There were more than 67,000 polling stations located across Iran's 31 provinces, as well as 285 polling stations in 120 countries to enable Iranians living outside of the country to vote. As has been historic practice in Iran, stubs and ballot papers were counted at polling stations in the presence of candidate representatives. The results were recorded on an official form that, along with other election materials, was sent to a collation center for aggregation. Unlike in many countries around the world, in Iran candidate representatives are not entitled to a copy of the official count and results are not posted publicly at polling stations. The results submitted from the polling stations were compiled behind closed doors with no candidate representatives or independent witnesses present. This approach exacerbates a lack of transparency in the overall process. The immediate public posting of results and greater access to the tabulation process would ensure consistent and timely processes across the country, increase transparency and enhance public confidence in the accuracy of the vote count.

National Democratic Institute

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The Institute has concentrated on providing accurate and impartial analysis through its observation missions in order to inform the international community and domestic actors of strengths and weaknesses in electoral and political processes and to offer, where appropriate, recommendations for strengthening democratic processes and electoral frameworks.

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