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Iranians Choose A Centrist As Next President

Posted on **June 15, 2013** by **Arash Karami**

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With a 72% voter turnout Iranians have picked moderate candidate Hassan Rouhani with an overwhelming margin over his conservative and hard-line counterparts.

Rouhani, a 64-year-old cleric who labeled himself a “moderate” and who has been able to work with both sides and has avoided extremes, often criticized the “security environment” that has become prevalent in the country in the last few years and has touted his credentials as capable negotiator when he was in charge of nuclear negotiations with the West. In his television interviews he was often engaging and not afraid to go on the offensive. In the last few days before election day, with the withdrawal of reformist Mohammad Reza Aref and the support of reformist former President Mohammad Khatami and Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, Rouhani began to draw large crowds at rallies, suggesting the momentum was in his favor.

Many had predicted no candidate would receive the majority of votes and thus a runoff would be needed. However, surprising many analysts, Rouhani received over 18 million votes. Votes for the next three candidates were as follows: Tehran Mayor Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf received approximately 6 million votes, hard-line nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili received over 4 million votes and secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei received less than 4 million votes.

Upon news of his election, Western reporters and observers had reported that celebrations had broken out in the streets across the country.

Rouhani will be facing a litany of domestic and foreign issues, and on many fronts his efforts will be restrained by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who not only controls foreign policy and the nuclear file but has increasingly interfered in the appointment of key cabinet positions under the administration.

How effective Rouhani can be in implementing meaningful change in a system where the Supreme Leader controls nearly all the levers of power appears to be the question now.

Former spokesman for nuclear negotiations for Iran when Hassan Rouhani was in charge, Seyed Hossein Mousavian, said in an email that because of the special relationship between Rouhani and Khamenei the two can effectively work together. “The Supreme Leader will strongly support Rouhani because they have been friends for 45 years,” Mousavian said. “Rouhani has been his representative in National Security Council (NSC) for two decades. The Supreme Leader has two representatives in the NSC, and Rouhani has been constantly his representative since the beginning while the second representative has been changed three times.”

However, senior policy analyst at Rand Corporation, Alireza Nader, believes that the cards are stacked against Rouhani in implementing meaningful reform. “It remains to be seen how the ultra-conservatives among the Revolutionary Guards and Basij react to Rouhani. There was a lot of hope that Mohammad Khatami could also solve Iran’s problems when he was elected in 1997. But Khamenei and the Guards managed to constrain... A key question is whether Khamenei will trust Rouhani ... Rouhani is very closely associated with Ayatollah Rafsanjani, who was disqualified from the race [by the Guardian Council which is directly and indirectly appointed by the Supreme Leader]. This may not sit well with many of the Iranian hard-liners.”

Perhaps the most important issue facing Iran is the damage of Western sanctions on Iran’s economy as a result of their nuclear program. “While the rights of Iran for peaceful nuclear technology would remain a red line for the new administration,” Mousavian said, “the election opens a new window for the P5+1 and Iran to work on a new era of

cooperation rather than confrontation and to find a peaceful solution over Iran's nuclear dossier, face saving for both parties.”

Although many of Rouhani's supporters have taken to the streets to celebrate tonight [June 15], they too have many demands and time will tell if their demands will be met. The social and economic burdens that have been put on millions of Iranians in the last few years will take years to recover from, and the Mahmoud Ahmadinejad administration seemed either aloof or in denial as to the toll the public had taken as a result of sanctions and mismanagement. Also, the status of 2009 presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi under house arrest, and political prisoners, was a common concern at many Rouhani rallies where supporters would chant their names in support. Their release could serve as a step to broader social reforms.

Even if reforms are implemented, Rouhani's election could have benefits for Khamenei, who appeared to have backed the hard-line candidate Ahmadinejad four years ago. “Khamenei sees the condition of the country and knows that the country needs to move toward less strife domestically and in foreign policy,” former journalist and political activist Saeed Aganji told Al-Monitor. “And Rouhani poses no threat to either Khamenei or the system. He is close both to Khamenei and Rafsanjani. Therefore, Rafsanjani gets what he wants and is close to the administrative branch and Khamenei stabilizes his power. This will take pressure off of Khamenei.”

Rouhani will be sworn in as president in August.

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centrist by self-designation but as long as the "supreme leader" or super-ayatollah holds power, the election has as much to do with the future of Iran as it does with the price of borcht in Belorus

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An excellent analysis. The question remains: will Mousavi and Karroubi be released from house arrest or even "rehabilitated?" How can outside observers measure the real reformist intentions of Rouhani? And what words or actions will signal his real directions? A companion question: How best to determine the direction and intentions of the Basij vis-a-vis the new president?

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