Introduction

Two Pictures

During the second televised debate of Iran's 2017 presidential election, moderator Morteza Heidari asked the candidates: 'What are your main foreign policy priorities, especially for supporting the Resistance Front?' (aka the anti-Israel front consisting of Iran and its regional allies and militias). The candidates evaded the question and proceeded to address general issues related to diplomacy and foreign policy. Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri used the opportunity to elaborate his views on public diplomacy. He proposed two ways to repair Iran's international standing, which included expanding the freedoms of Iranian artists and improving Iran's inbound tourism industry. Hardliner candidate Ebrahim Raisi highlighted the importance of increasing exports and improving relations with Iran's neighbouring countries. A veteran of the Iran–Iraq war and former commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Air Force Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf spoke of negotiation diplomacy, public diplomacy and economic diplomacy and criticised the Rouhani administration for failing to take advantage of its neighbouring market, comprising 400 million people. Expectedly, President Hassan Rouhani boasted about his government's accomplishments in foreign affairs, exemplified in the achievement of the nuclear agreement of 2015.[1] Astonishingly, none of the candidates alluded to their support for Hezbollah or other similar groups or slammed Israel. No one addressed the Resistance Front or even mentioned Israel.[2] Perhaps candidates felt this was the safest way to avoid being labelled as

[1] Known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).
[2] Iranian Students' News Agency, 'Transcript of the second presidential debate 2017' (Persian), 5 May 2017, available at www.isna.ir/news/96021509091/, accessed 2/5/2018.

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revolutionary, or against diplomacy, or being associated with the likes of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or extremists.

A comparison of these positions with the views of candidates in the Islamic Republic's first presidential election (January 1980) reveals a striking transformation of political imaginations, values and priorities. During the 1980 election, ideological discourses towards anti-imperialism and the support of 'liberation movements' were pervasive and expressed by all candidates. These discourses were not limited to a specific revolutionary group or party, but were endemic to all, including the secular liberals, Islamists and Marxists. For example, in his televised address, the National Front's nominee Dariush Forouhar advocated his wholehearted support of all 'liberation movements, especially in Islamic countries'. He further admired the Iranian Islamic revolution as the greatest revolution in the history of humankind. As Interim Minister of Defence, National Front candidate Ahmad Madani highlighted his revolutionary measures, which included his dismissal of American military aides and advisors. He boasted that 'I was the first man in Iran who arrested an American military officer.'[3] Moreover, he frequently highlighted his involvement in Iran's unilateral cancellation of arms contracts with the United States, including billion-dollar contracts regarding the purchase of warships and helicopters. The liberal Interim Minister of Health Kazem Sami advocated Iran's independent 'Neither East, nor West' foreign policy: 'We will oppose any kind of hegemony and thus we will not accept imperialist interventions.' Freedom Movement member Sadegh Tabatabaei showcased his familial connection to Khomeini. He championed the Iranian 'Third Way' as a refutation of Western capitalism and Eastern communism.[4] Another Freedom Movement member, Interim Foreign Minister Sadegh Ghotbzadeh highlighted his close relationship with Khomeini and his anti-American stance.[5] He claimed that, unless the USA extradited the Shah, 'Iran will always reject negotiation in the release of hostages.'[6] Prior to the election, he also announced Iran's support of the Afghanistan resistance against the Soviet army.[7] The most popular contestant in this election, Abolhassan Banisadr, repeated the revolution's

[3] *Kayhan*, 16 January 1980, no. 10907, p. 3.
[4] *Kayhan*, 24 January 1980, no. 10913, p. 10.
[5] Sadegh Ghotbzadeh later became the CEO of the national TV and radio company – Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).
[6] *Enghelabe Eslami*, 19 January 1980, no. 169, p. 1.
[7] *Enghelabe Eslami*, 20 January 1980, no. 170, p. 4.

central slogan of 'independence from both superpowers', based on his belief that 'the world's existing political and economic structure cannot endure'. He reiterated his theory of cooperation with Europe, Japan and 'the oppressed countries of the world'.[8] These positions remained a cornerstone feature of Iranian electoral politics throughout Khomeini's reign (1979–89), with all presidential candidates upholding his ideologically driven domestic and foreign policy objectives.

In the early days of the revolution, in almost all newspapers a full page was dedicated to news, analysis and updates about 'liberation movements'. This focus, like Khomeini's charisma, was not limited to specific revolutionary groups but encompassed the entire political spectrum. As an example, three weeks before the first presidential election, the Conference of Liberation Movements was launched in Tehran's Imperial Hotel (later renamed Qods Hotel) with participants such as Yasser Arafat, chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), Sa'd Mojber, representative of Libya to Iran,[9] the representatives of Montoneros of Argentina, the Eritrean Liberation Front, and the Polisario Front. The list of Iranian participants was even more enlightening as many of them had an avowedly liberal persuasion, including Habibollah Peyman, the founder and leader of the Islamist Socialist Party, Ali Golzadeh-Ghafouri, later an opposition cleric, Hassan Lahouti, an anti-Islamic Republican Party (IRP) cleric, Taher Ahmadzadeh, the governor of Khorasan and a leftist politician close to the Freedom Movement, and Lotfollah Meisami, a member of the Freedom Movement.[10]

In contrast, during Iran's twelfth presidential election, held in May 2017, all candidates unanimously supported the normalisation of relations with the West, pragmatic diplomacy and enhancing socio-political freedoms. This is a significant observation. Yet it is often masked by the dominant narrative that positions moderate/reformist and hardliner/conservative candidates in diametrical

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[8] *New York Times*, 'Bani-Sadr appears to win easy victory in Iranian election', 26 January 1980, available at www.nytimes.com/1980/01/26/archives/bani sadr-appears-to-win-easy-victory-in-iranian-election-finance.html?searchResul tPosition=1, accessed 5/5/2019.

[9] *Enghelabe Eslami*, 3 January 1980, no. 159, p. 4.

[10] Most of these revolutionary leaders were interviewed by various Iranian newspapers. See, for instance: *Enghelabe Eslami*, 10 January 1980, no. 163, p. 4; *Enghelabe Eslami*, 14 January 1980, no. 166, p. 4; *Mojahed*, 1 January 1980, no. 17, p. 12.

opposition. Often what fascinates observers of Iranian elections is the wide gap between candidates' platforms and the divergent implications they hold for the country and region. The 2017 election exemplifies this point. The main contenders in this election were hardliner cleric Ebrahim Raisi and moderate incumbent President Hassan Rouhani. Raisi was supported by hardliner politicians and the Revolutionary Guards. He was also a member of the Committee of Death responsible for the summary executions of thousands of political prisoners in the late 1980s. On the other hand, Rouhani was supported by reformists, championed social and political freedoms, and was a long-standing advocate for enhancing relations with the international community. The divergent backgrounds of these two candidates left many observers viewing the election as critical to the Islamic Republic's future direction. Importantly, this polarised image is part of a larger picture in post-revolutionary Iran that frames its political system in constant battle between those who seek change and reform and those who want to stick to the pristine values of the early revolution. The duality of the Islamic Republic's political structure reinforces this polarised image. This political system is divided into elected and non-elected institutions. The president and parliament (*Majles*) are elected by the people. The other, perhaps more powerful institutions, are non-elected, appointed by the Supreme Leader. These include the head of the judiciary, the armed forces, the national broadcasting organisation (IRIB) and the Guardian Council, which is responsible for supervising presidential elections.

Within this polarised image of Iranian electoral politics, people's views and mindset are often perceived as static and fixed. It suggests that the same values, ideals, questions and debates have been in place since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. The media's obsession with repeated political infighting between opposing political factions often ignores the fundamental transformation that the entire political environment has undergone. Observers are so obsessed with the details of the moderate/reformist vs. conservative/hardliner debate that they simply fail to take notice of how far both parties have departed from the values and ideals of the early revolution. This book is an attempt to unearth and reveal the steady evolution of Iranian electoral discourse that has been occurring beneath the political surface for the past forty years.

We examine the transformation of election discourses in post-revolutionary Iran diachronically. Spanning a timeframe of four decades, we explore all twelve of the Islamic Republic's presidential elections and argue that, despite political infighting and divisions, the values, attitudes and mentality of Iranians in general have become staggeringly more secularised compared with the first decade of the revolution. This transformation is vividly traceable when observing the steady evolution of presidential campaign discourses over the past forty years. We further claim that the whole ontological and epistemic framework within which political forces (conservatives and reformists alike) operate has evolved from a revolutionary world-renouncing religiosity, to a liberalised secular one. In other words, the worldview of people and political players across the entire political spectrum in Iran has transformed.

In the dominant narrative within historiographies of Iranian society and politics, the reformist movement is heralded as the epitome of Iran's transition to secularity, while conservative political forces are positioned as supporters of Islamisation and resistant to secularisation. In contrast, this book contends that people's utopia, their political and cultural imagination, and their ideals of life have secularised regardless of the reformist/conservative divide. Disagreements between political factions are more about politics than the turn towards secularity. In short, current debates in Iranian domestic politics are not between secularists and their opponents, but rather, between different kinds of secular forces. As will be shown, this shift is particularly evident when comparing recent campaign discourses with those of the Khomeini era.

It is important to note that this book is not a political history of Iranian presidential elections, nor a chronology of all events, or a detailed account of all election campaigns. There are other informative volumes and accounts that explore Iranian domestic politics through lenses such as these. The primary focus of this book is on aspects of election campaign discourses, which demonstrate the secularisation of Iranian social imaginaries and lifeworlds. While a brief explanation of the socio-political environment surrounding each election is provided, this is to provide a more nuanced understanding regarding the overall transformation of electoral discourses since the revolution's first decade.

The 'Secular'

Informed by debates regarding theories of secularity, this book's conceptualisation of the secular does not denote an absence of religion, but rather, the construction of a new religion which is secular in essence. So, while the traditional foundations of the Islamic Republic persist, along with its revolutionary religious dogmas and discourses, its cultural and social meaning has changed. While being religious and revolutionary in the era of Khomeini was associated with the centralisation of the otherworld and world-denunciation, the new understanding of Islam is world-affirming and human-centred. Moreover, this book provincialises the concept of the secular to the specific Shia-Iranian context by defining it as a departure from Khomeini's tripartite revolutionary religiosity. This religiosity was, first of all, constructed around the persona of Khomeini as the living instantiation of a Shia Imam. Second, it was centred on the concepts of jihad and martyrdom. And third, it was egalitarian owing to the Marxist vibe of the milieu and because Khomeini's mystical Islam was more consonant with equality.

In connection with this understanding of secularity, this book argues that the discourses of presidential election campaigns are secularised compared with those in the era of Khomeini, both in content and in form. In terms of content, they have diverged extensively from the triad ethos of revolutionary religiosity mentioned above. But also, the election per se (and the greater concept of political disagreement and competition) was an anomaly in Khomeini's revolutionary Islam of the first decade. This, however, is not the case today. In the post-Khomeini era, people's perceptions, as well as the state-sanctioned reading of Islam, have evolved in ways that made them plausibly receptive to the very institution of election. This point will be further elaborated in Chapter 1.

Why Elections?

Election campaigns are litmus tests of social and political imaginaries in two ways. First, campaign operations, slogans and mottos, speeches of the candidates, their TV shows and debates all represent what is appealing and attractive for voters, thus reflecting the general vibe of each milieu. Second, they are moments of inundation of new discourses, which often outlast campaign days and remain dominant in

the coming four years. There are, however, limits to this metric. One is the fact that candidates who pass the vetting firewall of the Guardian Council often do not reflect the existing diverse political spectrum, but rather, represent only those political strands which are deemed loyal enough to the state to be allowed into the competition. Thus, the very fact that these candidates are allowed to enter the competition indicates a certain degree of commitment to the principles of the Islamic revolution (no matter how these are defined and who measures them) and therefore, constrains the scope of their discourse to what is sanctioned by the regime. This objection is partly valid, but at the same time, though the Guardian Council's filter might limit generalisability of the results of this investigation into the whole population (participants or non-participants), nevertheless it shows, at the very bottom, the evolution, contraction or expansion of the official boundaries of the state-legitimated discourses. The study of campaign discourses at least proves the fact that even *the state-permitted discourses of elections* have evolved from a focus on martyrdom and equality to one on welfare, peace and prosperity. And this is no trivial finding. We acknowledge the role of everyday people in shaping electoral discourses and running the campaigns in the streets and the significance of their very act of voting or abstaining from voting. The focus of the research, however, is on the evolution of the voices of the candidates and their campaigns which are deemed *legitimately debatable*. Though we understand the importance of incorporating other voices in the study, this will be faced with formidable methodological and logistical challenges and is outside the scope of the current research.

Above that, things are not that simple and straightforward on the ground. Even people whose preferred candidates are not allowed to compete often actively participate in the process of election by compromising their ideal option and conceding to one of the existing candidates. The candidates, on the other side, compete for votes and in this process, inflect their rhetoric to appeal to potential voters. Thus, these campaign discourses are influenced and shaped inevitably by non-participants as well. This could be the reason why, although the Guardian Council has been progressively tightening its vetting criteria during recent decades, election campaigns have become more heated and confrontational, and have pushed the revolutionary discursive red lines further back. A look at the 2013 and 2017 presidential elections confirms this. While the Guardian Council permitted only contestants

from the inner circles of the regime, once these candidates were confronted with the discursive demands of the people, they crossed many ideological red lines that were not crossed by previous candidates who were deemed more critical than the existing ones. Thus, a mutual need on the part of the candidates to maximise votes and a need among voters to be represented has made the campaigns unexpectedly heated.

We have argued throughout this book that the discourse of Iranian presidential elections has changed from one oriented to tripartite elements of Khomeini's revolutionary religiosity to one of a secular worldly religiosity. Further, elections have become increasingly central factors in legitimising political power. But does this mean Iran has become more *democratic*? This question requires an intellectual journey into the rich literature of electoral authoritarianism (EA) which is beyond the scope of this book. Electoral authoritarian regimes play the games and theatres of elections, but utilise a sophisticated 'menu of manipulation' to make the result ineffectual in practice.[11] The Iranian regime puts limits on elections in two ways: institutionally, by vetting and disqualifying opposition candidates from running for elections; and informally, by pressuring and persecuting the opposition members before and after the elections and rigging the election results. Thus, Iranian elections are hardly free and fair.[12]

Even having fair elections comprises only one (although an important one) among many requirements of calling a state *democratic*.[13] Investigating Iranian elections from the perspective of electoral authoritarianism, Luciano Zaccara includes Iran among 'hybrid regimes', being also a 'competitive authoritarian' one, to use Andreas Schedler's terminology.[14] However, and despite all systematic toolboxes for manipulating elections in Iran, Zaccara is right that

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[11] See: Andreas Schedler, 'Elections without democracy: the menu of manipulation', *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 36–50.

[12] See John Keane's new exposition of the electoral authoritarian regimes in this regard: John Keane, *The new despotism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

[13] Andreas Schedler enumerates seven basic choices which should be met in order to call a state effectively democratic. These are legislatures, courts, decentralisation, elections, political parties, media and civil society. See: Andreas Schedler, *The politics of uncertainty: sustaining and subverting electoral authoritarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 62.

[14] See: Luciano Zaccara, 'Elections and authoritarianism in the Islamic Republic of Iran', in *Elections and democratization in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 153–78. On hybrid regimes: Matthijs Bogaards, 'How to

Iranian elected president matters both for the policies implemented inside the country as well as for the foreign diplomacy that he can develop. And the fact that there have been electoral 'surprises' proves that the results are not determined beforehand, something very important to determine the 'empowerment' and 'irreversibility' conditions attributed to the Iranian electoral system.[15]

We limit the scope of our study to presidential elections for two reasons. First, other elections (the parliament or *Majles*, the municipal councils, the Assembly of Experts) are held locally and myriads of vernacular issues determine both the campaign discourses and their outcomes. For example, in small towns and rural areas, the pledge of allegiance to a clan head, a local nobility or a popular clergyman may be more instrumental to the outcome of an election than a given candidate's choice of rhetoric. In the absence of well-entrenched and nation-wide parties in the country, this local and diffused practice of electoral politics is even more salient. Second, this diffusion, locality and lack of centrally controlled campaign operations makes tracing general trends in these elections intractably hard for any researcher. In practice, such research entails excavating endless amount of material (including print, audio-visual and social media) from close to three hundred constituencies, cataloguing them, and making theoretically sound taxonomies. These should then be fed into a solid theoretical framework – an almost impossible task, at least within the narrow scope of this research.

Electoral Politics in Iran

Iranian electoral politics take place within a political system based on both Islamic and democratic principles. This model was pioneered by Ayatollah Khomeini as a revolutionary system of governance that blends divine authority, represented in the Supreme Leader, with popular sovereignty, represented in the electoral bodies of the parliament (*Majles*), Assembly of Expert and the president. The Islamic Republic's 1979 constitution institutionalises the theocratic dominance of the state

classify hybrid regimes? Defective democracy and electoral authoritarianism', *Democratization* 16, no. 2 (2009): 399–423. On competitive electoral authoritarianism: Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way, 'Elections without democracy: the rise of competitive authoritarianism', *Journal of Democracy* 13, no. 2 (2002): 51–65.

15 Zaccara, 'Elections and Authoritarianism', 174.

under *velayat-e faqih* (Guardianship of Jurist).[16] This doctrine empha-
sises the absolute power of the Supreme Leader (*valiy-e faqih*) based on
his knowledge of Islam. It was crafted by Khomeini to legitimise the
Shiite clerical establishment's power over the state and thus signifies
a rupture from the age-old Shiite tradition of political disengagement.
The Supreme Leader's powers are expansive. He oversees the judiciary,
executive and legislative branches of the state and holds ultimate author-
ity over foreign and domestic policies. He is the commander of the armed
forces and exercises power over most intelligence and national security
operations. Significantly, the Supreme Leader is elected for life by indir-
ect vote of the people through the Assembly of Experts, explored below.
With an unrestricted time-limit, the Supreme Leader can purge all rival
individuals or institutions to consolidate and maintain his power base in
the long term. Although the capability of elections to affect the scope of
power structures is limited, they are potentially the most dangerous
threat to the absolute reign of the Supreme Leader.[17] Thus, to outlast
the political turbulences sparked by elections during the past three
decades, the Supreme Leader has restricted the powers of electoral
institutions through his establishment of parallel organisations. These
include the Intelligence Organisation of the Islamic Revolutionary
Guards Corps (IRGC) to compete with the Intelligence Ministry, myriad
economic corporations and holdings to counterbalance the economic
power of the government, and tens of cultural organisations to counter
bodies such as the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Education.[18]
These bodies established by the Supreme Leader represent a unified base
of hardliners dedicated to maintaining the political status quo.
Significantly, the Guardian Council is considered the main guarantor
of the Supreme Leader's control over electoral institutions.[19]

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[16] For the social and ideological roots of the revolution, see, for example: Nikki
R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution* (New
Have: Yale University Press, 2006); Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of discontent:
the ideological foundation of the Islamic revolution in Iran* (New York:
Routledge, 2012). For a broader outlook of different trends in political Islam,
including Iran, see: Shahram Akbarzadeh, *Routledge handbook of political
Islam* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012).

[17] Mehran Kamrava and Houchang Hassan-Yari, 'Suspended equilibrium in Iran's
political system', *Muslim World* 94, no. 4 (2004): 506.

[18] Nimah Mazaheri, *Oil booms and business busts: why resource wealth hurts
entrepreneurs in the developing world* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 83.

[19] For an exploration of the Islamic Republic's power structure and election roles,
see: Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Where is the Islamic Republic of Iran heading?'