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Iran's May 19 Election - A Mandate for Moderation

Iran's overwhelming reelection of incumbent President Hassan Rouhani on May 19 delivered a stark message to the world. The Iranian people are pushing their country in a positive direction, demanding greater openness at home and engagement with the world. It is vital that the United States not stand in their way:

Mandate for Moderation

- More than 41 million Iranians voted in Iran's May 19th Presidential election, or nearly 75% of the electorate. That figure included tens of thousands of Iranians in the diaspora. Overall, voter turnout inside and outside Iran was remarkable given the obstacles imposed by Iran's unelected institutions.
- The election was a 57-38% landslide for incumbent President Hassan Rouhani, and a defeat for hardliners – including the leadership of Iran's judiciary and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) - which mobilized for the conservative candidate Ebrahim Raisi.
- It was not just a defeat for hardliners at the Presidential level, but also in city council races throughout the country. Reformists swept all 21 seats in the capital Tehran, and are also poised to sweep council seats in other major cities, including Raisi's conservative hometown of Mashhad.
- For the first time in Iran's history 6 women were elected to Tehran's 21 member city council, and another 415 women won seats on councils in Iran's conservative Sistan and Baluchistan provinces. In Mashhad, a woman won a seat on the city council with her campaign slogan "Let's Vote for Women."
- The Iranian people sent an overwhelming message that they want to push their country in a positive direction through peaceful, indigenous change through the ballot box, not externally imposed regime change.

Implications for Policy

- By building and maintaining the most robust political coalition in the 38-year history of the Islamic Republic, Rouhani has solidified a significant power base. Unlike past Presidents with a reformist agenda, he has been more pragmatic and may now be able to make good on his promises to reform human rights at home and broaden his international engagement, though ill-advised U.S. policies will almost certainly undercut his agenda.
- The election was a referendum on the benefits of the Iran deal, further diplomacy with the West, social freedoms at home, and even the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

- Critically, Rouhani floated the possibility of pursuing negotiations to lift all sanctions on Iran, which would necessitate further U.S.-Iran diplomacy on sensitive issues including state sponsorship of terrorism and the war in Syria.
- Rouhani went so far as to publicly criticize the IRGC, which is overseen by Khamenei, for undermining Iran's economic benefit under the nuclear deal by test-firing ballistic missiles with anti-Israel rhetoric.
- Prior to the election, Rouhani's challenger Ebrahim Raisi was considered a top contender to replace the aging Khamenei as Supreme Leader. After defeating Raisi, Rouhani has burnished his credentials for the critical, and potentially transformational, role.

Will the U.S. miss this opportunity?

- This could be a major turning point and opportunity. If the U.S. is serious about addressing Iran's role in the region and curbing its missile program, it must work to engage rather than undercut Rouhani's moderate coalition and the millions of Iranians who voted for greater openness and engagement.
- It has not been lost on Iranian society that, in spite of mobilizing to vote for moderation, Donald Trump was in Saudi Arabia showing solidarity with unelected monarchs who have a history of ties to terrorism and spreading radical ideology throughout the Muslim world.
- Trump's call to isolate Iran, as well as Tillerson's unilateral demands in the wake of the election, were a slap in the face to the Iranian people who voted for Rouhani as a way of extending Iran's hand to the international community. Congress must not be so reckless as to assist Trump in wasting an opportunity to reduce mutual tensions with Iran and stand in the way of the Iranian people pushing their country in a positive direction.