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ROUHANI'S KEY: SYMBOLS AND RITUALS IN IRANIAN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS 2013¹

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This short paper is written within the framework of the anthropology of politics and of emotions. It focuses on the importance of symbols in the manipulation of the political behaviour of the people: « Emotions matter more than ever in a world where media are playing the role of a sounding board and a magnifying glass » (Moisi, 2009: 4). We should note that the religious network in Iran is a widespread organ which is responsible for most of the rituals which occur in people's life cycles, and this puts these rituals in contact with the people. The religious networks are constantly engaged in the management of rituals; and the manipulation of the people's feelings of joy, pain and sublimation are some of their

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¹ Data gathering for this research took place in May and June 2013. Newspapers from various tendencies were studied, television programs followed, and on the most important day before elections a trip was made within the city to gather visual information and to go to various candidates locales, and to be at Palestine Square where one of the candidates was going to give a speech and then to walk up the most important city street, Vali Asr, to see the supporters of various candidates. This year, university semester ended sooner than usual, and given the load of work I had to finish before the elections, I had limited time for all this work.

arte-facts: « It is one task of governments to study the emotions of their respective peoples, to capitalize on them if they are positive, to try to reverse or contain them if they are negative » (Moisi, 2009: 20). The presence of clergy not only at weddings and mortuaries but at yearly processions of Ashura and religious gatherings (*rowze*) puts them in contact with the people's pains, needs, views and aspirations and they have managed to have a discourse to relate to situations as diverse as there are ethnic groups, classes, ages and sexes. According to Kertzer: « Rituals bring all the people together, sanctifying their unity and thus counteracting the divisiveness tendencies that plague daily social life. The greater the divisiveness in society, the greater the need for compensatory rituals to hold the society together » (1988: 63). The power of the clergy to control rituals is thus uncontested, and voting is managed as a regular ritual in political life of Iran today.

According to Rappaport, « beliefs are privately held and in some sense unknowable, while rituals provide public statements of acceptance of a group's position... [ritual] is visible, explicit, public act of acceptance, and not the invisible, ambiguous, private sentiment that is social and morally binding. Socially and politically speaking we are what we do, not what we think » (Kertzer, *op. cit.*: 69).

Moisi in his book *Geopolitics of Emotions*, considers hope, fear and humiliation. I have found these concepts helpful to understand the people's responses to participation in democratic behavior which is the essence of voting.

In June 2012 I had a visitor from Paris who asked me and all friends we met if they were going to vote in 2013, and what could bring people to participate in the elections. The responses were all morose and no one would even put the time and energy to seriously respond to this question. After 2009 events, which still was keeping two candidates of the election under house arrest, who would possibly go to vote? A spirit of delusion was in the air.

Articles in daily news-papers leading to the date of election all had negative titles: they were related to unemployment, inflation and

rising prices for food and lodging, lowering value of Iranian currency, corruption, increasing sanctions against Iran, decrease in the export of oil, increases in the level of divorce and addiction, etc. It was within this helpless and totally locked atmosphere of hopelessness that the leader pronounced at the moment of the New Year a motto for the year. He, said this would be the year of Epical Politics, Epical Economy (*hamâseye siyâsi, hamâseye eqtesâdi*).

Murmurs of criticism were heard: how can something be called epical before it happens? During these short months – from March 21st to June 14th – leading to the elections, the president of the time was doing whatever was in his power to do, to make his candidate Mashâyee (father-in-law of his son), previous head of Cultural Heritage, Handicrafts and Tourism Organization (ICHTO), a viable candidate to show that he did not want to lose power after this election, and that he would stay on and hoped to be re-elected after four years. Everyone recalled President Putin and Medvedev. His slogan was « spring » (*bahâr*) which he repeated three times during his New Year allocutions.

During the last electoral campaign what had given sparkles to the elections were disclosures to the public about candidates which occurred during debates. In May 2013, in a discourse in the parliament, the President showed a short film on one of the brothers Larijani (there are five in office), holding key positions, and this film eventually discredited one of the brothers, who is head of the parliament and who then couldn't become a candidate. Time was passing fast. No competition of any personalities was in the air. To allow disclosures to give vivacity to the elections would have been too costly for the state, yet I was expecting an election motto to become « Disclose, disclose ... ». This became a columnist's view also (see Soroush Farhadian « Pole Efšâ » [bridge of disclosure] in newspaper *Bahâr*, 25/4/2003).

The situation was still very dull, and so tense that on the side of the reformists, the last minute candidacy of one of the founders of the Revolution, Hâshemi Rafsanjâni gave some sparkles to the headlines and the people. This old man became the hope of a young

nation, as he had become eight years ago when the present president won for the first time. The Revolution had not produced any new candidates. Even his candidacy came after he was urged by Ayatollah Sistâni in Najaf had poignantly and authoritatively advised him to do so, in prevention of worse disasters for the country. The idea of the fall of the nation, or its division in various areas is the most fearful thing which could happen. Moisi says: « In its most common interpretation, fear is an emotional response to the perception, real or imagined, of an impending danger. Fear leads to a defensive reflex that reveals and reflects the identity and the fragility of a person, a culture, or a civilization at a given moment... Fear stimulates attentiveness to one's surroundings and is in that sense a constructive emotion, a natural protective instinct » (2009: 92).

From the 6th till the 12th of May, registration for presidential candidates would take place, and the eligible candidates would be pronounced on the 22nd of May. From 648 candidates including 30 women, eight men were screened, approved and found eligible by the Assembly of Experts, pronounced by the ministry of Interior. The names of Mashâyee and Hâshemi Rafsanjâni were not among them. The latter's age was mentioned as an impediment for his final approval. Nothing was mentioned for refusing Mashayee and all the other candidates. Again a feeling of hopelessness took over. The eight eligible candidates had 23 days to campaign all over the country, to participate in debates in the television. There were seven well-known civil servants and one religious man in robe and turban. How could in such a short time candidates have their propaganda films made, travel, discuss, present, interact and find their future government ministers, programs etc.? How could they produce the most viable mottos and symbols to carry their messages deep into all the different corners of the country. A reductive and artistic cognitive power was necessary to crystallize the situation and produce a symbolic solution. Given that there were eight candidates, it could easily get to a second round. At the beginning it was said there was one candidate from the reformist side, and the rest were from the conservative tendency. The reformist, first vice-president during

Khatami's Presidency (2001-05), Aref, appeared with his wife in his first campaign. None of the other candidates made such symbolic appearances. People's murmur was that the president was already chosen, and there would be a vote which would correspond to this decision. So, the feeling was still one of resignation and not discussion nor participation. Guesses went toward Velâyatî, a medical doctor who had served as Minister of Foreign Affairs (1981-97), and Jalili (parallel cousin of Ali Khamenei, MSS), Secretary of Supreme National Security Council (2007-13), who had been present on the international scene on the nuclear agenda. Others, Hadâd Adel (Chair of the Parliament 2004-08, also father-in-law of Ali Khamenei's son) and Qarazi, Minister of the Post, were the weaker figures, but Qâlibâf (WSS of Ali Khamenei), the mayor of Tehran since 2005, had been very active for years trying to prove himself as a devoted military and efficient bureaucrat at the service of the people. This could be seen within the city on daily basis. What about Ruhânî? Who was he, and how did he win with this overwhelming majority? Here is where the power of appearance and symbols count, the power of demagoguery and intelligence of a person who can juggle ideas and symbols at crucial time with great dexterity. What is general knowledge about Ruhani today was not public knowledge at the time of elections. He was a self-contained person, more in the backstage than on the headlines like Mashayee, and not related to any important public personalities.

He was of modest background, born in a small town called Sorxe, near Semnân, east of Tehran, in 1948. His name was Hasan Fereydu, and his father died with this last name in 2011, Asadollah Fereydu. As early as 1981 he had found his name unfit and made in Hasan Fereydu Ruhani (cleric or holy). At the time of his presidential candidacy his name had become Hasan Ruhani. He went to the Semnan Seminary and then to Qom to complete his religious studies, but also went to Tehran University and in 1969 got his BA in Judicial Law. He went to the military service in 1973, and he was from early on a follower of Ayatollah Khomeini. As early as in 1977 at the memorial of Mostafâ Khomeini at Tehran Ark Mosque he used

the term Imam for Ayatollah Khomeini. In 1978, he went to Paris and his picture is seen at Neauphle-le-Château sitting behind Khomeini. After the Revolution, in 1979, he became responsible for the organization of the disorderly Iranian army and military bases. He also became deputy from Semnan to the Assembly of Experts. In 1980 he was elected deputy to the parliament and served five terms, which makes 20 years. During eight years he was the head of the Defense Committee, and during another eight years he was the head of the Policy Committee. In 1980-1983 he was the leader of the Supervisory Council of IRI Broadcasting, and during the Iran-Iraq War, in 1982-1988, he was a member of the Supreme Defense Council. In 1986 he became Commander of Iran Air Defense Force, and got first grade *Nasr* Medal from Commander-in-Chief of Armed Forces Ali Khamenei. After the War, he was representative of the latter at the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). He kept this highly sensitive post under the presidency of Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Khatami, in 1989-1997 and 2000-2005.

Meanwhile, he still was interested in law and managed to go to Scotland and got a M. Phil degree in law (1995) from Glaslow Caledonian University, to be followed by a Ph. D. in Constitutional Law (1999), the topics of which are also significant: « The Islamic legislative power with reference to the Iranian experience » and « The flexibility of Shari'a with reference to the Iranian experience ». From 1991 at the Center for Strategic Center, he became the Managing Editor of three journals, *Rahbord* (Strategy), *Foreign Relations* and *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*.

At the Expediency Council, he was the head of the Political, Defense and Security Committees. In March 2013, at the same assembly he became responsible for the Commission for Investigating Ways of Protecting and Guarding the position of Supreme Leader (*velayate faqih*). So this man had occupied key posts in diplomacy, law, religion, military and the academia (from the Internet, 02/2014).

From the beginning of the Iranian New Year (March 21st) it was continuously repeated that security was under high alert and we

could see various security corps in the city at different places and times. Elections had to proceed without tension and bloodshed, and the school year was to finish earlier than in the other years in order to prevent the congregation of lots of young people at high schools or universities. What was already repeated was that the election had to become a joyful event, *porneshât* (joyful) was a repeated word. Television clips were constant, showing presence at poll booths, people showing their identity cards, their stamped fingers, and smiling with the « V » sign. Activities of the candidates were under great surveillance, as pasting of propaganda on streets were concerned, or their use of the public media, or their disclosures related to other candidates. They had individual sites, but their presence in the radio and television showed total equality in time allocation. Their televised presence on programs was regulated within definite boundaries, to which some candidates reacted. At times it was like if they were school children who were repeating their lessons, no more.

There were three debates and even these were in the form of one person presenting his program, and others asking him questions, and he responding afterwards. The debate which made a difference and made the differences be noticed took place on June 8th. The topic was internal and international politics, and here one disclosure gave sparkles and became a decisive moment. It was on this debate that Ruhâni speaking to Qâlibâf said: « I am a man of law, not a military man ». He spoke of freedom of speech and equality among all ethnic groups, and he put into question the mayor of Tehran who had been planting millions of flowers and trees in the city, raising numerous flags of patriotism, and constructing kilometers of highways, including tunnels and bridges. He did this by speaking of a scar which had not yet been healed, from more than 14 years ago, when the police had attacked students (18th of Tir [9th of July, 1999]). Qâlibâf who had been the head of the police had favored giving permits to students to hold a meeting so that he would capture them, while Ruhâni in his official capacity had been against such a method. These were catchy words and ideas, something people

could relate to and needed badly, law and good behaviour towards the youth. He had the audacity to provoke such a touchy topic but then remained within the boundaries set by the program, yet he had spoken of liberty and justice, words which were reminiscent of Khâtami period. While he could not at this time show direct alliance with Khâtami. It was another candidate, Aref who later resigned giving his support to Ruhani. With his neat clothing and appearance he was a definite reminder of what the people could utmost hope for: another Khâtami. We should note that it was only three days before the final vote that Aref, the reformist candidate gave his dispense, and Khâtami and Hâshemi Rafsanjâni gave their support to Ruhâni.

Meanwhile, television programs allocated equal time to all candidates, and each candidate had a propaganda clip. In his film, Ruhani had taken off his turban and was sitting in a small cheap Iranian car, a Pride, and was discussing his views. All candidates were shown arriving in a location, people going to welcome them, then their hands up in the air when they pronounced something important, a few close-ups, and then some distant shots where the candidate was submerged by his followers. These images were not decisive, though Qalibaf's film attempted through the use of emotions to appeal to the people. He recalled the experience of his martyr brother and dropped some tears, a very effective way of attracting sympathy. But the people's problems and hopes for a president looked into the future and this was again where Ruhani acted brilliantly.

On the 28th of May, on Channel 2 TV, in his first group debate, at one point he pulled out a huge cardboard key, saying what was impossible, but that he had the key to all the problems people had. At the beginning we evoked the problems which were reflected in the headlines of the newspapers, and that it was being said, again and again, how difficult it was to « unlock » the complex situation which had been produced during the past eight years, and how many years were necessary to return to the economic situation of even four years before etc. etc. So it was totally audacious to think of having a key to the problems, and the impossible dream was what Ruhâni

tried to appeal to, in order to give hope and try to save the nation from threat of total disarray and collapse, a total humiliation for the nation.

A repeated phrase among the people ever since the Revolution when inflation, war, unemployment, or any other problem were evoked, was, «these are still our good days». So in the Iranian psyche something worse could happen, it could still go down, and the people had the capacity to bear these difficulties. But ever since the effect of sanctions and mismanagement of the country evoked above, it was as if though the bottom line was reached, and the reaction to all these pains was a definite change, and that is why this catchy phrase («these are still our good days») was no longer repeated. It was as if they had reached the end of fear and humiliation, and this exclamation of expectation of a doomsday, was no longer repeated during the last few months before the election period. They were craving for hope, they wanted to become hopeful, and someone provided them with the key, the miracle they were hoping to get. We should not forget that the young population of the country who is educated and entrepreneurial had been hearing from the President during the last eight years the expression «We can», so this was a leitmotif in the key symbols which the youth jumped unto to believe that they would be able to rebuild the structures in such a way to produce jobs, control prices, and to live peacefully with the outside world. The key became a strong symbol for Ruhani, and after the election it continued to be mentioned (newspapers *Qanun*, June 18th 2013; *Arman*, July 16th 2013 and recently *Etemad*, January 13th 2014, and all on the cover page).

Another reminiscent of previous elections was the issue of the green color which was a very potent symbol not only within the country, but communicated internationally. It was a part of Iranian flag, symbolized Islam, and it represented environmental consciousness too. The candidates tried to have some colors, and this became evident during the last days of publicity. Once Qarazi put a wide green band around his neck, Jalili had the Palestinian black and white «chafia» (exactly as the Leader) often around his

neck, Rezâ'yee used blue, Qalibâf used yellow in the form of a ribbon or yellow flowers that his followers carried to his last speech, Hadâd Adel and Velâyatî faded in shades of gray and at times red, but again here Ruhânî had a pronounced use of the purple color (this also showed sensitivity to the fashionable color of the year also). On the streets some of his young followers had a green band on one wrist and a purple one on another, and my final observation was in the metro late at night when a girl was tying her last piece of purple ribbon with a metallic key on another girl's wrist. Purple for the youth was a continuation of green, a color that had become too stigmatized to be used. Sedition (*fetne*) is the term used for the followers of the Green Movement by the conservatives.

What happened after the announcement of the results which was spectacular, because had he not won on the first ballot, it would have become much more difficult for him to win on the second ballot. He succeeded the first time and this avoided what had happened eight years ago when the present President first came into office against Hâshemi Rafsanjâni. A street feast followed. Upon hearing the announcement of the Minister of Interior, people flooded the streets, on foot and on car, and as traffic jams are usually stifling, on this evening and night they totally paralyzed the city till the early hours of the morning. On this night there were no policemen to prevent the flow of the population. They could not go through them, so they let them be. The public place became private. What is definitely not allowed on the streets, happened, and that was dancing in the streets. The defiant bodies used the cars as shields and as music came loud and happy from these parked cars in the middle of the streets, crowds danced, boys and girls, men and women, with all the bodily movements (see Shahshahani, 2004) which are prohibited in the public spaces. After this joyful Saturday, the victory of the Iranian football team on Tuesday brought again a proud crowd to the streets: Another joyful night for the citizens of particularly Tehran, are now proud of having gained international recognition. « When your team wins on the global state, you feel "on the top of the

world", united in a collective manner with the national team whose triumph you share » (Moisi *op. cit.*: 19).

The end result became a happy Leader who was finally able to control the emotions and reasons of the people in a way to go and vote and to have a man in religious attire in office, a man whose name had been Fereydun before, an Iranian epical name, but who had changed it to Ruhâni (meaning spiritual, clergy) many years ago. By using the motto « Prudence and Hope » for his future government, he had been able to capture the attention and the trust of the people. So, the people of Iran on June 14th did what had been done many times before them: in electing a president, they elected the chief symbol-maker of their land.

In this analysis, while Moisi's concepts have served us, yet his view on Iran needs revision: « Iran is a young country whose striving, open energy has nothing to do with the profound anachronistic nature of the "bearded clerics" who lead it » (*op. cit.*: 127). The « bearded clerics » have once more persuaded the people to go and vote, and that time for a cleric.

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Summary

Merging the three fields of anthropology of emotions, politics of emotions and anthropology of symbolism, we try to understand the coming to power of a figure in Iranian politics, who is no one but the actual president elected in 2013. With one symbol developed and used during the last days of his campaign, Rouhani did the impossible task of convincing the people, who had lost interest and trust in participating in elections, to go to the booths again and vote for him, a religious dignitary. Attention is paid to ritual as a specialized domain of religious experts. My claim is that focusing for a few days on one potent symbol, was a very efficient tactic to win this election.

Key-words: Iran, elections, symbolism, emotions.

Résumé

La clef de Rouhani : les symboles et les rituels des élections présidentielles iraniennes de 2013

Fusionnant l'anthropologie et la politique des émotions avec l'anthropologie symbolique, nous entreprenons de comprendre l'arrivée au pouvoir d'une nouvelle figure dans la politique iranienne qui n'est autre que le président élu en 2013. Grâce à un symbole développé et utilisé pendant les ultimes jours de sa campagne, Rouhani est parvenu à convaincre les gens qui avaient perdu tout intérêt et confiance dans la participation aux élections de se rendre aux isolements à nouveau et voter pour lui, un dignitaire religieux. Une attention particulière est accordée dans cet article au rituel comme un domaine spécialisé des experts religieux, mon hypothèse étant que l'utilisation intense pendant un très court temps d'un symbole puissant a été une stratégie très efficace pour remporter cette élection.

Mots-clefs : Iran, stratégie électorale, symbolisme, émotions.

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