

Iran's president wins reelection

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Hassan Rouhani has won a second four-year term as Iran's president. He polled 57.1 percent of the more than 41 million votes cast in Friday's election, eliminating the need for a runoff election on May 26.

Rouhani, who has been part of the Islamic Republic's ruling cadre since its creation in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Shah's bloody US-backed dictatorship, appealed for votes by casting himself as a proponent of peace and moderation.

He in fact speaks for the sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie most eager for a rapprochement with the European imperialist powers and Washington.

Throughout the campaign, Rouhani held up the nuclear accord Iran reached with the US, Russia, China, Britain, France, Germany and the European Union as the signal achievement of his first term in office. Under the accord, which came into force in January 2016, Iran dismantled or rolled back key elements of its civilian nuclear program. In exchange, the European powers lifted all, and the US suspended some, of the punishing economic sanctions that they had jointly imposed on Iran.

Rouhani and Iran's foreign minister, Javad Zarif, insisted during and after the negotiations that Iran was "open for business" and ready to partner with the imperialist powers in stabilizing the broader Middle East.

To woo Western investors, Rouhani's administration solicited IMF advice, revised the rules governing investment in Iran's energy sector to make them more favorable to foreign-based energy companies, and stepped up privatization. It also slashed what it derided as "unproductive" and "wasteful" social spending, vowing, to use Rouhani's expression, that it would not "foster beggars." Shortly after completing the phasing out of subsidies on basic foodstuffs, gasoline and cooking fuel and replacing them with meager cash handouts of less than \$20 per month per household, the government raised energy prices by 30 percent.

In its second term, Rouhani's administration will intensify these right-wing, anti-working class policies, while seeking to cultivate a base of support by loosening the reactionary restrictions that the Shia religious establishment has imposed

on dress, gender mixing, and access to foreign culture and media.

In his victory speech Saturday evening, Rouhani emphasized his government's eagerness to expand economic and strategic ties with the Western powers. Iran, he declared, "is ready to expand its relations with the world based on mutual respect and national interests." He added, "Today, the world knows that Iranians have chosen the path of interaction with the world away from extremism and violence."

In an interview Sunday with Agence France Presse, a top official with the Iranian Privatization Organization and key Rouhani aide, Farid Dehdilani, enthused about how the reelected president will "aggressively pursue his economic agenda, with productive investments to attract foreign capital."

"A lot of investors I hadn't heard from for three months were suddenly phoning me this morning," added Dehdilani. "Some are already booking their tickets."

In Friday's election, Rouhani drew support from all sections of Iranian society, increasing his total vote from the last election by five million to 23.5 million. But, as in 2014, his support came disproportionately from the most privileged sections of Iranian society. As a whole, these wealthy layers are either indifferent to the impact or, citing Thatcherite nostrums, enthusiastically support the government's drive to eliminate the little that remains of the social concessions made to the working class and rural poor in the aftermath of the 1979 revolution.

They believe they will benefit from Iran's increased economic integration with Europe and North America, including through access to better consumer products, high-paid professional jobs and business opportunities.

Rouhani's principal challenger was Ebrahim Raisi, a former prosecutor-general who in recent years has headed a major religious foundation. He won 15.7 million or 38.3 percent of the votes cast Friday, leaving the two remaining candidates to share just 2 percent of the vote between them.

Raisi was the standard-bearer for the Principalists and other factions tied to more socially conservative elements in the clerical political establishment. He also reputedly had the

backing of Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

Raisi made a calibrated appeal to socioeconomic discontent. He attacked "the 4 percent" who he said are monopolizing Iran's wealth and promised to increase taxes on the rich and triple the cash payments now provided in lieu of price subsidies for the poorest 30 percent of Iranian households.

Raisi pledged that he would uphold the Iran nuclear accord, but suggested that the government had made too many concessions to secure it. Pointing to Iran's official 12.5 percent jobless rate and 27 percent youth unemployment rate, he lampooned Rouhani's and Zarif's claims that the nuclear accord would produce an investment boom.

Although there is mounting anger over rampant social inequality, growing poverty, especially in rural areas, and mass joblessness, Raisi's attempt to cast himself as the votary of the poor and downtrodden had limited traction at best. The Iranian working class and poor have a long experience with the claims of various factions of the Islamic Republic's political elite to support "social justice."

The Principalists and other conservatives have participated in and profited from the privatization drive. They joined hands with their rivals from the Rouhani-Rafsanjani and "reformist" camps to press Rouhani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to eliminate all price subsidies, and they savagely oppose any efforts by the working class to assert its independent class interests.

Friday's election saw a record participation rate, with 73.5 percent of eligible voters casting ballots. Detailed analyses of the voting results have yet to be published in English, but it appears that Rouhani did especially well in Tehran. In the local elections, which were held simultaneously with the presidential poll, Rouhani's supporters swept the board, winning all 21 seats on Tehran's city council, ending 14 years of Principalist/conservative domination of the municipal government of Iran's largest city.

As balloting was underway Friday, Iran's theocratic supreme leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, called for "national unity," saying all Iranians should accept the results. Such appeals only underscore the extent to which the Islamic Republic's ruling elite is divided as it confronts an increasingly explosive social and geopolitical situation.

For decades, Khamenei has played a Bonapartist role, maneuvering between competing ruling factions. He has repeatedly supported attempts to reach an accommodation with Washington. In 2003, with his blessing, secret emissaries offered the Bush administration a "grand bargain," including recognizing Israel and halting all military aid to Hamas and Hezbollah in exchange for a US pledge to renounce regime change.

Rouhani, himself for decades a close adviser of the supreme leader, was able to conclude the nuclear accord only because Khamenei endorsed it and ordered the entire state apparatus and political establishment to rally round it.

But Khamenei has voiced increasing anger over the sweeping economic sanctions the US continues to impose on Iran on other pretexts. These sanctions, along with the prospect that the US-fomented regime-change war in Syria could lead to a broader conflict, have caused European big business to shy away from making major investments in Iran.

Rouhani vowed during the election campaign that he would secure the removal of all remaining US sanctions. But he offered no explanation as to how this would be possible.

Continuation of the sanctions and preparations for war with Iran are strongly supported by the Pentagon and Republican and Democratic Party leaderships. Speaking from Saudi Arabia, US Secretary of State and former ExxonMobil CEO Rex Tillerson responded to the Iranian election Saturday with a vituperative denunciation, labeling Iran a state sponsor of terrorism and abuser of human rights.

Tillerson was in Riyadh along with Trump to reaffirm US imperialism's decades-long partnership with Saudi's absolutist regime, sell it tens of billions of dollars in new armaments, and discuss a US proposal for a NATO-style Arab alliance against Iran.

Today the US president will fly to Israel, where he will meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who, like Trump himself, has condemned the nuclear deal the Obama administration negotiated with Iran in the most strident terms.

Under Trump, the US continues to formally adhere to the nuclear accord, including last week authorizing the temporary waiving of some US sanctions. But the new administration has signaled that if and when it judges it opportune, Washington will repudiate the agreement and/or find another pretext, such as Iran's ballistic missiles program or the fighting in Syria or Yemen, to rapidly escalate tensions with Iran.

Further underscoring Washington's menacing attitude toward Iran, US officials have boasted that the pro-Syrian militia that US fighter planes bombed in southern Syria last week was Iranian-backed, i.e., had Iranian logistical and command support.



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