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Hassan Rowhani's Election as President of Iran: Initial Assessments

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The election of Hassan Rowhani as Iran's president is surprising – not only in the very fact of his election, but particularly in the large majority he received, which made a second round of voting unnecessary. Prior to the elections, two candidates were considered to lead the race: Saeed Jalili, who is Iran's national security advisor and head of the Iranian nuclear negotiating team, and is very close to Supreme Leader Khamenei; and Tehran's popular mayor, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. In the elections themselves, Rowhani earned 50.7 percent of the total vote, with each of the other candidates receiving less than 17 percent.

Rowhani, who was the only cleric among the candidates and who holds a doctorate in law, is not one of the leaders of the reformist camp, which rose following the last presidential election in 2009. However, of all the candidates Rowhani is closest to the reformers, and he is their main hope. Presumably, therefore, he was elected mainly by three groups: the reformists, various minorities that he addressed, and those who saw him as a chance for relief from the sanctions imposed on Iran and a chance for improvement in the Iranian economy. In this election, followers of Supreme Leader Khamenei likely did not attempt to falsify the election results, as they apparently did in 2009, because they feared that it would lead to unrest this time, as it did four years ago. As such, the election of Rowhani appears to reflect both a real desire for change among the Iranian public and the impact of the sanctions and the deteriorating economic situation.

The fact that Rowhani was not disqualified as a candidate for the presidency, as many others were – in particular, former president Rafsanjani – may indicate that Khamenei did not feel he would constitute a major challenge as a president. Nonetheless, his term as president could create serious difficulties for the Supreme Leader and his associates, for several reasons. First, Iran has long experienced tensions between the Supreme Leader and the three presidents who served during his tenure: Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad. These tensions stemmed from the structure of the regime, which is based on a supreme leader appointed in effect for his entire life and a president elected in general elections, and from the friction resulting from the division of powers between

them. Second, the election of Rowhani could revive and strengthen the reformist camp, which has kept a low profile since it was suppressed in the demonstrations in the summer of 2009. If this occurs, Rowhani's election could serve as an important milestone in shaping the regime. Third, the fact that Rowhani earned such broad popular support could give him power vis-à-vis Khamenei and the conservatives.

Nevertheless, Khamenei may well have an interest in exploiting Rowhani's image as a moderate to attempt to have the sanctions lifted and improve Iran's international standing without paying too heavy a price on the nuclear issue.

It is clear to everyone that the main decision maker in Iran is the Supreme Leader. However, the president is the second most important figure, especially in domestic affairs. He appoints the ministers (in Iran, there is no prime minister under the president), and he is responsible for the management and performance of the government and for shaping and implementing economic policy. While his authority in the realm of foreign policy and the nuclear issue in particular is limited – the official who decides this issue is the Supreme Leader – the president does not lack influence in this area because he is the head of the Supreme National Security Council, and he presents Iranian policy to the outside world. The fact that Rowhani has in the past dealt with foreign affairs and the nuclear issue as head of the nuclear negotiating team under President Khatami, while Khamenei has not left Iran since his appointment as Supreme Leader in 1989, could enhance the President's influence.

Rowhani will likely lend high priority to the effort to promote a solution to the nuclear issue in order to ease the sanctions on Iran. During the election campaign, he stressed his commitment to a moderate approach and a solution to the problem of sanctions and Iran's international isolation, although like the other candidates, he vowed to continue the nuclear program. To that end, he is likely to attempt to formulate new proposals in order to reach an agreement with Western governments. He may also initiate direct contact with the US administration on this issue. The question is how much leeway Khamenei will give him; it will likely not be much. Khatami, Iran's president from 1997 to 2005 and considered a moderate, attempted to publicly initiate a dialogue with the American people, but was stopped by Khamenei; and during his term in office, an important breakthrough in uranium enrichment occurred with the construction of the enrichment facility in Natanz. The more likely possibility is that during the coming period, Iran will perhaps be prepared to make tactical concessions on the nuclear issue, but that Khamenei will not permit concessions with strategic significance.

Rowhani's election has been welcomed by the US administration and other Western governments, which expect that his presidency will allow real progress on the nuclear issue and will perhaps even strengthen the reformists and see the start of internal changes

in Iran. They also eye his election as a first sign indicating that the sanctions are beginning to affect Iran, and therefore they will likely seek to give another opportunity to the diplomatic option while examining Rowhani's internal room to maneuver and his ability to advance a settlement. It is also possible that in this framework, there will be elements in the West that propose to lighten the sanctions on Iran in order to provide Rowhani with an achievement and strengthen his power domestically in advance of a settlement. In this spirit, at this stage the US administration will likely take the military option off the table and demand that Israel do so as well, until the chances of achieving a settlement with Iran become clear.

From Israel's point of view, Rowhani's election involves both opportunities and risks. The former include the possibility of a settlement that would be acceptable to Israel, and the possibility of the start of internal change in Iran. For now, these possibilities are not very likely. For his part, Rowhani will likely shun Amadinejad's rhetoric on the need to wipe Israel off the map and denial of the Holocaust, which many in Iran see as a gratuitous error. If this happens, Israel will lose a public relations asset because Ahmadinejad's harsh statements helped Israel illustrate the threat of a nuclear Iran. More importantly, the moderate image of the new president could help lessen the international pressure on Iran, and later, perhaps even encourage a deal on the nuclear issue that would not be acceptable to Israel.

