Electoral Activism in Iran: A Mechanism for Political Change

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Abstract

Scholars of electoral authoritarianism contend that elections make autocratic regimes more durable, while scholarship on democratization states that authoritarian elections can lead to electoral revolutions and regime change. In this paper, we argue that these two lenses occlude smaller instances of activism during election periods and the influence that this protest has on bringing about gradual political change. To build our argument, we draw on two presidential elections held in Iran in 2009 and 2013. We show how grassroots activists use elections to abort gains made by hard-liners, push centrist and moderate candidates toward more reformist and democratic stances, promote issues that would otherwise be considered beyond the pale of formal regime politics, and encourage solidarity and opposition coalition building.

Introduction

Social scientists working on elections and those working on social movements have rarely been in conversation.[1] The few sociological studies that have considered the relationship between elections and social movements have focused on consolidated democracies like the United States;[2] but, most authoritarian regimes also hold elections. Scholars of authoritarianism contend that elections contribute to the survival of autocratic regimes by legitimizing their rule, unifying their ranks, and dividing the opposition.[3] On the other hand, democratization scholarship suggests that postelection protest in reaction to electoral fraud can lead to regime change.[4] We argue that looking through the lens of regime survival or collapse ignores instances of activism around authoritarian elections that contribute to smaller and more gradual processes of political change.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, a regime that mixes electoral and nonelectoral institutions, offers an interesting case of electoral authoritarianism. We focus on presidential elections since the presidency is the highest electoral institution in Iran and these elections draw the most intense competition. Drawing from reports, statements, interviews, and videos of two election campaigns from various sources in Farsi, we document activism during election campaigns, and show that it is consequential for the dynamics of the regime and the opposition.

We argue that electoral activism has influenced Iranian politics in four ways. First, activists have used elections to bring issues into the official discourse that would not be articulated otherwise. Second, activism has pushed moderate and centrist candidates to take more reformist and democratic positions. Third, activists have encouraged alliances among the opposition. Finally, activism has prevented victory by hard-liners. These consequences fall short of regime change, but have moved the Islamic Republic in a more liberalized direction.

We use "liberalization" here to mean improvements in the conditions of political competition and rights that fall short of a democratic transition. In that sense, scholars refer, for example, to liberalized versus closed autocracies.

Authoritarian Elections: Survival or Breakdown

Scholars of authoritarianism contend that elections boost the chance of authoritarian survival through several mechanisms. First, elections give regimes a semblance of democratic legitimacy. Second, authoritarian incumbents use elections to intimidate opposition and prevent them from articulating grievances. Incumbents can show strength by mobilizing votes and winning elections through fraud without much consequence.[5] Third, authoritarian regimes rely on elections to gather information about discontent among their constituencies. Such information is used to make concessions, or alternatively to focus repression.[6]

Finally, authoritarian incumbents use elections to distribute patronage and buy support. Based on her study of Jordan, Lust-Okar argues that elections help ruling elites give local elites access to resources and consolidate their support.[7] Similarly, in a study of Egyptian elections under Mubarak, Blaydes contends that elections ease elite conflict over spoils and provide a mechanism for distribution of patronage wealth to state employees and citizens.[8] Mahdavi maintains that parliamentary incumbents in Iran's oil-producing provinces have a better chance of reelection because they can use oil revenues as patronage.[9]

While these studies advance our understanding of electoral processes and their consequences in authoritarian regimes, they envisage authoritarian elections as top-down processes in which the ruling elites appear as omnipotent actors. It is true that the balance of power between the regime and the opposition in these elections is asymmetrical[10], but

occasionally opposition actors capitalize on elections to mobilize citizens against the ruling elite.

Another strand of the literature focuses on the destabilizing effects of elections - particularly postelection uprisings in reaction to election fraud. These studies suggest that fraudulent elections help the opposition solve its collective-action problem in different ways. Fraud creates moral outrages among voters and encourages defection from the ruling bloc. Also, the election process makes angry voters aware that many others share their political beliefs and their outrage, leading to a perception of lower risks of participation in mass protests.[11]

Not all electoral upheavals lead to regime change however. Accordingly, scholars have emphasized different factors, such as opposition strategies and tactics, to explain the variation in outcome.[12] Both of these strands in the literature focus on dramatic outcomes such as revolutions or their absence and ignore more incremental changes in policy and official discourse. Hybrid regimes are not only about survival and collapse, but also about gradation and policy.

Elections provide opportunities for activism; as Lindberg argues, they bring formal rights and liberties that raise the cost of repression, paving the way for incremental democratic change.[13] Elections are also a time for realignments within the political elite. Sidelined elite factions might resort to electoral mobilization to keep their position within the regime. Rights and liberties along with realignments and elite rivalries thus make elections opportunities for the electorate to have increased their influence in the political process.

Nonetheless, as some scholars note, these opportunities are not always obvious. They become real with activists' efforts to push the boundaries of permissible action during election times. In this sense, electoral activism functions in a gray area between routine and contentious

politics. O'Brien in his study of elections in rural China points to similar types of claims making between prescribed politics and politics by other means, labeling it "boundary-spanning contention."[14] This electoral activism has important consequences for the trajectory of the regime. It does not necessarily turn into a full-fledged electoral revolution, but might gradually change the official discourse and the configuration of the political elite. If we look at elections as institutions serving regime stability, or occasions for massive upheavals, we would not be able to observe these smaller but significant instances of activism.

Elections in a Hybrid Regime

The case of presidential elections in Iran provides a basis for analyzing the consequences of electoral activism. The Islamic Republic of Iran is an intriguing example of a hybrid regime that practices electoral authoritarianism - a mix of electoral and nonelectoral institutions.[15] The presidency, parliament, and local councils make up the main electoral institutions, while the leader, judiciary, and Guardian Council are not elected. On paper and in practice, the nonelectoral institutions and the leader have the upper hand over electoral institutions. The leader commands the armed forces, including the army and the Revolutionary Guards, and appoints the heads of the judiciary, national television and radio. Additionally, the leader administers elections for the parliament and presidency through the Guardian Council, which has the authority to determine who is qualified to run for office. The Guardian Council's filtering of candidates in presidential and parliamentary elections is a major obstacle to holding fully competitive elections in Iran.

Even though nonelectoral institutions are more powerful, the president and the parliament still have significant executive and legislative power.[16] Through different ministries and organizations, the president shapes decisions regarding higher education, foreign policy,

and economic policy. The president also has the power to expand or restrict press freedoms, books, and movies. The activities of political parties and civic associations are to a large degree shaped by executive policies of ministries supervised by the president. Finally, through the Ministry of Oil, the president has control over the main source of revenue for the state and allocates budgets for all state institutions, both electoral and nonelectoral. Because of these autonomous powers and the President's legitimacy as the highest official elected by direct vote, Iranian presidents from the beginning of the Islamic Republic have clashed with the leader over the limits of their power.[17]

The Islamic Republic has witnessed significant elite competition. During the 1980's, the regime elites were divided into right and left wings. The left wing advocated state control of the economy and a more aggressive anti-imperialist foreign policy, while the right wing favored a more laissez-faire economy and moderate foreign policy. In the early 1990's, the right gained the upper hand with new leader Ali Khamenei, marginalizing the Left. The Left went through a metamorphosis, revising its principles and beginning to emphasize values such as popular sovereignty, civil society, and the rule of law.[18] The 1980s left wing of the regime thus transformed into reformists in the 1990s. Reformists were able to capture the presidency, parliament, and city councils in 1997, 1998, and 1999. At this point, the reformists enjoyed massive support from different segments of Iranian society, including intellectuals, students, youth, and the middle class, allowing them to democratize the regime from within. Reformist electoral victories backed by popular support were interpreted as a sign that elections could be used to push for gradual democratic change. However, reformists soon faced resistance from the conservatives, well positioned in nonelectoral institutions of the regime. As conservatives increased repression and used their institutional resources to block reformists' plans, the reformist camp split over how to respond and its base became disillusioned due to

the slow pace of progress. Thus, reformists lost control of the parliament in 2004 and the presidency in 2005.[19] With Ahmadinejad's victory, hard-liners' ascendance in Iranian politics captured journalistic and scholarly attention. Grassroots activism nonetheless reappeared in Iranian politics, on a larger and more consequential scale.

In 2009, outraged by Ahmadinejad's autocratic and erratic policies, reformists tried to recapture the presidency, backing Mir Hossein Musavi and another reformist candidate, Mehdi Karrubi, in an electoral race that presented one of the most heated episodes of elite rivalry in the history of the Islamic Republic. When Ahmadinejad was declared the winner, many opposition voters considered the results fraudulent and took to the streets to protest. The government violently cracked down on protestors and the repressive atmosphere continued to the end of Ahmadinejad's term in 2013. In the 2013 election, reformists initially hesitated to participate; however, just days before the vote they rallied behind moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani in an attempt to end hard-liners' rule over the country. In the political realm, Rouhani's election loosened the repressive measures of Ahmadinejad's era to a considerable degree and several opposition figures and parties were able to become again politically active.

We focus here on presidential elections in Iran for several reasons. First, the outcomes of these elections have been highly influential in the trajectory of politics in Iran; they have also stoked political rivalries and garnered attention from the public and media. Second, these elections are held at the national level, compared to local parliamentary elections, and thus bring other local dynamics into electoral politics. The outcomes of presidential elections are also easier to assess compared to parliamentary elections. The party system is very weak in Iran and voters vote for individuals in parliamentary elections, so there is always a considerable portion of representatives who are not formally affiliated with any of the established parties

and political circles. Nonetheless, activism is also observed in some parliamentary elections as well.

Among the two elections we analyze, the 2009 election has received the most attention because of the massive postelection protests. Scholars have considered the role of the internet[20], the class background of the movement[21], and multiple identities in the protests.[22] Pourmokhtari[23] documents that the demands of the student and women's movements appeared in the campaign of the opposition candidates. While this is in line with part of our argument, such demands did not initially exist in the major opposition candidate's platform. Rather, grassroots pressure pushed the candidate to take these positions.

Literature on Iranian politics has analyzed the outcomes of different elections and the importance of electoral institutions in the hybrid arrangement of the Islamic Republic, but the dynamics of elections in Iran in itself are still understudied. The literature has also elaborated on how elite factionalism shapes Iranian politics and contributes to the emergence of activism. Below we present a framework for understanding grassroots processes during Iran's elections. We recognize the importance of elite factionalism, but also demonstrate how grassroots activism moves and shapes the regime's factions and elite rivalry in turn.

We also analyze these two elections not as independent electoral episodes but as interconnected events, since electoral activism and the dynamics of a given election are also consequential for the next elections. Activists are constantly learning from their interactions with state and society and often apply the lessons learned from one election cycle to the next. Accordingly, this learning process shapes and reproduces the repertoire of electoral activism in the political process.

In documenting electoral activism, we refer to actions by both established and grass-roots activists. This analytical choice to a degree reflects the level of repression at different

elections. Prominent reformist activists expended energies in support of the electoral campaigns of reformist candidates in the 2009 election. During this cycles, students, women, and ethnic rights activists were also campaigning for their demands and supporting their preferred candidates. With the heavy government crackdown after the election, many of these people were imprisoned, escaped the country, or stopped political activities. As a result, rather than well known activists and campaigners, in 2013 we mostly observe the presence of anonymous grassroots reformists participating at the campaign rallies of moderate candidates[24].

Consequences of Electoral Activism in a Hybrid Regime

Given the limitations of authoritarian regimes, what can electoral activism achieve? Our study found four important consequences of electoral activism. First, activists may use elections as a pretext to bring issues and claims to the official discourse that would not otherwise be articulated. Authoritarian regimes often control mass media and try to manage issues and rhetoric addressed in public discussions, but activists may have a better chance of challenging the regime's dominance over public discourse, given their greater access to public spaces and the relaxation of state repression during election cycles. In our analysis we show how women, student, and ethnic minority activists used the 2009 elections to inject some of their demands in the public discourse. We also show how campaign participants made issues out of the house arrests of opposition leaders and other political prisoners in the 2013.

Second, related to the first point, electoral activism could push election candidates to take more progressive political positions. Elections provide an occasion for sidelined elites to gather popular support from excluded segments of the population. Accordingly, the electorate can push candidates to take more progressive positions, including those that the excluded strata embraces. In this way, electoral activism pulls centrist and moderate candidates in more

democratic directions. Even though this achievement is at the discursive level and rarely manifests in tangible policy outcomes, such gains are significant in authoritarian regimes because they push the boundaries of what is possible to demand and articulate.[25] When state elites recognize an issue, this provides more political space for the citizenry to articulate demands related to that issue and to use state officials' rhetoric to hold them accountable.[26] This mechanism can be observed in how opposition candidate Musavi changed his discourse from the beginning to the end of the election campaign in 2009 under pressure from reformist and prodemocracy activists. In 2013, participants' chants for the release of opposition leaders brought this demand into the election platform of centrist candidate Rouhani.

Third, when activists perceive an election as an opportunity to defeat the incumbent, they can try to unify the opposition. Of course, different groups may have different understandings of positive and negative implications of electoral participation for activism, but if all groups are convinced that the election is an opportunity and that unity is the way to victory, then there is a higher chance for an opposition coalition. A unified opposition is then in a better position to defeat the incumbent and open the way for a democratic breakthrough, even if it doesn't produce a full-fledged electoral revolution.[27] This mechanism was most visible in 2013, when calls for an alliance by campaign participants led to the withdrawal of one of the moderate candidates in favor of Rouhani, and then to reformists' united support behind him.

Fourth, as activists push for an alliance and mobilize the electorate, they might indeed be able to affect election results. Existing research shows that preelection mobilization empowers the opposition and increases the chance for an incumbent defeat.[28] In such situations, activists might be able to get their preferred candidates in the race and rally behind them. If their preferred candidate is not allowed to run, they might decide to support a centrist

or moderate candidate to prevent a victory of the regime's hard-liners. This was the case in 2013, when reformists rallied behind Rouhani and enabled his victory over his hard-line rivals (see Table 1 for the summary of the results).

Table 1. Main outcomes of electoral activism in 2009, and 2013 Presidential Elections

	Electoral activism
2009	• Pro-democracy, women and ethnic human rights groups promoted their demands in the campaigns reformist/moderate candidates Musavi & Karrubi
2013	• Grass-roots brought the demand to end the house custody of green movement leaders to public spaces • They pushed for alliance between moderate candidates • Pushed reformist leaders to back one of the moderate candidates • Prevented hardliners victory in the election

These consequences of activism in hybrid regimes resemble how social movements and activists affect the electoral process in consolidated democracies. Schwartz[29] argues that, social movements brought new issues to the electoral platform of political parties in the United States and Canada. Similarly, Skocpol and Williamson[30] document how Tea Party activists spurred a rebranding of the Republican Party's ideology and affected election results in the United States. At the other end of the political spectrum, Marshal[31] shows how local feminists promoted the candidacy of feminist women in primaries and advocated for inclusion of equal rights for women in the candidates' electoral agendas. Pointing to these similarities contributes to an emerging literature that has been questioning the strict analytical dichotomy between democracy and autocracy. A number of scholars have argued that if we critically examine

democratic and nondemocratic regimes, we can find shades of each in the other. Weeden, for instance, highlights similar strategies of control in both political regimes;[32] Gilley documents democratic enclaves in authoritarian regimes.[33] Instances of electoral activism that occur in authoritarian regimes share similarities with the activism in consolidated democracies highlighted above.

Data and Method

We use process tracing to demonstrate our argument. Process tracing is defined as "the analysis of evidence on processes, sequences, and conjunctures of events within a case for the purposes of either developing or testing hypotheses about causal mechanisms that might causally explain the case."[34] Here we use evidence to show how our four mechanisms of political changed induced by electoral activism manifest in the precise sequence of events that occurred in each election cycle. In addition, for each election we provide analysis of the post-election period in order to trace the longer-term effects of our mechanisms. Here we are following an inductive approach to process tracing to generate new hypotheses- our four mechanisms- rather than testing existing hypotheses.

We collected statements by activists and politicians, interviews, and reports from Iranian newspapers and websites to document instances of activism in the 2009, and 2013 elections and analyze their significance. To ensure that we covered all major events in these elections we used three main sources for each election. First, we used articles Iran's Student News Agency (ISNA) for all the elections, since it was active during all two elections and covers statements and activities of different Iranian political factions relatively equally. Because of government repression and shutting down or limiting newspapers and news websites, we could not find other sources that covered all two elections. Therefore, we used the Kaleme website and Etemad Melli daily for the 2009 election, Sharq daily and other websites closer to

Rouhani for 2013 as our second sources. We supplemented the news articles from these sources with other sources covering political events in Iran. Third, we utilized videos of campaign meetings on Yutube and Aparat (the Iranian version of YouTube) to examine the dynamics between activists, their slogans, and the candidates.

We reviewed approximately 1000 news items and selected about 850 relevant items to construct our narrative for each election. We collected all reports and videos related to campaign conventions, candidates' speeches, meetings between candidates and activists, and activists' and politicians' statements and interviews regarding the election process and activists' demands. We examined each item for themes related to activists' presence and demands, their interaction with candidates, and changes in candidates' discourse. From these themes, we coded the four findings summarized above. The method used here is similar to recent contributions in social movement studies.[35] Our personal positions as participants and observers of prodemocracy activism in Iran also informed our schematization of the news items.

2009 Election

The case of 2009 election demonstrates how activists capitalized on opportunities to raise issues in public discourse and to push existing candidates to take reformist and democratic positions.

Activism and the Public Discourse: In 2009, Ahmadinejad was standing for his reelection. Ahmadinejad imposed severe restrictions on civic and political groups in his first year as president. Many student activist groups on university campuses were shut down and the Ministry of Higher Education declared the main organization of the Iranian student movement, the Office for the Consolidation of Unity, illegal.[36] Many student newspapers

ceased publication under pressure from newly appointed university officials. Professors and others who criticized the administration's policies were fired or prosecuted. The government cracked down on trade union activists and arrested many. Constraints on the press increased and the government introduced new internet regulations and restrictions.[37]

Reacting to these increasing repressive measures, reformist youth collected signatures online and offline for a petition trying to convince ex-president Khatami to run against Ahmadinejad.[38] They held a public gathering on December 6 at which artists and intellectuals argued in favor of Khatami entering the race.[39] A number of videos were made at this meeting and cell phones were used to share them.[40] Khatami announced his candidacy on February 8. A few days later, several thousand supporters gathered at their second public convention to endorse him.[41] At this gathering, students held pictures of imprisoned students and chanted slogans for their release. Various intellectuals, activists, and politicians expressed their demands and reasons for endorsing Khatami. A Kurdish politician talked about discrimination against Kurds and the Sunni minority in Iran, their conditions of deprivation, and their hope that Khatami's presidency could address these issues.[42] These instances highlight our first mechanism when activists use the opportunity of elections to bring certain issues in the public discourse.

Activism and Candidates' Discourse: Another group of politicians and activists were of the opinion that Mir Hussein Musavi, Iran's prime minister during the 1980s, would be a better candidate to challenge Ahmadinejad because of Musavi's pro-welfare policies during that decade. Musavi had been mostly inactive in politics since his times as Prime Minister; however, he showed signs of becoming active in politics again by holding meetings and discussing important issues starting in January 2009. The case of Musavi exemplifies our second mechanism – that in which electoral activism changes the discourse of the existing

candidates in the race. On January 20, a website affiliated with Musavi released an interview in which he referred to the situation in Iran as a crisis. He pointed to the 1980's as a model of successful management of the country and economy, stressing those issues rather than political issues.[43] Musavi gave a lecture at Tehran University on March 3, reestablishing his presence among students and youth.[44] Organizers encouraged the audience to chant nonconfrontational slogans, but students chanted more oppositional slogans and demanded the release of political prisoners. Although students initially received Musavi's speech enthusiastically, his apolitical stance and disconnect from students' concerns disappointed many. One attendee wrote in his blog that the speech was too general and did not say anything about the election.[45] Musavi announced that he was running on March 10 and then gave a lecture on March 20 in a mosque in Nazi-abad, a neighborhood in south Tehran, to convey his attention to the lower classes. Even though reformists later endorsed Musavi, they were not aware that he is going to announce that he is running for the election. In this speech, he emphasized independence, the importance of people in the poor and vulnerable strata, and his hostility toward aristocratic tendencies in the regime and society.[46]

The parallel candidacies of Khatami and Musavi did not last long as Khatami withdrew in favor of Musavi. In a letter to Khatami, Musavi thanked him for this action and said he thought that the right path for Iran was reformism, but with a return to principles.[47] This reference showed that at this stage of his campaign, Musavi did not want to identify as a reformist but tried to stand between reformists and conservatives, the latter describing themselves as principlists. In his speech at Tehran University, Musavi had argued that reformism and principlism (conservatism) could be combined to serve their true purpose.[48] Here, we highlight Musavi's earlier rhetoric to demonstrate how his positions changed throughout the campaign as a result of interactions with activists and reformist youth.

Khatami's supporters initially seemed confused and disappointed by his withdrawal, but then considered whether Musavi could also represent their values and demands, even +though he did not have Khatami's charismatic popularity.[49] At this stage, some conservative figures expressed hope that Musavi might take some conservative positions.[50] Reformist groups initially stated that Musavi was not their ideal candidate, but different reformist groups then met with him to discuss their demands and his policies and plans. A prominent young campaigner for Khatami wrote about a meeting between the reformist youth and Musavi in which young campaigners presented their written demands and discussed various issues, including human rights, the Guardian Council's supervision of elections, security agents' illegal and abusive treatment of citizens, the morality police, NGOs, rights of ethnic groups, limitations imposed on the press, and freedom of student organizations.[51] Musavi held a press conference several days later and mentioned some of those issues. He opposed the vetting of elections by the Guardian Council and promised to remove the morality police if elected. He clarified that by "return to principles," he meant the rule of law, one of the principles promoted by reformists.[52] Young reformists recognized this shift in Musavi's discourse. Young campaigner Arash Ghafouri mentioned in his memoir that Musavi addressed some of the issues that they had raised at the meeting.[53] These changes in Moussavi's rhetoric show how electoral activism can push an existing candidate towards more reformist and democratic positions.

Others also recognized this shift in Musavi's rhetoric. In an interview, Abdolreza Davari – one of Musavi's former supporters who joined Ahmadinejad's camp for the 2005 and 2009 elections - was asked why he did not support Musavi in 2009. Davari said that Musavi's meetings with reformists and students changed him, and this change can be seen by comparing of his later speeches with the Naziabad speech. Davari described these campaign

meetings as a "communicative oven" that changed Musavi's temperature.[54] In the next few weeks, several reformist groups and parties endorsed Musavi. The Third Wave, another important youth campaign group that formed to support Khatami, stated that it took this position after meeting with Musavi and learning that he would promote their prodemocracy values.[55]

More reformist and progressive themes then appeared in Musavi's speeches and interviews.[56] In a speech in Tabriz, Musavi emphasized the importance of a multivocal society and freedom of speech. When he talked about principles, he listed them as freedom, justice, rule of law, and republicanism. He spoke about the importance of protecting people from state tyranny, asserting that while state security is important, people's security is more important. Musavi opposed barring students from higher education for their oppositional activities, a repressive practice that had become common under Ahmadinejad.[57] In a radio interview, Musavi said he would appoint a vice president for human rights to his cabinet.[58]

Musavi put more emphasis on gender and women's rights in this period of his campaign, even though initially neither he referenced to women in his speeches or interviewes, nor he had his wife present in the initial campaign events. Nonetheless, this dynamics changed later. First, in a significant symbolic move, his wife, Zahra Rahnavard, a university professor, joined him during the campaign. This was the first time that a presidential candidate or official of the Islamic Republic appeared in public with his wife. In a campaign speech, Rahnavard pointed to gender discrimination as the main problem in Iranian society.[59] On another occasion, she said that Musavi would appoint female ministers, ambassadors, and deputy ministers to his cabinet.[60] In an interview Musavi thanked his wife for helping him to connect with women, youth, and students.[61] He echoed this support for women's rights in his speeches.[62]

The case of Mehdi Karrubi, former parliament speaker, also exemplifies how activists took advantage of the electoral campaign of a candidate to raise their issues during the election time. Karrubi had run for president in 2005 and came in third with a considerable share of vote. This performance encouraged him to found a political party, publish a newspaper, and start his presidential campaign for 2009 early. Several activist groups in the women's movement, ethnic minorities, and students saw Karrubi's campaign as an opportunity to raise their demands in the political discourse. A group of students and human rights activists from the province of Kurdistan met with Karrubi and raised a number of grievances and demands regarding Iranian Kurds. Karrubi promised to address those issues if elected.[63] During Karrubi's trip to Kermanshah, another Kurdish province, again Kurdish students and activists had a strong presence. In their speeches and slogans they raised grievances such as the large number of political prisoners in that region, many people sentenced to death without going through the due judicial procedure, and the exclusion of Kurds from the political process.[64] Women activists also succeeded in bringing their issues into Karrubi's campaign. Karrubi said in an interview that he would appoint his female advisor, Jamileh Kadivar, as a cabinet minister.[65] Students used the election to fight repressive measures on university campuses. When Karrubi visited Amir-Kabir University, students who had been banned from registration due to their political activism returned to campus and declared they had "conquered" the campus.[66] Finally, the Office for the Consolidation of Unity endorsed Karrubi after it sent its demands to both Musavi and Karrubi; only Karrubi responded and agreed to meet with students a couple of times.[67]

The Breadth of Electoral Activism: About three weeks before election day, the campaigns took on a carnivalesque atmosphere. Supporters of candidates, primarily Musavi and Ahmadinejad, took to the streets, engaging in political conversations, chanting slogans,

and singing and dancing.[68] Their public presence and enthusiasm were important in two regards. First, oppositional political gatherings are generally prohibited in Iran. This was even more important since Ahmadinejad had increased suppression of public political gatherings, even in closed spaces such as university campuses. Second, participants' excitement and enthusiasm were in clear contrast to the 2005 elections, when a number of reformist groups boycotted the election. These gatherings started first in closed spaces such as stadiums and large lecture halls and then extended to street events. One of the important instances of these outdoor gatherings was the "human chain" organized by Musavi supporters that connected Tajrish Square in north Tehran to Rah-ahan Square in the south along Vali-ye Asr Street, the capital's longest street. Organizers expected about 18,000 people, but to their surprise, the actual number was about three times greater.[69] These street activities grew as election day approached. The largest event was a rally two days before the election in which people chanted slogans against Ahmadinejad and in support of Musavi. Reflecting on the excitement and enthusiasm during these events, sociologist Abbas Kazemi (2009) wrote in his blog:[70]

> Hundreds of thousands of free spirits took to the streets today and this evening to demonstrate the power of people who hadn't been able to speak for themselves before. . . Today I saw people with iron wills who came to announce their victory ceremony. For a moment, seizing the streets was perceived as a possibility. For a while, one could have shouted, cried, and freely laughed. . . . Those who had boycotted the election four years ago and those who had voted for Ahmadinejad were along each other now. There is unity now that will form the cornerstone of the democracy. . . . Today's event in Tehran was a strange event. I wonder where this much energy was released from. How come this much passion and enthusiasm emerged all of a sudden?

Postelection

With the announcement of the fraudulent election results on June 22, the campaign participants' jubilation turned to anger. The solidarity around the election evolved into a series of protests that became known as the Green Movement. But a heavy government crackdown on street protests, campaigns of torture and imprisonment, the house arrest of Karrubi and Musavi, and the disbanding of reformist parties put an end to the Green activists' street presence and led to a loss of enthusiasm for further electoral participation. In this context, reformists did not participate in the 2012 parliamentary election. Reformist groups such as the Participation Front, Nationalist-Religious Activists, and the Council of the Green Path boycotted the election. Karrubi and Musvai both said that they did not consider this a free election and they had little hope for it.[71] With reformists' absence in this election, the main competition was between moderate conservatives and hard-liners.

Electoral activism failed to affect the election results; moreover, postelection mobilization backfired as it led to further repression and contraction of political opportunities. Nonetheless, activism during this election was significant in pushing the boundaries of candidates' discourse in the Islamic Republic. Some of Musavi's and Karrubi's promises were co-opted by Ahmadinejad during his second term. He appointed women to his cabinet even though this was not part of his electoral platform. Although the postelection uprising of 2009 was brutally suppressed, its memories, symbols, and adherents endured in opposition politics during subsequent elections. Thus, postelection upheavals are not only important in terms of affecting election outcomes, as the democratization literature suggests; as we see in Iran, these uprisings continue to matter even when initial unrest fails to achieve its immediate political goals.

2013 Election

The case of the 2013 election shows how electoral activism raised forbidden issues in public spaces and official discourse, how grassroots activists pressured reformists into participating in the elections, forming a coalition, and consequently defeating hardliners. To demonstrate such mechanisms, we first describe how reformists were initially divided and even reluctant to participate in this election. While fraud and repression in 2009–2010 discredited the institution of elections in the eyes of many prodemocracy and reformist activists, the rival tactic of direct protest and contentious collective action did not prove more effective. Even though hundreds of thousands of people marched in the streets of Tehran following the June 2009 election, they failed to achieve their political goals. In this context, a group of activists saw the new presidential election as an opportunity to change the political situation and win relief from repressive political measures. Some reformist politicians asked ex-president Khatami to run again. They perceived him as the only candidate who could pass muster with the Guardian Council, represent reformist and democratic values, and have sufficient popularity to win the election.[72] But as demands for Khatami to run increased, hard-liners threatened that the Guardian Council would disqualify him, and he might even be tried for his support of the Green Movement, or as hard-liners call it, sedition.[73] Eventually Khatami stated that the situation was not right for his candidacy and someone less provocative to hard-liners might be a better option.[74] At the same time, a number of reformist groups, such as the Participation Front and the Organization of Mojahedin invited ex-president Akbar Hashemi to run. Although Hashemi had sided with protestors in 2009, since he was one of the main architects of the regime and still held office, reformists thought he would have a better chance of being accepted by the Guardian Council.[75]

Hashemi entered the race on the last day of registration, raising hopes in the reformist and prodemocracy camps. But the Guardian Council rejected Hashemi's candidacy, to the great disappointment of reformists. They perceived this event as a sign of hard-liners' determination to keep their grip on the executive power. Hashemi was the head of the Expediency Assembly and a member of the Assembly of Experts. If hard-liners were willing to pay the price for disqualifying him, they were willing to pay other costs to avoid losing the election to moderates or reformists. These perceptions were reflected in statements made by different reformist groups and politicians. The Organization of Mojahedin of Islamic Revolution wrote that the removal of Khatami and Hashemi from the election showed that the military and security circles backed by the leader were determined to engineer the election and bring their preferred candidate to power. In this electoral scenario, only centrist candidates with no chance of winning were allowed to run against hard-liners, an attempt to create a false perception of pluralism and avoid the situation that happened in 2009.

Activism, Public Discourse, and Candidates: Other reformists called for supporting existing moderate candidates such as Mohammad Reza Aref or Hasan Rouhani to end hard-liners' dominance over the government. Aref was Khatami's vice president during his second term in 2001–2005, but was not considered a progressive reformist. He had not sided with the Green Movement in 2009 and he even participated in the Friday prayer one week after the election, when Ayatollah Khamenei threatened protestors with a bloody crackdown. Rouhani belonged to the moderate faction of the conservative camp in the 1980s and 1990s. He was a close ally of Hashemi, and he was an outspoken critic of Ahmadinejad's policies. Before Hashmei was disqualified, Rouhani's campaign did not receive as much attention or enthusiasm from reformists, but after Hashemi's disqualification, some reformists saw Rouhani's campaign as an opportunity to present their demands and derail hard-liners'

plans to keep their monopoly on political power. With this approach, an interesting phenomenon emerged in public meetings with Aref and Rouhani. While participants were cheering for them, they were also chanting slogans in support of Musavi, Rahnavard, and Karrubi and demanding their release.[76] Such slogans were especially significant at the time because mentioning Musavi and Karrbui at public gatherings had been forbidden since 2009 and newspapers were not allowed to publish their names or photos. Thus, participants were using an institutional opening provided by the regime to perform a contentious oppositional act. They were tying their electoral participation to their identification with a protest movement that emerged in reaction to electoral fraud. These participants were framing their participation in elections not in contrast but connected to their support for the Green Movement. It was not that they were unaware that Rouhani and Aref were not as progressive as Musavi and Rouhani; this was a practical decision to back these candidates as the best possible options at the time. Hard-liners reminded reformists of this fact in an attempt to undermine the emerging alliance. Farsnews, the hard-line news agency affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards, released Rouhani's speech in support of the infamous 1999 crackdown on students.[77] The hard-liners' efforts were unsuccessful, as reformist campaign participants had made a very practical decision to support existing moderate candidates, with full knowledge of their infamous backgrounds and ideological differences. Instead, reformists tried to frame Rouhani and Aref in the same light as Khatami, Musavi, and Karrubi, chanting, "Long live Aref! Long live Musavi!".[78]

Chanting for the imprisoned opposition leaders again demonstrates our first mechanism, whereby electoral activism brings previously taboo issues into mainstream public discourse. The chanters did not escape repression by the hard-liners. In one of Rouhani's first speeches in Tehran after Hashemi was disqualified, people chanted, "Our leaders in custody

should be released!" and "Hail to Musavi! Hail to Karrubi!" and carried signs with pictures of Musavi, Karrubi, and Khatami. In response Rouhani declared, "The year 2013 will not become a 2009. They cannot keep you away from the ballot boxes," tacitly admitting wrongdoing in the 2009 elections.[79] At the end of the session, security agents arrested three young Rouhani campaigners. The arrests, however, did not stop the slogans at future meetings.[80]

Activism and Coalition Building: Participants' pragmatic approach in supporting Rouhani and Aref was also manifested in their calls for an alliance between the candidates, also highlighting our third mechanism about coalition formation. In both Rouhani's and Aref's campaign meetings, participants chanted, "Rouhani, Aref, Alliance, Alliance."[81] This was ironic because an alliance meant that one of the candidates would have to withdraw from the race. Along with grassroots pressure, reformist politicians were also considering an alliance that would entail convincing one candidate to drop out. This call for coalition formation also highlights a learning moment for reformists in the political process. After reformists lost the presidency to conservatives in 2005, many reformist strategists and analysts pointed to the presence of multiple reformist candidate in that election as a major cause of the defeat[82]. This time, however, reformist activists formed an organized campaign with a website and Facebook page to encourage a coalition between reformist and moderate candidates rather than supporting one candidate. Eventually reformist leaders selected Rouhani and Aref withdrew.[83] Senior reformist politician Ahmad Masjed-Jame'i noted in an interview that grassroots pressures were influential in convincing the reformist leadership to participate in the election and to back one candidate. He said reformist leaders were disheartened after Hashemi's disqualification, but grassroots pressure changed this perception, and subsequently the leadership followed the peoples' direction rather than deciding for them.[84]

Activism and Hardliners' Defeat: Finally, the grassroots pressure and activism was influential in hard-liners' defeat in this election. Three days before the election Khatami endorsed Rouhani in a video that was shared across social media.[85] As polls showed, Rouhani's popularity skyrocketed. Several reformist groups and a number of political prisoners released statements in support of Rouhani. Reformist support for Rouhani was also reflected in the slogans that people chanted the night before the election: "Khatami's epic should be repeated," "Our vote is one word: reformism," and other slogans in support of Khatami and Hashemi.[86] Rouhani won the election in the first round. People rushed into the streets to celebrate their victory and the fact that this time their votes were counted. They chanted in support of Musavi, Karrubi, and other political prisoners. One chant was "Musavi, Musavi, I took back my vote," a reference to the protest 2009 slogan, "Where is my vote?" They also chanted, "The green movement is not dead, it has brought Rouhani," "Political prisoners should be free," and "Rouhani end [house] custody".[87]

Postelection

Rouhani was not able to end the house arrest of Green Movement leaders, as the main decision maker regarding house custody was Supreme Leader Khamenei. During this period, the judiciary put new limitations on reformist leader Khatami and banned newspapers from mentioning his name or publishing his picture.[88] Nonetheless, repression eased considerably. A number of new parties comprised of formerly banned reformist groups received permits from the Ministry of the Interior to start activities.[89] These parties were particularly active in the 2016 and 2017 parliamentary and municipal elections, winning seats in both. Many student organizations were granted permits to become active on university campuses and hold oppositional events.[90] Politicians and activists who were imprisoned after 2009 were now able to pursue activities and give lectures. The new administration appointed several women to

different ministries. The Supreme Administrative Council ruled that by the end of the Sixth

Development Plan, the presence of women in public managerial positions should increase to

30%.[91] Internet speed increased under the new administration, and in contrast to the previous

administration and despite pressure from hard-liners, Rouhani's government did not filter

popular social media platforms. Rouhani's most remarkable achievement was perhaps the

nuclear agreement with the world's six great powers, approved despite much opposition from

hard-liners. Rouhani's administration curtailed inflation, reducing it from 34% to 9%.[92]

The administration had less success however in translating its foreign policy gains into

economic gains for ordinary people through job creation. Hard-liners saw this as Rouhani's

Achilles' heel and hoped to make him the first incumbent president who would not win

reelection. They hoped to at least take Rouhani to the second round and perhaps defeat him

there, since some polls showed that Rouhani did not have the 50% of the vote required for

victory in the first round. Newspapers and news agencies affiliated with Iran's Revolutionary

Guards and Basij militia ran pieces criticizing Rouhani's economic performance, and hard-

liner candidates Rai'isi and Qalibaf focused their campaign on making economic promises and

criticizing Rouhani's performance. Nonetheless, reformist leadership supported Rouhani, and

Rouhani's campaign meetings became the scenes of passionate participation of reformist

grassroots where they were chanting again for the release of political prisoners but this time

in much wider scale. In this campaign, we also observe that electoral activism brought to the

front demands that would not be otherwise articulated and that electoral participation once

again led to the defeat of hardliners with Rouhani's victory in the first round. Rouhani's

rhetoric during the campaign excited reformist activists, but some of his actions after the

election disappointed. Many considered his choices for parliament ministers inconsistent with

his campaign rhetoric. Discussions about his potential conservative turn after the election[93]

highlighted the limits of electoral activism[94]. Reacting to Rouhani's conservative policies during his second term, some activists questioned the effectiveness of electoral activism in Islamic Republic.[95] A second group maintained with all of his shortcomings in the second term, Rouhani's administration has still continued some of his positive policies from his first turn[96]. Finally, a third group criticized Rouhani's performance in the second term, but still emphasized the importance of electoral participation. This group argues that electoral participation alone is not sufficient for reforming the non-democratic features of the regime, and civic activism and grass-roots collective action beyond electoral arena is necessary to take further steps in pushing the Islamic Republic in a more democratic direction.[97]

Conclusion

Post–Cold War, most authoritarian regimes have held elections. These elections are significant because they provide a space for opposition groups to vocalize their grievances and demands. While these activities rarely lead to immediate democratic breakthroughs, they ineluctably shift and pattern formal politics, even in highly controlled contexts. Here we have focused on presidential elections in Iran as a case of a hybrid regime that mixes electoral and nonelectoral institutions.

Iranians have capitalized on elections as an opportunity for activism with important consequences. First, this activism has raised issues that would not have been otherwise articulated in the official discourse. In 2013, campaign participants used public spaces to demand the release of imprisoned leaders of the Green Movement. This was significant in the context of Iran's repressive political atmosphere after 2009. Second, participants have pressed moderate candidates to take prodemocracy positions. In 2009, activism pushed reformist and

progressive issues onto the electoral platform of candidates Karrubi and Musavi. This is most visible in how Musavi's discourse shifted from a focus on economy and management to an emphasis on women's rights and freedom of speech after pressure from activists. Third, campaign participants pushed the opposition to form a coalition. In 2013, grassroots pressure encouraged reformist leaders to participate in elections and to form an alliance backing one of the centrist candidates. Finally, electoral activism influenced electoral outcomes, as in 2013 the push for participation and alliances was consequential in Rouhani's victory and hard-liners' electoral defeat[98].

Going forward, some puzzles remain. What makes electoral activism possible in Iran and other hybrid regimes? Different processes perhaps contribute to the possibility of electoral activism in Iran. First, women, student, human rights, and ethnic minority activists are at work before election times, but they perhaps are not able to take certain actions outside of election cycles because of higher levels of repression or lower level of public attention. Second, activists also take inspiration from previous experiences and instances of electoral activism itself. There is indeed a learning process happening during the election period. Third, a weak party system ironically provides an opportunity for grassroots and activists to directly target candidates and bring their issues to the forefront of public debates at the election period. While this article focuses on documenting the instances and consequences of electoral activism, future research can tell us more about what shapes electoral activism and how it is related to activism outside elections.

This argument has important implications for studies of elections, social movements, and regime change. Elections and social movements are two main aspects of modern politics, but the relationship between the two is understudied. We have specified mechanisms of electoral activism in the context of authoritarian regimes. Scholars of authoritarianism depict

elections either as serving the survival of the regime or as an occasion leading to electoral revolutions. Such lenses prevent us from seeing activism during elections and its contribution to more gradual political change. The case of Iranian elections shows how activists make tactical choices in a highly constrained environment. The constraints in the case of Iran and other hybrid regime stems from the power of non-elected institutions and their upper hand in formal politics. Nonetheless, such activism in constrained elections could be also extended to consolidated democracies where stiff and strong party systems or highly influential interest groups reduce the grassroots input in the electoral process. Accordingly, our findings about Iran can travel beyond the universe of electoral authoritarianism to the electoral process in democratic regimes.

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[98] This article documents instances and consequences of electoral activism in the reformist camp in Iran. While conservatives have been also putting efforts into electoral mobilization, instances of electoral activism are much weaker in the conservative camp. This is partially because the conservatives have a more top-down vertical organization that leaves much smaller space for grassroot activist to affect their electoral process.