



Seyed Hossein Mousavian, Contributor

Former head of the Foreign Relations Committee of Iran's National Security Council

Winning Iran's Election Is Just The Beginning Of Rouhani's Political Struggles

Iran's president may have been re-elected, but he'll need to win the supreme leader's support and get foreign powers to engage with Tehran to be successful.

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ATTA KENARE VIA GETTY IMAGES

Securing his office is one thing. Selling policies to the supreme leader is another.

Iranians just overwhelmingly voted to keep President Hassan Rouhani in power after a fiercely competitive and divisive election campaign. But while the president's re-election was hailed by moderates as a rejection of isolation and populism, it is only the beginning of a much larger battle for the centrist leader — one that will require Rouhani to make good on past promises while finding a way to compromise with those whom he now needs on his side.

Iran's presidential election took place at a time when the country is witnessing its most sensitive political period since its 1979 revolution. There is unprecedented regional turmoil and a newly elected American president who, on his first overseas trip, openly advocated for overt confrontation with the Islamic republic. It is amidst such a backdrop that Rouhani's resounding victory promises to be especially significant for the country as it defines its future — and as the global community decides how to react to that future.

Rouhani beat out the other remaining candidates, some from the moderate camp and some from the principlist, or conservative, camp. His main rival, Ebrahim Raisi, took the second largest voting percentage at 38.5 percent. In Raisi was the potential for a more conservative Iran. This potential has, for now, been quelled.



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The Iranian electorate has spoken in its decision between two stark alternatives: strengthening civil society and engaging with the world, or turning inward with economic populism and combative foreign policy. In decisively voting for Rouhani, Iranians have endorsed diplomacy and moderation. And they have done so in direct contrast to U.S. President Donald Trump, who has called for increasing tensions with Iran and championed isolationist foreign policy.

The real test now is what comes next. The near-record voter turnout of over 40 million people, coupled with Rouhani's strong electoral performance, is a move in the right direction. But the president also faces a divided nation disillusioned in part by the promises of increased domestic civil rights and economic stability from the nuclear deal that Rouhani ran on — and that have yet to be fully realized. If Rouhani wants to be successful in his second term as president, he's going to need to follow through on those promises, win over the loyalty of moderate principlists — including those who tended to favor Raisi — and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and convince them and foreign powers why the world must engage positively with Iran. But his past looms as he looks ahead.

How Rouhani Became Vulnerable



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In his first term, Rouhani's achievements were overshadowed by his inability to deliver on the promises of the nuclear deal.

As president, Rouhani has political sway, but it is Ayatollah Khamenei who makes the top decisions and the moderate principlists, conservatives who are open to working with Rouhani but don't necessarily support him, who serve as an influential power center in the country. Both have strongly criticized broader negotiations with the United States after the nuclear deal. Thus much of Rouhani's ability to mandate reform this time around will be determined in part by how much credibility he's able to regain within these domestic circles and by his willingness to appease key leaders.

During the nuclear negotiations, Rouhani had Ayatollah Khamenei's blessing and a mostly united nation behind him. He reinforced this support by successfully bringing the country back from the brink of economic collapse, implementing policies that took Iran from a recession to an estimated 7 percent annual economic growth, reduced the inflation rate from 40 percent to single digits,

But over the course of his first term, Rouhani gradually faced a more polarized public. And support from the supreme leader subsided as well as the eventual nuclear deal failed to produce expected dividends. This endorsement must be regained if Rouhani's policy preferences are to sustainably implemented.

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In fact, Rouhani's failure to produce on the nuclear deal proved to be a dark cloud over his other achievements — the biggest challenge to his re-election bid was the state of the country's economy nearly two years after those negotiations. Iranians are disappointed with the slow results of the landmark agreement made with the U.S. and other world powers. Rouhani's signature foreign policy achievement — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA — for many Iranians seems to have been oversold, largely due to the short span between the deal's implementation and this election and U.S.-induced obstacles to proper sanctions relief.

Opponents of Rouhani capitalized on the president's difficulty in delivering the fruits of the nuclear deal. They largely mocked his foreign policy strategy of diplomatic engagement with global powers, including direct high-level talks with the United States, labeling it as weak and lambasting him for catering to Western powers. Raisi, the judge who became Rouhani's biggest rival in the election, accused Rouhani of pursuing “begging diplomacy.” And leading up to the vote, senior Iranian cleric Kazem Seddiqi was known to have accused the politically moderate camp of “being cowardly” when working with foreign, particularly Western, leaders.

Rouhani's landslide victory represents a public rebuke to these criticisms, but the president will nonetheless have to continue striking a balance between pragmatic foreign policy and preservation of Iran's rights and dignity. It is a nuance Rouhani didn't shy away from in his victory speech, when he said that he wanted to engage with the world on the “basis of mutual respect and [Iran's] national interests” but would not settle for “threats and humiliation.”

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One of the key ways this balance will be tested is in the way he chooses to approach Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia. The president's willingness to mend tension with the kingdom under certain circumstances is a controversial view that ensued much debate during the campaign and similarly earned him the scorn of his principlist rival. Raisi reportedly claimed, during a presidential debate, that Saudi Arabia acts only in line with American strategic preferences, and characterized the Saudi government as a “cancerous tumor” in the region that seeks to sow division in the Islamic world. His comments stood out because they marked the first time in Iranian politics the “cancerous tumor” label, usually reserved for Israel, had been applied to Saudi Arabia.

Meanwhile, Rouhani has denounced a 2016 attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran and exercised inclusive and conciliatory rhetoric in domestic issues, especially in relation to Iranian minorities. And it seemed to work in his favor this election. For the first time, Iran's Sunni minority coalesced around one candidate, with Iran's Sunni spiritual leader Molavi Abdul Hamid endorsing Rouhani. This should be interpreted as a positive message by Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states and inform their policies towards Iran.

A Challenging Path Forward: Trump And Saudi





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Trump's dangerous embrace of Saudi Arabia's vision for the Middle East could have disastrous effects on Iran and the region.

What happens next remains to be seen, but if the Arab Islamic American Summit in Saudi Arabia with Donald Trump is any indication, Rouhani has many foreign policy challenges ahead. In fact, while Iranians went to the polls, those very Sunni Arab states who could have looked to Rouhani's openness for diplomacy in a positive light, reacted with clenched fists. And so did Donald Trump.

Hours after Rouhani declared victory in Iran, Trump signed an over \$100 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia, further militarizing the region. The deal, according to U.S. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, was designed to help Saudi Arabia counter "malign Iranian influence." In a similar vein, the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia have indicated that they are taking steps to form an unprecedented anti-Iranian so-called "Arab NATO." This anti-Iran collaboration was reinforced during the U.S. president's stay in Saudi Arabia, where Trump declared in his keynote address that, "all nations of conscience must work together to isolate" Iran.

Trump's apparent eagerness to increase Iran-Saudi tensions, contrary to former U.S. President Barack Obama's belief that the two countries should "share" the region, will exacerbate regional instability and encourage Saudi Arabia to remain intransigent in response to Rouhani's overtures. His call in Saudi Arabia for "all nations of conscience" to "isolate" Iran not only will surely fail and put the U.S. and Iran even deeper on the path to confrontation, but will also prove to be a lose-lose strategy for Washington, Tehran, Riyadh and the other regional nations.

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Further, the U.S. president's decision to fight the nuclear deal will only disenfranchise the very Iranian people both he and King Salman of Saudi Arabia claimed to have great respect for. A JCPOA- violating sanctions bill is circulating in the U.S. Senate with significant Democratic support. The Trump administration, despite its recent renewal of JCPOA sanctions waivers, is still fundamentally critical of the deal, raising serious doubts about its sustainability. In the midst of all of this, Iran's neighborhood is

But there is hope. What stands out most about the Iranian election is its uniqueness in the region. Iran's first experiment with democratic elections occurred over 100 years ago, but the energy and competitive atmosphere during this campaign was unparalleled. It bore far more resemblance to elections in the West than those of America's regional allies, who are decades behind Iran in terms of democratic practice and mostly run along familial or tribal lines. People still chose the embattled Rouhani, even in spite of all the setbacks his domestic and foreign policies presented.

Now that he has an election mandate, perhaps Rouhani's biggest fight beyond regaining support from the supreme leader and the public will be reacting to President Trump. Trump stands at a fork in the road as well. He can either accept the resounding call of the Iranian people for peaceful engagement, or he can return to the pre-Obama U.S. policy of unrelenting hostility towards Iran. If he chooses the former, he will find a receptive voice in Tehran. But if he chooses the latter, as his speech in Saudi seemed to indicate, the Iranian people and Rouhani will have to be united in resisting aggressive U.S. policies, as they did during Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iran during the 1980s.

It looks like Trump and Rouhani both have a long road ahead of them.

Ambassador Seyed Hossein Mousavian is a Middle East security and nuclear policy specialist at Princeton University and a former chief of Iran's National Security Council's Foreign Relations Committee.

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