

The Rise of the Iranian Moderates

By: [Seyed Hossein Mousavian for Al-Monitor Iran Pulse](#) Posted on **July 5**.

به فارسی

Political infighting and factionalism has become a cynical characteristic of Iranian politics since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, specifically in the last 16 years. This phenomenon escalated with the sweeping victory of the traditional left wing of the revolution relabeled as *Isahtalaban*, or “Reformists,” in the presidential election of 1997. During the eight years of President Mohammad Khatami’s administration from 1997 to 2005, the right wing of the revolution — relabeled as *Usulgarayan*, or “**Principalists**” or “Conservatives” — was progressively sidelined and replaced by Reformists. Khatami, while disapproving of factionalism, could not withstand the tide of change toward a Reformist-dominated administration. This left many Principalists alienated and bitter from the experience they faced at the hands of the Reformists.

About This Article

Summary :

The international community should seize the opportunity by Iran’s turn toward moderation and engagement under President-elect Hassan Rouhani.

Author: [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#)

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The surprise win for the Principalist candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in the 2005 presidential election turned the tide against the Reformists. This time around, the purge of Reformists from the administration was swift and almost total, ushering in a period of dominance in the administration by one faction for the next eight years.

During both periods of extreme political polarization and dominance by one faction, there existed moderates within *Isahtalaban* and *Usulgarayan*. Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani — early on in Khatami’s presidency — voiced his concern over the growing trend toward factionalism. As one of the key founders of the Islamic Republic, he cautioned that such political infighting would ultimately endanger the whole establishment. Rafsanjani instead called for like-minded politicians in both camps to create a new political movement in Iran, under the banner of moderation or centrist. Subsequently, then-Deputy Foreign Minister Mahmoud Vaezi, MP Mohammad Bagher Nobakht, Deputy Cultural Minister Ali Jannati and I met with Rafsanjani to realize the initiative. In that meeting, Rafsanjani told us, “Ruling the country with one faction would be a disaster for the country, and instead all moderates within both major factions should unite and advance economic-political development to strengthen the pillars of the Islamic Republic.” In the same meeting, we decided to establish a party, the *Hezbe Etedal va Tosehe*, or “Moderate and Development Party.” The best candidate to lead the party, according to Rafsanjani’s advice, was Hassan Rouhani. In 1999, the party and its central committee was established and led by Rouhani.

The leading political forces in the country were split between the Reformists and Principalists, while this political party would aim for moderation and economic development. This new political strand was in its infancy during Khatami’s presidency, and it faced considerable obstacles during Ahmadinejad’s era, where this school of thought and its central committee were further isolated. Under the leadership of Rouhani, the party was steadfast and kept its ground.

Rafsanjani offered four moderate choices for the 2009 presidential elections: Ali Akbar Nategh Nouri (adviser to the supreme leader and one of the leading figures of the Principalists who lost to Khatami in the 1997 presidential election), followed by Hassan Rouhani, Ali Akbar Velayati (foreign policy adviser to the supreme leader) and Ali Larijani (speaker of parliament). The leaders of the Reformist movement, Mehdi Karroubi (former speaker of parliament) and Khatami decided to support Nategh Nouri, a moderate within the Principalist camp. They met Nategh Nouri in his home and offered not to field themselves as Reformist candidates, and instead back him in the 2009 presidential race. The attempt in 2009 to bring the political spectrum to the center, however, failed primarily because Nategh Nouri was pessimistic about the chances for a moderate candidate winning the election.

The disturbances in the aftermath of the 2009 elections heightened the severity of factionalism and spilled into the public domain. By 2013, matters had become even worse with heated divisions within the ruling Principalist factions and complete sidelining of the Reformist movement.

Amid an intense political climate, the 2013 presidential elections opened up the best chance yet for the **moderates** to take the reign of power in the administration. It was, therefore, no surprise that Rafsanjani, Khatami, Nategh Nouri and even Hassan Khomeini — grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini — renewed their backing for the moderate candidate, in effect to save the establishment from disintegration and further factionalism. Rouhani, the only moderate candidate, would be the man to do the job. To further assist Rouhani in the election and not split the vote, the sole Reformist candidate, Mohammad Reza Aref, bravely and cleverly stepped aside. The gamble paid off, and Rouhani secured over 50% of the votes — negating the need for a runoff election — while the four Principalist candidates collectively secured about 40% of the votes.

With Rouhani’s victory, politics of Iran will shift toward the center and reduce 16 years of factionalism in the administration. Rouhani — a moderate centrist — believes the government cannot be ruled by one faction, neither Reformist nor Principalist. Instead, he advocates for the full utilization of the best and most capable public servants from both factions. Following his victory, [Rouhani stated](#), “This victory is a victory of wisdom, a victory of moderation, a victory of growth and awareness and a victory of commitment over extremism and ill-temper.” Addressing factionalism plaguing the country, he added, “I warmly shake the hands of all moderates, Reformists and Principalists [Conservatives].”

Rouhani's victory and moving the political spectrum to the center will have wide socioeconomic and political implications for Iran. The domestic and foreign policies of the country from 2013 to 2017 will ensure the pendulum does not swing toward the extremes; instead, it will be based on moderate policies in all arenas.

Domestically, moderate policies will be coupled with infusing seasoned and professional personnel to tackle economic and social malaise. The emphasis on national unity and development will also impact positively on civil liberties and engagement. This was [expressed](#) by President-elect Rouhani who criticized, "The freedom and rights of people have been ignored but those of the rulers have been emphasized. ... Restricting [people's right] to criticize will only stifle and lead to inefficiency." Moral principles will also be positively shaped, with an end to an era characterized by insults, baseless accusations, suspicions and overall moral degradation.

In foreign policy, the new administration will focus on reviving and restoring relations with the outside world based on respect, mutual interest and equality. While the policy will be conciliatory, the national interest, rights and dignity will not be compromised. The Foreign Ministry will make efforts to reincorporate seasoned diplomats and foreign policy experts, who in the past have been sidelined due to factionalism. These developments will professionalize the tone and nature of Iranian diplomacy, paving the way for better relations with the international community.

The world would no longer hear provocative rhetoric such as denial of the Holocaust from the new Iranian president. With the backing of the supreme leader, Rouhani's strategy and discourse would be "cooperation and constructive engagement" to enhance peace, security and stability in the Middle East and beyond. If the international community — specifically the United States — understands well the current political development taking shape in Iran, they should embark on a series of practical positive gestures. Such shift in policy can rapidly transform the current confrontational relations with Iran to cooperation.

*Ambassador [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) is a research scholar at Princeton's Woodrow Wilson School and a former spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiators. His latest book, *The Iranian Nuclear Crisis: A Memoir*, was published by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.*



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