

Rouhani to the rescue: aiming for the Middle Way in the Islamic Republic

By Kjetil Selvik

■ Executive summary

Hassan Rouhani won Iran's presidential elections by posing as the voice of protest and change. Though previously considered a conservative, he ran a campaign with a strong reformist flavour. Rouhani himself does not use the terms "conservative" and "reformist" but defines himself as a moderate. He represents a middle-of-the-road current in Iranian politics which deplors the country's development under President Ahmadinejad. Rouhani's victory will empower this centrist political current. However, the 2013 election has also brought the centrists closer to the reformists. There is, hence, a new momentum for reform.

Rouhani pledges to save Iran from the damage caused by "extremism". It means rescuing the economy, reviving public trust and re-creating cooperative ties with the world. A key factor that will determine his success is whether or not he can assure the support of the Leader. This report argues that Khamenei may in fact see opportunities in Rouhani's presidency, as it can serve to defuse internal and external tensions. Rouhani's background is as suited for mending fences within the system as it is for negotiating with the international community. However, the ability to change will depend on Khamenei holding the security apparatus in line, external developments and the demands of protestors.

Introduction

When Hassan Rouhani prevailed in the June 14th 2013 presidential election with 50.71% of the vote, both the Iranian regime and its reformist opposition claimed victory: the regime because the participation rate was high, 72.7%, and because it had demonstrated to "the enemies" that elections in Iran are genuine; the reformist opposition because the president-elect had adopted its political demands and symbols. Given how the authorities had clashed with the Green Movement in 2009, such harmony was not the expected outcome. Nevertheless, it was precisely with reference to the previous electoral experience that both the regime and the reformists felt vindicated.

The signs before the elections were not encouraging. From early winter 2013, the security apparatus exercised various forms of pressure on the reformists to convey that their

figurehead Mohammad Khatami was unwelcome as a candidate in the electoral contest. Discouraged by the lack of room for political manoeuvring, most reformists seemed to have reached the conclusion that they had better abstain from, or even boycott, the entire electoral circus. Then the middle-of-the-road current received a blow when the candidature of Hashemi Rafsandjani, former president and chairman of the Expediency Council, was rejected by the Guardian Council. All seemed to point in the direction of voter disillusionment and victory for the conservative faction.

However, the Guardian Council had kept Rouhani and Mohammad Reza Aref in the race as second-rate centrist and reformist options. Through outspoken campaigns, they managed to arouse elector interest against the odds. The paradox of Iranian politics is that candidates that belong to a narrow group of ideologically and politically selected

“insiders” are able to mobilise broad segments of society in elections. Once past the vetting stage, they are forced to appeal to the public at large in order to win the electoral game. Successful contestants are those who best capture and attune their discourse to popular sentiment. As long as the count is fair, this provides a level of responsiveness to the populace of the Islamic Republic.

The discourse carved out during electoral campaigns tends to define Iran’s political direction for the following years. Broadly speaking, there are three main political discourses in the Islamic Republic. The first is the centrist-pragmatic discourse which gained prominence when Rafsandjani was elected president on the promise of post-war reconstruction in 1989. It stresses competence over ideology and pragmatism over lofty political goals. The second is the reformist discourse which showed its force during the election of Khatami in 1997. It calls for the strengthening of civil society, constitutional government and recognition of the will of the people as the most important source of political authority. The third is the conservative discourse which wore traditional garments in the 1990s and emerged with a neoconservative slant under Ahmadinejad. It insists on the absolute authority of the Leader and “the system” over popular sovereignty.

Hassan Rouhani’s discourse is closest to the first of these and heralds the return of centrists to the Iranian government offices. As he made clear in his first TV interview during the electoral campaign, “I have never been extreme (*efratgar*), neither to the right nor left” (Seda va Sima 2, 2013). After eight years of polarisation under Ahmadinejad’s confrontational governing style, this is a position that carries increasing weight. However, Rouhani, who historically has stood to the right of Rafsandjani, also borrowed from the reformist agenda in his campaign. His calls for “desecuritisation” and political and civil rights in particular had a strong reformist flavour.

Who dares wins: Rouhani’s electoral platform

The Islamic Republic is an ideological regime, but it enjoys no ideological hegemony. Rouhani’s recipe for victory was criticising the political order and cultivating symbols of change. It implied distancing himself from Khamenei’s discourse and carried the risk of alienating the Leader. However, it was this very courage and independence that made him credible in the eyes of the average Iranian voter.

In his address to the Iranian people on the first day of the Iranian New Year, March 21st 2013, Khamenei seemed to impose a certain vision on the presidential contest. He criticised the inclination of some to stress only weakness in the country’s development, whereas in fact “other nations were learning from the experiences of Iran” (Khamenei, 2013). He spoke at length of the country’s “enemies” and explained that sanctions were having the opposite of the intended effect. What had been imposed to cripple the country had in fact strengthened Iran because the nation had learned to stand on its own feet. Interestingly, he

mentioned in passing that he would not oppose the government negotiating with the U.S., yet also emphasised his disbelief that such negotiations yield results.

Heeding the New Year speech and other similar messages from the Leader, some candidates based their electoral platform on this “official script”. The hardliner Saeed Jalili, in particular, mimicked Khamenei’s approach in his speeches. It meant that he would not dwell on social and economic problems in the country but rather focused on achievements and positive traits. He talked tough about the Islamic Republic’s “enemies”, lauded the revolutionary ideology and stressed the merits of what Khamenei calls “resistance economy” (*eqtesad-e moqavamati*). Jalili held up the slogan that “resistance is the key to progress”, almost seeming more Catholic than the Pope himself.

By contrast, Rouhani painted a gloomy picture of his country’s state. Echoing the traditional singer Mohammad Reza Shajarian’s interpretation of Mehdi Akhavan Sales’ poem “It’s Winter”, Rouhani emphatically stated: “We are in a cultural, political and economic winter, and it is unfairly cold!” (Rouhani.ir, 2013). Shajarian was very critical of the Iranian regime after 2009 and the clampdown on Green Movement protestors. It is, therefore, not trivial that on several occasions Rouhani expressed how much he likes him.

Rouhani’s campaign team made a captivating documentary named *This Is a Spring that Waits behind the Winter*. It relies heavily on situations where Hashemi Rafsandjani and Khatami (as well as the Leader) express appreciation and respect for Rouhani. The strong use of these two leaders in the context of the presidential election was significant. They were symbols of those excluded from the contest by the security apparatus and the Guardian Council. “They have set people aside,” the documentary laments. “It burns the heart” (Rouhani.ir, 2013). Next, Hashemi Rafsandjani’s image appears on the screen, in silence.

The strongest symbols of protest and opposition were, however, conveyed by Rouhani’s encounters with the public. In video footage reminiscent of the protests of 2009, Rouhani’s supporters chanted slogans in support of the opposition leaders Mir-Hussayn Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi and the freeing of political prisoners. Rouhani did nothing to dissociate himself from these security-sensitive displays; on the contrary, he had his campaign distribute the footage. He spoke against the increasing securitisation of the Iranian regime and called for the protection of civil liberties. In TV interviews he deplored that voters and peaceful protestors had been met with violence in 2009 and blamed the whole situation on “extremism”. Contrary to official discourse, he seemed to imply not protester radicalism but rather extremism within the system. Thus, crossing the red lines of the security apparatus, Rouhani built his reputation among the public.

Rouhani’s campaign was a conscious attempt to win the hearts of the disgruntled majority in Iran and the support of

the reformists. Public endorsements by Rafsandjani and Khatami a few days before the election were a major boost for his popularity. However, Rouhani's orientation towards reformist discourse and symbols represents something deeper than a mere electoral tactic. It is consistent with similar moves over recent years by many conservative centrists. After 2009, past opponents of reformists and defenders of the Leader's authority have come out with criticism of the evolution of the regime. Outspoken intellectuals such as Mohammad Nourizad and Ali Motahari epitomise this trend. A film-maker and former journalist for the conservative daily *Kayhan*, Nourizad attacked Khamenei's authoritarianism in a series of public letters. Motahari, conservative member of parliament and son of the revolutionary Ayatollah Morteza Motahari, lashed out at the growing influence of the Revolutionary Guards in politics and defended the political rights of opponents of the system. Such criticism seem to resonate among traditional conservative clerics and politicians. Rouhani's electoral campaign discourse is a sure sign of discontent within the system.

Conservatives of the traditional or centrist-leaning type have had particular problems with Ahmadinejad's governing style and rhetoric. They tried to use their parliamentary weight to push for the president's impeachment. Rouhani's electoral platform was, more than anything else, a negation of what Ahmadinejad stands for. Rouhani spoke of the need for moderation, competence, planning and constructive engagement on the international scene. His campaign slogan, "rationality and hope" (*tadbir va omid*), targeted Ahmadinejad and recalled Mousavi at the same time. Mousavi's campaign and Green Movement slogan in 2009 was also "hope".

An often heard argument from members of the middle-of-the-road current is that one political faction cannot solve the country's problems alone. Rouhani has made clear that he will work with moderates "of all types" in order to save the country. Related to this is criticism of those who seek to purge the Islamic Republic of certain parties and ideas. The issue of purge (*hazf*) has been burning since 2009, when reformist political parties were outlawed and their activists subjected to show trials. The names and images of the opposition leaders Mousavi and Karubi became taboos in the national media. Rouhani's campaign can be read as a statement against this radicalising trend. "The elimination of a group is inconceivable", declares his campaign documentary.

The Leader's stance

The Leader's stance with regard to Rouhani is an interesting and open question. If we look at the message that was sent by Rouhani's campaign platform, there is no doubt that it clashes with Khamenei's discourse over the past four years. Knowing the Leader's hard-line approach to Green Movement activism, many suspected Rouhani would have disqualified himself internally by stepping over the system's red lines. Rouhani's close and proudly declared

connection with Rafsandjani was also assumed to work against him. After all, Rafsandjani had been banned from running in the election at huge cost to the legitimacy of the regime.

Nevertheless, if we restrict the analysis to what the Leader actually did, the picture looks a little different. First of all, it is important to point out that Khamenei did not declare a preference for either of the candidates. In fact, he emphatically denied having a favourite in the race in pre-election speeches. Second, he did not interfere in the electoral count. In contrast to 2009, when he made an early intervention to declare that the elections were over and Ahmadinejad the winner before the Guardian Council had announced the results, this time he let the Ministry of the Interior do the counting at its own pace. No candidate raised accusations of electoral fraud. Third, in a surprising speech two days before the election, he called on every Iranian, "also those who do not want to defend the Islamic system", to come out and vote (Ebrat.ir, 2013). He offered an olive branch by saying that every Iranian loves his country and therefore should participate. This unusual encouragement was arguably a contribution to Rouhani's electoral victory, since the votes of those opposed to the system tend to go to the most liberal candidate.

Of course, the Leader's concern was to make sure there would be high participation rates in the election. He has called the current Iranian calendar year the Year of Political and Economic Epic, and wanted to show how the Islamic Republic can mobilise the masses. After election day, the hard-line newspaper *Kayhan*'s headline boasted "Climax of a political epic: the world was stunned again" (*Kayhan*, 2013). Being able to send this political message may in itself have been worth the price of getting a reformist-leaning president. However, Rouhani's presidency also offers opportunities for engagement that go beyond this minimum benefit.

Thanks to his background and track record, the president is in fact in a unique position to mend fences within the system and negotiate with the international community. Rouhani's career was made in the security establishment, as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council between 1989 and 2005, and as Khamenei's representative on the council since then. He is on good terms with actors on the far right of the political spectrum as well as with the leading reformists. Externally, he is known as the man who negotiated an agreement with European powers to temporarily suspend Iran's uranium enrichment programme and implement the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty in 2004.

At a time when international sanctions are taking an increasing toll on the Iranian economy, having Rouhani as president is a useful legitimacy asset for the Leader. Nicknamed "the diplomat sheikh", the careful Rouhani offers a gentle face of Iran where the unpredictable Ahmadinejad has become associated with animosity. He

ran his electoral campaign on the need to engage and build relations with the world, and managed to obtain a clear popular mandate. Rouhani will not only seek to extricate the nuclear dossier from the UN Security Council's grip but also work to improve relations with regional powers such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. When Ahmadinejad took office in 2005, Khamenei used the opportunity to shift from accommodation to confrontation on the nuclear issue. With Rouhani, he may well adjust his tactics again and present the West with some new options in the nuclear dispute.

The spring after winter? Prospects for change

The question is whether or not the Leader will also seek compromises in the domestic political arena. Without acceptance of reform at the highest echelon of the political system, Rouhani cannot bring about the spring after the winter that was promised in his campaign documentary. Previous electoral experiences show that presidents who work against the Leader become inefficient and end up fighting the shadow-state security apparatus. Rouhani is intent on using the Leader's personal trust in him to negotiate solutions and gradually bring the Islamic Republic into a moderate orbit.

This is not an approach that is targeting huge and sudden changes. Rouhani's ambitions are soberly described in his 120-page electoral manifesto. The manifesto is framed in general terms and shies away from words such as "democracy" or contentious debates about the role of Islam in politics. However, it states that the government of rationality and hope sees its prime responsibilities as defending the equal rights of citizens and ensuring the full implementation of the constitution. The latter is understood as strengthening civil society, freedom of conviction, publication and speech, public and private media, political parties and local administration (among other things). The manifesto calls on the state not to interfere in the citizens' private life (Electoral Campaign Office 2013).

The reformists who threw their support behind Rouhani believe that it is better to have incremental change along these lines, with Khamenei's support, than to perpetuate the status quo or raise maximalist demands that may cause a security backlash. They believe Khamenei may be interested in reducing political tensions to improve state management and face the international community from a stronger, more united, domestic position. Rouhani, in this reading, offers a way out of the post-2009 political crisis without the Leader having to acknowledge that he did anything wrong.

The only problem is that, over the years, Khamenei has built his support base among the hard-line elements of the

Islamic Republic, and notably in the security apparatus. Rouhani's demand for "desecuritisating" the country is therefore bound to run into resistance from the very forces that uphold the Leader's rule. Khamenei can keep his radical supporters in line up to a point, but the day will come when their interests are at stake vis-à-vis the reform agenda. For the Leader to continue pushing then, he must feel politically secure.

External factors may determine how far the Leader is willing or able to go. One is pressure and negotiation over the nuclear programme and the results that Rouhani's diplomacy can yield. A good outcome for Iran will boost the government's popularity and increase the system's room to allow civil society. Conversely, diplomatic defeat, further sanctions and renewed threats of war will oblige Khamenei to lean more heavily on his security apparatus.

Another important issue is what the demands of Iran's society will be. So far, protestors have shown willingness to moderate their slogans in the face of changing opportunities. The "Death to the Dictator" slogan that was heard after Khamenei declared support for Ahmadinejad in 2009 was not raised in the 2013 rallies. Iran is not in a revolutionary mood, as the Arab world was in 2011, but has a thirst for constitutional politics. This public craving is Rouhani's greatest strength as he aims for the Middle Way in the Islamic Republic.

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