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Death By Moderation

Will Iran's new president be weakened beyond repair even before he takes office?

BY OMID MEMARIAN | AUGUST 2, 2013



Two days before he takes office, Iranian President-elect Hassan Rouhani remains something of a blank slate. A conservative who took up a portion of the reformists' cause during the campaign, Rouhani has yet to convince Iranians -- or Americans, for that matter -- of what kind of president he will be. The unveiling of his cabinet at the inauguration ceremony on August 4, therefore, will provide the first concrete indication of which way Iran is headed -- and how the moderate Rouhani will differ from former

reformist President Mohammad Khatami and outgoing radical conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Above all else, Rouhani has presented himself as a moderate. During the campaign, he repeatedly emphasized "**moderation**" and "**being a moderate**," attractive phrases that resonate with many Iranians, as well as observers in the West who are fed up with eight years of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. But in Iran's highly polarized political environment -- split between conservatives and reformists, and increasingly between conservative groups who have serious internal disputes -- what Rouhani represents is both ambiguous and mysterious.

The haziness envelopes not only Washington, where diplomats are waiting to see how Rouhani's government will approach the nuclear standoff, but also Tehran, where hardliners and reformists are struggling to figure out which direction Rouhani plans to take the country and how he plans to implement his moderate policies -- both foreign and domestic.

Without a doubt, Rouhani owes reformists big time. With his strong roots among the traditional clerics in Iran, Rouhani initially had little chance of winning the presidential election. But the intervention of two former presidents, Mohammad Khatami and Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, on Rouhani's behalf prompted the only reformist candidate in the race, Mohammad Reza Aref, to withdraw just days before the election and paved the way for his victory.

Rouhani also benefitted from his intensely conservative background and, in particular, his sudden turn to the center: His embrace of political rights and civil liberties on the one hand, and his promise to eliminate sanctions on the other, helped generate serious momentum in the race. Rouhani not only earned the votes of the urban middle class, he also got the votes of those suffering the most under the economic conditions of today's Iran. Many of these voters are deeply conservative.

Now that Rouhani will be president, both groups are demanding their share of his victory.

The reformists -- who have all but vanished from Iran's political scene for the past eight years and whose two presidential candidates in the 2009 race, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir Hossein Mousavi, have been under house arrest for more than 1,000 days -- want Rouhani to follow through on his campaign promises. The conservatives, meanwhile, have their own demands and are seriously concerned that the reformists may claw their way back into power.

In the words of former Tehran Mayor Gholamhosein Karbaschi, who met with the president-elect in June, "[E]very faction considers Rouhani totally its own and wants to see all its own demands reflected in his [cabinet] choices." Rouhani, for his part, has attempted to appear disinterested, promising to engage both groups in his cabinet. As a result, Karbaschi said, Rouhani's final decision "can lead some to be dissatisfied about some of the choices." The question is whether his centrist approach can succeed.

Hossein Mousavian, spokesman for Iran's nuclear negotiating team from 2003 to 2005 and Rouhani's go-to man at the time, thinks that it can: "The cabinet's preliminary composition... which is about 70 to 80 percent of what is to come, indicates that [Rouhani] has been successful in his first step towards realization of a non-partisan cabinet," he told **Foreign Policy** in an interview. "I believe he has a high chance of receiving the parliament's vote of confidence on his cabinet," he said, adding that parliamentary approval would indicate that lawmakers intend to engage with the president's agenda, rather than confront it.

But for hardliners in Tehran, "non-partisan" means a cabinet without reformists. In a July 29 editorial, Hossein Shariatmadari, the editor in chief of the radical conservative *Kayhan* newspaper, claimed that several of Rouhani's proposed cabinet members had been involved in the 2009 popular protests. As a result, he called on members of parliament to withhold their votes of confidence: "It is now upon the Majlis [parliament] and the representatives to act upon their legal duties and Islamic obligations and to cleanse the new government's cabinet from the presence of disloyal secessionists of 2009," he wrote.

Kayhan holds a special place in Iranian politics: The publication's managing editor is appointed by the Supreme Leader himself, who is also a loyal reader of the newspaper and a major player in every president's cabinet selection process.

Conservative pressure is building on Rouhani from numerous quarters. According to a political activist in Tehran who is knowledgeable about cabinet developments, even the *Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps* has submitted a list of its favorite candidates to Rouhani. "Ayatollah Khamenei has rejected the first five candidates Rouhani suggested for the ministries of Culture and Islamic Guidance, Intelligence, Science and Technology, Interior, and the Environmental Protection Organization," the activist said on the condition of anonymity.

The rejected candidates were former ministers and officials in Khatami's reformist government: Ahmad Masjed Jame'i, Ali Younesi, Jafar Tofighi, Majid Ansari, and Massoumeh Ebtekar. "Rouhani is looking to reach an agreement with Ali Larijani [the speaker of the parliament], so that he can get the vote of confidence for his cabinet without having to pay for resistance. I think Rouhani wants to relinquish the domestic issues to the conservatives, but have more maneuverability with respect to foreign policy," the activist said.

Karim Sadjadpour, a leading policy analyst and researcher on Iran at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington DC, had a similar take, predicting that Rouhani might sacrifice human rights improvement in order to resolve the nuclear issue. "Based on Rouhani's rhetoric, it's clear that he would prefer a more tolerant Islamic Republic. But it's a question of priorities. He may need to expend his limited political capital, trying to reach an internal consensus for a nuclear deal, rather than fighting hardliners for greater political and social freedoms," he said.

Rouhani's strategy may pay off in the end. Sadegh Zibakalam, a prominent political analyst who teaches political science at Tehran University, told **Foreign Policy** that Rouhani has substantially greater negotiating power and maneuverability than his reformist predecessor, Khatami.

"Rouhani wants to be a moderate, meaning that he wishes to emphasize the reformists' demands, but he will not appoint anyone as a minister or adviser who would provoke the conservatives," Zibakalam said. "Several of the ministers Khatami had picked [in his two terms in office from 1997 to 2005] caused great disappointment for Ayatollah Khamenei and other conservative leaders."

But it is precisely this unwillingness to challenge the Supreme Leader that explains why many reformists fear that Rouhani's adoption of reformist positions during the campaign was merely a political stunt -- a fear that has been enflamed by his decision to hand critical ministries over to the conservative camp.

A seasoned politician close to Hashemi Rafsanjani's camp who has been in the working groups determining cabinet members over the past several weeks told **Foreign Policy** that even though most of the individuals in the working groups are either moderates close to Rouhani or reformists close to Rafsanjani, the names on the list indicate that the behind-the-scenes lobbying from conservatives has clearly left its mark on the process.

"Two major groups have played the biggest roles in designing Rouhani's new cabinet: first, the Supreme Leader and his inner circle, and second, Ali Larijani, the powerful parliament speaker whose vote of confidence Rouhani will need for his cabinet," he said. "Rouhani is a conservative who became a reformist overnight. He gives in to pressure very easily, because he is worried that struggling with the conservatives could end his career in failure like that of Mohammad Khatami's."

According to the same source, some members of the parliament's conservative majority have warned that if their opinions are not reflected in Rouhani's cabinet choices, they will not vote for several of his ministers. The two groups have leaned especially hard on Rouhani to appoint conservatives to the critical Intelligence and the Interior ministries and make sure they remain out of the control of reformists -- or even candidates close to Rafsanjani. Since he was disqualified from running for president, Rafsanjani's relationship with the Supreme Leader has soured dramatically. "They [Khamenei and Rafsanjani] used to meet every week, but since the election, they have not met" the source

added.

But while Rouhani has caved to conservatives on certain areas, he has refused to compromise on his choice to lead the Foreign Ministry. According to an individual who has met with him over the past few weeks, the president-elect remains committed to nominating Javad Zarif, a U.S. educated diplomat who served as Iran's Representative to the United Nations from 2002-2007.

"Rouhani's main promise was to remove the sanctions and to reduce tensions with the West and to have talks with the [United States]," said the source. "He wants all these developments to go through the Foreign Ministry, unlike in the Ahmadinejad era, when the negotiations took place through Saeed Jalili, secretary of the National Security Council. He doesn't see the subject of civil and political rights he also promised on his working agenda [as taking place in] the short-term."

Mahmoud Shamsolvaezin, a journalist and political analyst in Tehran, said no matter whom Rouhani picks for his cabinet, Iran's new president is determined to move forward seriously and immediately on one of his two major promises: negotiating with the West and removing the sanctions.

"The way the Foreign Ministry is organized, including the selection of Javad Zarif, sends a signal that experienced diplomats are returning to the Foreign Ministry," said Shamsolvaezin in a telephone interview with **Foreign Policy** from Tehran. "The team Rouhani is putting together is not for negotiating with Bahrain, Qatar, or the Emirates. It is clear that the organization is being set up to negotiate with the biggest world power over...Iran's nuclear program," he added.

So far, however, there is no indication that Rouhani's strategy of appeasing the conservative base while pursuing a non-confrontational foreign policy agenda is working.

Rouhani's willingness to bow to conservatives in selecting his cabinet may send mixed messages to observers in Washington, who are cautiously following the president-elect's

every move. While those who press for tougher sanctions regardless of who is in power in Tehran can point to this to support their cause, those who favor negotiations might see Rouhani's inability to rise above domestic power struggles as proof that he is too weak to be a deal-maker, even before he takes office.

On Wednesday, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a **new round** of sanctions on Iran's oil industry, sending a powerful signal to Tehran that the pressure will not subside until the new administration makes some meaningful and tangible moves to address American concerns about the country's nuclear program.

But many Iranian observers see the U.S. Congress's serial sanctions bills -- particularly the recent one -- as especially damaging. Though many believe Rouhani might be a game-changer in dealing with the nuclear dispute, the accumulating sanctions could muddy the issue by sending mixed messages to the Iranian leadership about how to move forward. If the United States continues to push on sanctions before Rouhani lays out a plan for moving forward with the upcoming negotiations, it might also weaken him politically and give him less maneuverability at home.

According to Mousavian, "The big question in Tehran right now is, 'Who is making decisions in Washington?' and there is a lot of suspicion and doubt about whether the U.S. government has any power of its own, or not. Washington always blamed Iran, saying 'We don't know who makes the decisions in Iran, therefore we don't know with whom to negotiate,'" he said.

In Mousavian's view, however, "Tehran can also blame the U.S., for it's not clear who makes the decisions in Washington. Is Mr. Obama's nuclear negotiation team the decision-maker? Why would a team that has no control over the sanctions come to the negotiation table? How can Obama reach a deal with Iran, if he wants to fundamentally challenge Iran?"

Still, while Rouhani's suggested cabinet list might seem disappointing to many reformists many others are optimistic that the new president can engage with the United States and

take tangible steps toward dealing with Iran's international crisis. "I don't doubt that we will witness diplomatic negotiations with American moderates in different capitals as the first steps of a new season in the Iran-US relations," the journalist Shamsolvaezin said.

Regardless of whom he ultimately chooses as his ministers, Rouhani will face two major challenges: international sanctions and Iran's domestic economy, which he can only resolve with consensus among the country's leaders; and the civil and political demands of a wide cross section of the people whose rights were violated after the 2009 election, and who voted him into office.

As Rouhani navigates the fractious political environment in Tehran, his major asset will be Iranian public opinion, on the one hand anxious for the removal of sanctions, and on the other craving more civil and political freedom. Still, he must realize that both the Iranian people and the international community are impatient, and his honeymoon with conservatives won't last long.

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mikevolze

It's nice to see that people think Rouhani will be a moderate, now if only he would stop the enrichment process...oh wait he hasn't done a thing. [jella369](#)

[http://online.wsj.com/article](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887323997004578644140963633244.html?KEYWORDS=Iran+Nuclear)

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2 DAYS AGO



The_Thresh

This is the key question. Ultimately, the same Supreme Leader is still in charge, Iran is still seeking the bomb, and the US and Israel want to stop this. There's a case that Iran will be bombed or have the bomb by the end of the year. See the article at TheThresh.com.

3 DAYS AGO



FaramarzFathi

[The_Thresh](#)

Well, some argue Iran should be a fool not to have the bomb.

Not having the bomb will leave the region in status quo. On the other hand, having the bomb will bring stability in the region and Iran won't be at endless threats and hostilities receiving end anymore too.

Faramarz Fathi

3 DAYS AGO



Falkis

[FaramarzFathi](#)

[The_Thresh](#)

What threats has Iran received that don't have to do with the nuclear program? And as Pakistan can tell you, there is no way for a nuclear state to be threatened, uh huh.

2 DAYS AGO



Nickusik007

What kind of moderation you talking about? Dogma and nihilist never going be moderate, artificially to play double game yes! So we don't have to be naïve -- one son is gone and the other just get in. My believe is No difference he already urged that "Israeli occupation - the wound of the Islamic world" So. International community has to be so careful, cause this guy seem more dangerous than previous one!

4 DAYS AGO



FaramarzFathi

[Nickusik007](#)

"he already urged that "Israeli occupation - the wound of the Islamic world ""

And the error here is?

Faramarz Fathi

4 DAYS AGO



wasp2179

FaramarzFathi

Let me help you.

Here's what a true statement reads like:

The Islamic world is a cesspool of intolerance, racism and misogyny. Islam - a wound to the civilized world.

4 DAYS AGO



FaramarzFathi

wasp2179

wasp2179:

Coming from you every Muslim will take this as compliments please be assured.

Faramarz Fathi

3 DAYS AGO



wasp2179

Nickusik007

Well said.

4 DAYS AGO



FaramarzFathi

Nickusik007

Nickusik007:

"What kind of moderation you talking about ? Dogma and nihilist never going be moderate ,"

For a moment I thought you were talking about those vile Apartheid leaders who currently are running two concentration camps in Palestine.

My apologies.

Faramarz Fathi

3 DAYS AGO



Puller58

All the Presidents are largely ceremonial. The Supreme Ruler isn't going to share power with a mere mortal...

4 DAYS AGO



RafaSantos

Well, considering Warmongers United, aka US Congress and Senate, are lobbying for more starvation, more medicine-deprivation, of Iranian families even before the fellow takes office, that seems to be a possibility.

5 DAYS AGO



FaramarzFathi

"he must realize that both the Iranian people and the international community are impatient, and his honeymoon with conservatives won't last long." End of quote.

I beg to differ here.

Even though I have not been in Iran for the last 5 years but the message I get through variety of correspondences with the family, relatives and friends, indicates the Iranian people overall, despite all the hardships they are enduring as result of sanctions, are actually learning to live without imports, which BTW has paved way for significant domestic productions and are content and proud with the stand their government has taken against unreasonable and illegal demands by the so called International Community which is limited to heads of Western governments.

I do not know this author here and likewise, do not know what kind of seclusions or solitude he has been confining himself to for the last decade but the real international community is applauding Iran for not bowing to West for its only guilt of being independent and disobedient.

Faramarz Fathi

5 DAYS AGO



rubbermaid

FaramarzFathi

I do not know you, and likewise, do not know what kind of seclusions or solitude that you have been confining yourself to for the last decade, but there is no 'real' international community that applauds Iran. Most people don't care enough to have any opinions on the matter. And those who do are sharply divided between two camps; those who really do applaud Iran but tend to be crackpots and/or powerless, and those who seethe at Iran for its nuclear armament programs and who have power.

5 DAYS AGO

**FaramarzFathi**

rubbermaid

Rubber:

“those who really do applaud Iran but tend to be crackpots and/or powerless, and those who seethe at Iran for its nuclear armament programs and who have power.”

I beg to differ here.

Many neutral scientists, intellectual, academics and politicians throughout the world commend Iran's stance on their nuclear programs that is if they don't call for Iran to go nuclear to preserve its sovereignty and maintain deterrence against endless aggressions and hostilities by US.

The latter are those who put interests of US before another country which makes them irrelevant to begin with.

Faramarz Fathi

4 DAYS AGO

**MarkThomason**

FaramarzFathi

That was an important side effect of the US experience with embargo, when our own government embargoed Europe during the Napoleonic Wars. That promoted US industry. While it hurt many commercial interests, it helped other commercial interests. There was regional tension, but some approved just as some disapproved.

4 DAYS AGO

**FaramarzFathi**

MarkThomason

Informative and thank you.

Faramarz Fathi

4 DAYS AGO

**Falkis**

MarkThomason

FaramarzFathi

The embargo was generally considered an embarrassing failure for Jefferson, smuggling was widespread, and its total failure to resolve the disputes with Britain lead to the War of 1812. The embargo only lasted a year. American industrialization would be more aided by Clay's American system, which involved tariffs and infrastructure improvements, though even this was never fully implemented, due to objections from the South and West.

2 DAYS AGO

wasp2179



Iran went from a cartoon-like president who clashed with Khamenei, to a grey inside man who is part of Khamenei's circle.

As far as the West is concerned, nothing essential is likely to change. Only the rhetoric might be less venomous.

6 DAYS AGO

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