

The Rowhani Front

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Articles & Testimony

The new president-elect's supporters want a better economy and integration into the international community more than they want nuclear glory.

On June 17, at his first press conference as Iran's President-elect, Hassan Rowhani broke little new ground in the Islamic Republic's relations with the West. On nuclear policy, he said that the "era of suspension is over": Iran will not accept the suspension of uranium enrichment in upcoming negotiations but will seek to make its nuclear activities more transparent in order to build international confidence. Moreover, Iran would welcome direct negotiations with the United States if the US stopped attempting to meddle in Iran's internal affairs and abandoned its "bullying attitude."

None of these statements is new. Does that mean that the world should not expect meaningful change in Iran's official behavior following Rowhani's victory?

The general impression before the election was that Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei, supported either Saeed Jalili or Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf. In recent years, Jalili has been the leading Iranian representative in international negotiations over the country's nuclear program. That made him the main target of criticism by Rowhani and another candidate, Ali Akbar Velayati, Khamenei's adviser on international affairs.

According to Rowhani and Velayati, while Iran in recent years has increased the number of centrifuges in use in its nuclear research program, the cost has been an economically devastating array of international sanctions. Rowhani promised to sustain progress on the nuclear program while adopting stronger and wiser diplomatic measures to prevent the imposition of new sanctions and pave the way for lifting the existing ones.

Jalili had not been a high-profile figure within the country. For the first time, average Iranians saw him at public events and in the media, discussing not only nuclear policy, but also his ultra-conservative policy agenda for women, youth, and cultural issues. He ended up appearing even more radical on these topics than outgoing President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

As for Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran, he proudly confessed that he was directly involved in the violent crackdown on student protesters in 2003. Indeed, he described sitting on the back of a motorcycle with a stick to command police forces to suppress the massive demonstrations. Rowhani used this against him very effectively.

Conservatives tried to convince their candidates to unite behind a single figure, but weaker candidates did not drop out in favor of a unity candidate. In particular, there is strong evidence that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) split into two major factions, with one supporting Jalili and the other backing Qalibaf. For example, Qassem Suleimani, the commander of the Quds Force, a branch of the IRGC, endorsed Qalibaf, who he hoped would receive Khamenei's full support.

The infighting among conservatives and within the IRGC increased in the last few days before the election. And, with Rowhani's surprising first-round victory -- and Khamenei's refusal to endorse either candidate -- both IRGC factions lost.

Khamenei was probably wise to step aside and let popular opinion prevail. Had either Jalili or Qalibaf been elected, the tension within the IRGC might have worsened, becoming difficult for Khamenei to control. And, by remaining on the sidelines, Khamenei may have been seeking to show the IRGC that there are limits to its power.

Though well connected to the military and security community, Rowhani was clearly considered an outsider. Indeed, he was not a political figure until now, serving in the military during the Islamic Republic's first decade and spending the last two mostly in the Supreme National Security Council. When Ahmadinejad came to power, Rowhani lost his position as the Council's secretary, but became Khamenei's personal representative to it -- a post that he has held until now.

Whether Khamenei seriously planned for Rowhani's victory, or simply calculated that the cost of preventing it would be too high, Rowhani can serve Khamenei's agenda at least as well as any other candidate. Rowhani's victory created the impression of a democratic process and relieved the popular anger that has accumulated during the last eight years, especially since the rigged presidential election in 2009. Indeed, his triumph exposed a rift among Iran's democratic forces, which were divided over whether to participate in the election, and rendered irrelevant the Green Movement born in 2009.

Rowhani's efforts to portray Iran's foreign policy in a democratic light are less convincing. For example, his call for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to remain in power until the scheduled 2014 elections is risible, given that Assad typically "wins" Syria's presidential elections by Soviet-like margins, with more than 95% of the popular vote.

More important for the regime, Rowhani's victory has bought Iran time on the nuclear issue. Not only is there less chance of new sanctions, but Rowhani's electoral legitimacy may well force the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) to offer Iran better terms in any nuclear deal.

But Khamenei will face two main challenges related to nuclear policy in the next four years. First, Rowhani's victory has delegitimized the policy of resistance that Jalili championed. Iran's government can no longer claim that the nuclear program is a national cause with broad support. Rowhani's supporters want a better economy and integration into the international community more than they want nuclear glory.

Second, even if Khamenei hands the nuclear portfolio to Rowhani (which is not certain, given that he retained it under Ahmadinejad), the new president must come to terms with the IRGC, whose support -- at least tacit -- is necessary for any nuclear deal.

To date, Iran's nuclear program and regional policies have been run by the IRGC and the country's hard-liners. They did not win the election, but they have not gone away.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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