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# Summary Report: Iran's June 14, 2013 Presidential and City and Village Elections

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## Overview

On June 14, 2013, Iranian citizens went to the polls in the country's eleventh presidential and fourth city and village council elections. In addition to electing a new president given a two-term limit prohibiting the incumbent president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, from seeking re-election, the elections concurrently filled more than 126,000 local council seats. With dismal economic conditions brought on by a mix of poor fiscal management and tough international sanctions combined with an increasingly isolated international position under Ahmadinejad's idiosyncratic foreign policy, Iranian citizens clearly aspired for a change in policy direction.

The 2013 polls gained added significance because the most recent past elections in Iran did not adhere to democratic principles. Elections in 2005 that led to the country's first presidential runoff election were widely criticized. The subsequent presidential election runoff in 2009 led to mass protests and a violent government crackdown with ramifications that are still reverberating in the country. In both cases, citizens' concerns about the conduct of the elections and a lack of transparency in the process undermined public confidence that the official results accurately reflected the people's will. Though citizens could vote, the process left many with the impression that the outcome was manipulated, at best, or pre-determined, at worst.

International election observation has become an accepted practice in most countries, but Iran does not invite or allow international organizations to observe the election process and does not allow independent citizen monitoring of any part of the process, so analysis of election results is limited to publicly available information and official sources in Iran. The National Democratic Institute (NDI) has prepared this summary assessment based on publicly available information and official sources in Iran, data and analysis from the 2009 election, media reports, research from universities and think tanks, and reports from citizens and other interested observers and analysts. It does not purport to be an exhaustive or authoritative assessment of the political environment or recent electoral experience in Iran. Rather, it is a snapshot of some of the most critical electoral issues relative to international standards and relevant the principles enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a signatory.

While democracy is about more than the electoral process, elections provide a window into the nature of a society. Not only do political fault lines emerge, but a country's commitment to basic human rights and freedoms is tested. Elections should allow citizens to freely determine who governs on their behalf.

The 2013 elections in Iran produced an outcome surprising to many observers and analysts, notably, the first-round win of the relatively moderate Hassan Rowhani. Although the high turnout rate reported by the government (72.67 percent) cannot be independently confirmed, there was obvious voter enthusiasm and Iranians demonstrated an appetite for change.

While Rowhani's victory was welcomed by many inside and outside the country, the outcome does not change the fact that the Iranian electoral system continues to have the same defects as previous presidential and parliamentary elections. The system falls short of international norms and standards for free elections and calls into question Iran's commitment to the fundamental principles of democracy. Broadly speaking, 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, including determining which individuals are permitted and which are barred from running – means that truly independent analysis of election day proceedings 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.

As the country takes stock under new leadership and with an ever-growing desire among citizens for more say in decision-making, Iranian actors could explore key elements in the electoral framework with an eye to enacting significant reforms prior to the next set of parliamentary elections, anticipated for 2016. Such reforms would be important steps contributing to greater transparency and accountability in Iran's electoral process, qualities of particular importance given the clear desire on the part of Iranian citizens to participate in meaningful and credible elections.

- As in the past, the Guardian Council made arbitrary decisions about who could and could not stand for presidential office through an inaccessible process, eliminating a number of potential contenders without explanation for its choices and offering no appeal process. *The regime should stop the practice of closed-door vetting of candidates and ensure an appropriate appeals process is established.*
- Despite international trends over the past three decades enabling independent citizen monitors and international observers to enhance confidence and transparency in electoral processes, independent, non-partisan observation of election processes is not allowed in Iran by qualified domestic or international observers. *A legal framework and supporting procedures for the accreditation of independent monitors to observe future electoral processes should be developed.*
- Iran's constitution and election-related laws do not provide for the independent administration of elections with responsibility for all aspects of the electoral process, instead investing authority in bodies that have vested interest in the outcome of voting and with vague or arbitrary powers. *An independent electoral commission should be established, with supervisory powers over future elections and formal recognition with the electoral code.*

- Numerous reports indicated that journalists were harassed, intimidated and restricted in their ability to cover events, that newspapers were closed and, as reported publicly by the Minister of Communications and Information Technology after the elections, that internet access was even more restricted than normal. *Intimidation and censorship of the media should end and citizens should have widespread access to media resources, including open access to the internet.*
- Iran does not employ a voters list nor does it assign voters to particular polling stations, removing a critical check on illegal and multiple voting and creating opportunities for ballot box stuffing and fraud because of excess ballot papers. *Authorities should discourage opportunities for fraud by establishing an official voter registry linking voters to designated polling stations.*
- Unlike in many countries around the world, candidate representatives in Iran are not entitled to a copy of the official count and results are not posted at polling stations, leaving little opportunity for validation of the results. *Election authorities should make confirmed results from individual polling stations available immediately and publicly at local polling stations and nationally.*
- Election results are compiled and tabulated behind closed doors with no candidate representatives or independent witnesses present, exacerbating a lack of transparency in the overall process. *Authorities should make the tabulation and compilation of votes at all stages more accessible.*

## Political Context

Given the controlled nature of the Iranian state and limited options in presidential candidates, Iranian politics are often characterized by outside observers as homogenous but there are notable differences and tensions among the political elite even if formal processes are constrained. Most obvious have been the tensions between the president and Supreme Leader – perhaps best demonstrated during Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's second term.

Ahmadinejad won re-election following a dramatic second-round run-off in 2009 that sparked mass protests and a subsequent violent government crackdown leading to the house-arrest of two reformist candidates, Mir-Hossein Mousavi (who was the second-round contender standing against Ahmadinejad) and Mehdi Karroubi. As economic conditions worsened and Ahmadinejad continued with provocative policies that raised the ire of traditionalists, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the Guardian Council sought to re-exert control during 2013 electoral preparations, both to reassert authority and to avoid a replay of the protests seen in 2009. Although banned by constitutional provisions from seeking a third term, Ahmadinejad supported Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, a former cabinet member and first vice-president, for presidential candidacy. Mashaei had raised concerns with the religious establishment in the past for his controversial views and he was disqualified as a presidential candidate during the vetting process.<sup>1</sup>

At the other end of the narrow political spectrum, former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had voiced support for the reformist Mousavi in 2009, was also disqualified from standing, despite having met requirements when first elected in 1989 and re-elected in 1993. In the end, all but one of the approved candidates were drawn from Iran's traditionalists alliance of clerics and Revolutionary Guard commanders. The three top contenders included: Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf, mayor of Tehran, former chief of the Iranian Police Force and a confidant of Supreme Leader Khamenei; Saeed Jalili, Iran's nuclear negotiator at the time, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and a protégé of the Ayatollah, and Hassan Rowhani, also a former nuclear negotiator with experience on the supreme leader's security council. Also allowed to run were: Mohsen Rezaei, secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council and former chief commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps; Ali Akbar Velayati, a former foreign affairs minister; Mohammed Reza Aref, former first vice-president and cabinet member; Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel, former speaker of the Iranian parliament; and Mohammed Gharazi, former minister of petroleum.

Aref, having served in the cabinet under reformist president Mohammed Khatami, carried the reform message throughout his campaigning. Perhaps surprisingly, the more centrist Rowhani increasingly embraced reformist language, symbols and policies over the course of his campaign. Aref withdrew his candidacy three days before the election, in an apparent effort to consolidate reformist support behind a single contender. On that same day, Haddad also withdrew his

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<sup>1</sup> As a further sign of a fall from favor, Ahmadinejad's announcement following the June 2013 elections that a Former President's Office would be created within the executive and staffed by approximately 25 individuals was subsequently overturned when Rowhani formerly took office.

candidacy, presumably in a similar effort to consolidate conservative support. Such a consensus on the right failed to emerge as candidates pressed forward individually and even attacked one another. Although public opinion polls purported to show the number of undecided voters increasing throughout the weeks leading up to the election, they also showed Ghalibaf, seen early on as the frontrunner with a wide margin, losing his lead. With the withdrawal of Aref and the increasingly reformist rhetoric in the Rowhani campaign, Rowhani's edge increased significantly leading into election day.

## Electoral Framework

Iran's constitution and election-related laws do not provide for the independent administration of elections. They provide the basic legal framework for the presidential as well as city and village council elections. Articles 113 to 121 of the constitution cover presidential elections, while Article 100 relates to elections for city and village council members. Article 99 of the constitution tasks the Guardian Council with overall responsibility for supervising elections. Logistical management of the process is the responsibility of the Ministry of Interior (MOI).

Other central pieces of legislation include:

- *Law of Guardian Council Supervision over the Islamic Republic of Iran's Presidential Election;*
- *Islamic Republic of Iran's Presidential Election Law;*
- *City and Village Council Election Law; and*
- *Law of the Presence of the Representatives of the Presidential Election Candidates' at Polling.*

Although several entities play a role in election supervision, none are independent and the overall electoral process remains opaque and subject to arbitrary administration:

*Guardian Council.* The Guardian Council was established to enforce the constitution of the Islamic Republic and the laws of Islam (*Sharia*) in the Iranian political process. As such, the Council has two main functions: 1) to confirm that legislation, including electoral legislation, is constitutional and in line with *Sharia* law; and 2) to oversee all stages of the election process. There are 12 members of the Guardian Council, with six experts each for religious law and constitutional law. The Supreme Leader directly chooses the six religious experts from among the ranking members of the clergy with authority in religious matters and *Sharia* law. The head of the judiciary nominates six constitutional jurists. The nominees are then approved by the Iranian Assembly, or *Majlis*, for six-year terms and indefinite re-election. Half of the members of the council, three clerics and three jurists, stand for re-election every three years.

### 2013 Iranian Election Timeline

- May 7: Candidate registration opens
- May 11: Candidate registration closes
- May 21: Official candidate list published by the Ministry of Interior
- May 24: Campaign period begins
- June 5: Provincial election boards announce details for election day
- June 11: Mohammed Reza Aref and Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel withdraw candidacies
- June 13: Campaign period ends
- June 14: Election Day
- June 15: Election results announced by the Ministry of Interior
- June 25: Election results confirmed by the Guardian Council
- August 3: Hassan Rowhani inaugurated as the seventh president of Iran

*Ministry of Interior.* Immediately after the MOI announces the date of elections, governors establish boards in each province for the administration of the elections. The boards include: an MOI representative; the head of the province's Judiciary Department; the chief prosecutor for the province; and nine civilian trustees. The boards are responsible for determining the numbers and locations for candidate registration and polling stations. Nine days before the election, these boards announce details such as voting hours and dates, polling station locations, and the electoral regulations in effect.

Significantly, although the MOI is responsible for executing and managing the logistics of the elections, the Guardian Council can intervene if it is concerned with the preparations for or conduct of elections, and it has the authority to invalidate or stop the process.

*Central Executive Election Board.* A new Central Executive Election Board (CEEB) was created following a 2013 amendment to the *Presidential Election Law*. Under this amendment, the CEEB is formed five months before the end of the incumbent president's term. Although ostensibly formed to oversee the work of the MOI, the vagueness of its mandate and the make-up of the Board calls into question its ability to act independently and neutrally. Membership 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).

### **Pre-Election Period**

Elections are a process encompassing much more than just election day. In the Iranian situation, however, the pre-eminent role that the Guardian Council in candidate registration and restricted access to information stand as important restrictions on the ability of citizens to stand for office or make informed choices leading up to voting.

*Candidate Registration.* Candidate registration in Iran is a complex process for national office, in which the central government effectively determines who is permitted and who is barred from standing for office. Prospective candidates must first register with the Minister of Interior, who then submits the names to the Guardian Council. The Guardian Council then reviews each candidate's application to ensure they meet the constitutional requirements. The names of successful candidates are then sent back to the MOI which, in turn, announces the official candidates. This closed vetting process limited voters' choices and calls into question the fundamental principle of a free election.

Qualifications to stand for president are contained in Article 115 of the constitution, which states that the president must be elected from among religious and political personalities possessing the following qualifications: 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.

For these elections, initial registration of presidential candidates took place from May 7 to 11, 2013. A total of 686 people registered with the MOI as prospective candidates. Ultimately, only eight candidates were approved by the Guardian Council to stand for president. The other contestants, including several candidates from previous contests, were disqualified arbitrarily and no explanation for the exclusions was provided. Subsequently, as noted above, two approved candidates withdrew their candidacies over speculation that their withdrawals could help galvanize coalitions of support behind other leading candidates.

*Voter Registration.* Unlike elections in many countries, Iranian elections do not employ a voter registry; as such, there is no voter registration process and eligible voters are not issued voter cards. Rather, on election day, eligible voters can vote at any polling station using only their birth certificate, or *shenasnameh*, to verify that they are an Iranian citizen and 18 years or older. The MOI estimated prior to the election that 50 million people of an overall population of approximately 77 million were eligible to vote in these elections.

The lack of a voters registry removes a critical check on illegal and multiple voting. In many, if not most, democratic systems, a voter roll is produced and verified in advance. As part of this, voters are usually assigned to a polling station in advance. In addition to the risk of multiple voting, not having voters assigned to a station requires that election officials print and distribute excess ballot papers to ensure adequate supplies at all polling stations. As noted, excess ballot papers provide an opportunity for ballot box stuffing and fraudulent voting.

*Campaign Environment.* Elections in Iran are usually characterized by the loosening of normal restrictions on civil society and the media to allow candidates to spread their messages and garner support. This year's elections did not witness such an expected liberalization. Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani – whose previous presidential campaigns were known to attract large groups of supporters on the streets and therefore known as “election carnivals” – was disqualified from the race before it started. Security forces conducted public exercises as a show of force and a special volunteer police force was established to maintain security on election day and after. The Guardian Council refrained from announcing the final list of candidates until the last possible legal moment to minimize the planning period for organizing public mobilization. After the public protests that followed the 2009 elections, it would appear that the government wanted to avoid similar incidents.

In the days just prior to the election, anecdotal accusations and press reports of campaign infractions emerged, such as those related to pressure by authorities on government employees to vote, attacks on campaign volunteers canvassing neighborhoods, the closure of several campaign offices by the security forces and delays in delivering candidate representative accreditation. However, these reports cannot be properly investigated or corroborated. Given the limited reporting, it is not possible to know if such incidents targeted particular candidates and they did not seem to be widespread or pervasive.

In late May and early June, the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB) organized three debates featuring all eight approved presidential candidates. The first debate focused on economic policy, the second on cultural policy, and the third on domestic and foreign policy. In

addition to television, all three debates were also carried on YouTube. While independent estimates are not available, IRIB has stated that 45 million people watched the debates. The exchanges between candidates proved to be quite heated; though many of the policy propositions remained vague and there was little consensus, one point of agreement emerged among the candidates: the eight-year record of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had been disastrous for Iran.

*Media and Internet Access.* On the last day of 2012, the Judiciary announced to Iranian media organizations that the publication of content calling for an election boycott or suggesting that citizens should not participate in the elections would be considered a crime, and that the perpetrators would be prosecuted. *Iran* newspaper, which typically supported the incumbent president, was shut down in early June for defamation. As a mouthpiece for Ahmadinejad, *Iran* newspaper was an invaluable tool for the president to challenge and possibly threaten the ruling establishment after his associate Mashaei was disqualified as a candidate by the Guardian Council.

A number of reports also emerged of Iranian journalists being arrested between March and June. International media watchdog groups and journalists reported that most visa applications from foreign news organizations were either rejected or ignored. Furthermore, Reporters without Borders stated that Iranian media was “subject to harassment, restrictions and censorship,” while foreign journalists with visas were prevented from moving freely in Tehran, banned from candidate meetings and stopped from contacting government opposition figures. Apart from these limitations, the debate between the approved candidates raged in both print media and on state television, and newspapers regularly published candidate-sponsored content and campaign advertisements.

The Iranian government began a large-scale campaign of online censorship, hacking, and filtering in an apparent attempt to prevent anti-regime protests, according to reports from Iranians and security researchers. News outlets reported that Iranians found text messages and websites containing certain words, such as candidates' names or slogans, intermittently blocked, while other news sites were completely offline. Additionally, Google reported that it detected and stopped thousands of phishing attacks in a surge of efforts to target the email accounts of Iranian users ahead of the June 14 election.

With more than five million websites blocked in Iran at the time (including Gmail, Skype, Viber, Facebook and Twitter), millions of Iranians usually access blocked sites through proxy websites or virtual private networks (VPN). In the weeks before elections, however, many Iranians found access to their VPN services completely blocked. Anecdotal reports suggested that even downloading basic email was difficult. In contrast to previous statements on internet censorship, Iran's Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Mohammed Hassan Nami, surprisingly acknowledged after the vote that the government restricted the speed of the internet leading up to the presidential election.

## Election Day

Unfortunately, the limitations of the electoral framework and the opacity that pervades the entire electoral process in Iran mean that truly independent analysis of election day proceedings is not possible. A lack of independent oversight mechanisms, whether official or through citizen monitoring, and limitations on access to information and independent media may well have contributed to keeping reports of any fraud or violations to a minimum.

*Voting.* According to public accounts, voting commenced as planned at 8:00 AM on June 14.<sup>2</sup> While polls were originally scheduled to close at 8:00 PM, the MOI – citing higher turnout than expected – extended the voting period until approximately 9:00 PM in the provinces and 10:00 PM in Tehran. With the closing of the polls, ballot counting commenced,<sup>3</sup> with results being transferred to central tabulation centers without public scrutiny. The lack of candidate or independent witnesses present for the overall collation and tabulation from various polling stations, combined with the failure to post official results at polling stations or distribute them to candidate representatives, means that it is not possible in Iran to have any independent confirmation of the officially announced results.

Voting took place at more than 67,000 polling stations located across Iran's 31 provinces (including approximately 3,400 polling stations, or 5 percent of the total, in Tehran).<sup>4</sup> In addition, there were 285 polling stations in 120 countries to enable Iranians living outside of the country to vote.

*Electoral Incidents.* Some initial concerns were raised about withdrawn candidate names remaining on the ballot in particular localities and potentially distracting voters. This did not seem to have an impact on the results and may have been related to the logistics of printing relative to the timing of the withdrawal of particular individuals; anecdotal reports suggest that the authorities moved swiftly to replace the ballots. Overall, news reporting and monitoring of social media during and immediately following the election did not reveal a large number of

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<sup>2</sup> According to regulations, upon arrival at the polling station voters should present their birth certificate (*shenasnameh*) to prove their right to vote. To prevent double voting, the *shenasnameh* should be stamped with a unique mark to indicate that the holder has voted. In addition, voters' fingers are marked with indelible ink. When voters present their *shenasnameh*, their fingers should also be checked by polling officials for indelible ink. After verification of their ability to vote, the voter is issued with ballot papers for the presidential election as well as the city and village council elections. Each ballot paper has a stub where the voter's information should be recorded. The stub is retained to help determine the number of ballots that should be in the ballot box at the end of counting. There should be no serial number or other identifying mark on the stub that would permit it to be associated with its respective ballot paper (thereby undermining the secrecy of the ballot).

<sup>3</sup> According to regulations, stubs and ballot papers should be counted at polling stations in the presence of candidate representatives immediately after the polls close. In a case where there are more ballot papers in the ballot box than stubs, extra ballot papers are removed arbitrarily from the box and discarded. No action is taken if there are more stubs than ballot papers. The results are recorded on an official form and that form, along with other election materials, is sent to a collation center for aggregation.

<sup>4</sup> Each polling station should have six people responsible for administering the election, including: a chief; a deputy; three secretaries; and a representative of the provincial governor. The staff should arrive one hour before the polls open to prepare the station. At this time the ballot boxes should be opened and verified as empty.

incidents of fraud or intimidation. Nor did they indicate broad public concern about the veracity of results. There was 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 were publicized.

It is important to note that the absence of reports does not mean that there were no such incidences; rather they have not been brought into the public domain. This may, in part, be due to the lack of information regarding electoral laws and regulations, such that citizens may not fully understand the rights and obligations of electoral authorities, candidates, and voters. Similarly, given the restrictions on free speech and independent media in Iran, a culture of “reporting” does not exist. Moreover, given the surprising outcome, the political context may have dissuaded large segments of the population from reporting incidents for fear of reprisals or negative impact on the outcome of the vote.

*Observation.* Iran does not invite credible international organizations to observe the election process from within the country and does not allow independent citizen monitoring of any part of the process, so analysis of election results is limited to publicly available information and official sources in Iran. Creating opportunities for independent, non-partisan international or domestic observation of the voting process could lend credibility to the elections. 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 electoral processes worldwide. 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.

Under the *Law of the Presence of the Representatives of the Presidential Election Candidates' at Polling*, political contestants are permitted to have representatives present at polling stations throughout the election day process – from the opening of the polls through voting, counting, and the announcement of the station results (writing of the minutes). However, these representatives are not present at the tabulation centers when results from various polling stations are aggregated. Further, copies of the results and minutes are not made available to the candidate representatives. It is unclear how widely disbursed, how well trained, or how active such representatives were during these elections.

Under the 1985 *Law of Guardian Council Supervision over the Islamic Republic of Iran's Presidential Election*, the Guardian Council deploys monitors to oversee the process on its behalf. While these monitors have authority over election officials, given the nature of the Guardian Council itself, they cannot be reasonably described as disinterested or objective parties. The General Inspection Organization, a government oversight body, also has authority to observe elections, as granted by the Judiciary in 2009. It is unknown if any monitoring was undertaken by these bodies. Regardless, neither of these bodies is politically independent and neither can provide independent, non-partisan observation and information on the process.

*Turnout.* The government of Iran reported an official turnout figure of 72.7 percent of all possible voters. This percentage would be considered high in any country 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 a situation where citizens felt 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.

There is no way to independently verify the turnout rate presented by the government given the lack of independent oversight or observation; indicators such as long lines, often cited as an example of the zeal of citizens to participate, may actually be indicators of larger problems in election administration at the polls rather than greater numbers of voters. While it is possible that the figures are accurate, the unusually high rate invites skepticism. Ayatollah Khamenei was quoted as saying “every vote is a vote for the Islamic public or system” so it is clear that the regime had a stake in ensuring the reporting of higher numbers.

### **Post-Election Period**

Results by province were announced by the MOI 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 50.7 percent of the vote in a surprising first-round victory. Official results by county were posted to the MOI website several days later. Although the data remained available for some time, direct links to it from the MOI site were reportedly removed without explanation; access to the page now appears to be password protected and therefore unavailable publicly.<sup>5</sup>

There is clearly a deep-seated desire on the part of Iranians to vote in elections and to have a chance to choose their political leaders. That they participated in the 2013 process with such apparent enthusiasm – and in light of the obvious short-comings of the system – 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 many different segments of society. If the turnout figures were, in fact, altered by the regime to demonstrate popular support for the electoral process, this tactic may have backfired as it simply served to make the victory of Rowhani that much more impressive.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://result-p.moi.ir/Portal/Home/default.aspx>.

**2013 Iranian Presidential Election Results**

<i>Candidate</i>	Hassan Rowhani	Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf	Saeed Jalili	Mohsen Rzaei	Ali Akbar Velayati	Mohammed Gharazi
<i>Official Result</i>	50.7%	16.5%	11.3%	10.6%	6.2%	1.2%

While there was little disagreement about the final result once announced, the unexpected single-round victory meant that several aspects of the overall electoral process were not on display. No appeals or objections were filed relative to this particular presidential race, so there was no adjudication process to observe. Similarly, because the results were not disputed and no recount was required at the national level, the issue of the custody and integrity of ballot boxes being stored without any independent supervision – providing potential opportunities for ballot tampering and potential fraud – was not raised. Though not affecting the 2013 presidential results, risks may or may not exist in these particular stages of the process, and Iranian actors may want to explore them before the next elections to avoid any potential problems.

On August 3, 2013 Rowhani was inaugurated as president. Shortly thereafter, he presented a slate of 18 nominees for cabinet positions, including a large number of individuals identified as moderates, many of whom served in important capacities under previous reformist presidents. A number of the cabinet nominees were heatedly debated in parliament, eventually leading to confirmations for three to fail.

Not surprisingly, the local elections presented more dynamic post-election discussion, though reporting on this also remained limited. Accusations included nepotism and corruption among officials, discrimination against candidates and conflict over the conduct of recounts. More notably, particularly to international audiences, was the purported exclusion of a winning female candidate from taking an alternate seat for the Qazvin city council. After placing 14 out of 163 candidates with approximately 10,000 votes, votes for the 27-year old were nullified by the Council for Supervising City and Village Council Elections, which disqualified her candidacy after-the-fact because of what the Council termed “non-observance of Islamic codes” in her campaign posters.

## Recommendations

In the spirit of international cooperation and in support of the democratic aspirations of the Iranian people, NDI offers the following recommendations for enhancing the overall electoral process so that it is more fully representative of citizen interests. Although a more formal observation effort by citizens and/or credible international organizations might highlight additional areas for strengthening the electoral framework and process, the recommendations presented here provide an initial opportunity to enhance public confidence in the overall process and assure more representative and competitive electoral exercises. Parliamentary elections anticipated for 2016 in Iran provide a benchmark for implementing such reforms.

- ***Stop the practice of closed-door vetting of candidates and ensure an appropriate appeals process is established.*** As noted, candidates for president were vetted in advance by the Guardian Council, with over 675 applicants being disqualified without explanation, including several potential contenders. This closed vetting process limited voters' choices and calls into question the fundamental principle of a free election. Although various mechanisms exist to help reduce the field of likely candidates, such as political party primary elections, governments should not make determinations of who will stand for office outside of confirming basic eligibility. Further, explanation for exclusions should be provided along with appropriate opportunities for appeal.
- ***Develop the legal framework and supporting procedures for the accreditation of independent monitors to observe future electoral processes.*** Although candidate agents are able to view the voting process, independent, non-partisan domestic 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 around the world. 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 and the recognition that there is no substitute for civil society oversight.
- ***Establish an independent electoral commission that is mandated with full responsibility for all aspects of the electoral process.*** Iran should explore the establishment of an independent election commission with supervisory powers over future elections and formally recognize the role of such a commission in the electoral code. As noted above, while the CEEB was created for the 2013 elections to supervise the work of the Ministry of Interior, it remains far from independent. 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.

- ***Ensure that media is able to report freely and openly without fear of intimidation or harassment, and ensure that access to the internet remains open throughout the electoral process.*** All forms of media – whether print, audiovisual or online – are important as vehicles for citizens to better understand the electoral process, the stakes of elections and candidate perspectives on issues of concern. Access to unbiased information is a fundamental precept of a democratic society, as is the ability to access multiple points of view and opinions. In particular, the unilateral disruption of internet service around the country that was openly acknowledged by the Iranian government is cause for concern given the important role of the Iranian population attributes to online access.
- ***Discourage opportunities for fraud by establishing an official voter registry linking voters to designated polling stations.*** The lack of a voter registry deprives election officials of an important check on illegal or double-voting. The ability to vote at any station also necessitates 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. If necessary, regulations to enable alternate voting locations can be established.
- ***Make confirmed results from individual polling stations available immediately and publicly at polling stations and nationally.*** Stubs and ballot papers are counted at the conclusion of voting and recorded on official forms in the presence of candidate representatives. However, unlike in many countries around the world, candidate representatives are not entitled to a copy of the official count and results are not posted at polling stations. Lack of access to such information, particularly in the absence of independent monitoring or oversight, leaves little opportunity for validation of the results. Undertaking such procedures would increase transparency and accountability, enhancing public confidence in the accuracy of the vote count on all sides.
- ***Make the tabulation and compilation of votes more accessible.*** Once submitted to a collation center for aggregation, results are compiled with those of other polling stations. This process occurs behind closed doors with no candidate representatives or independent witnesses present. This approach exacerbates a lack of transparency in the overall process. Many people inside and outside Iran have expressed unease about the tabulation of votes and the announcement of results because of the opaqueness of the process and the previous controversies over the accuracy of the official results of the 2005 and 2009 processes. At a minimum, accredited candidate representatives should be given access to the entire tabulation and compilation process.

## **About NDI**

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization working to support and strengthen democratic institutions worldwide through citizen participation, openness, and accountability in government.

Since NDI's observation mission to the Philippines in 1986, the Institute has become one of the leading international nongovernmental organizations in the field of international election observing. NDI has conducted more than 200 international election observer missions including observation of elections in the Middle East and North Africa in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, the Palestinian Territories, Tunisia, and Yemen.

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.

More information is available at [www.ndi.org](http://www.ndi.org).

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