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Elections in Iran and Its Foreign Policy

With Hassan Rohani's victory in Iran's recent elections, there have been suggestions that this may herald the end of the country's confrontational foreign policy. Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi argues that any major changes in Iran's foreign policy rely on Rohani's ability to make good on his campaign rhetoric.

By Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi for ISN

On June 14, Hassan Rohani won Iran's 11th presidential elections, officially ending the second and last mandate of President Ahmadinejad and raising hopes, domestically and abroad, about a potential shift in Iran's foreign policy. Rohani, a cleric with long-standing ties with the establishment and the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, has put forward a platform based on the improvement of relations with regional and international powers, in order to reduce the isolation the country experienced under Ahmadinejad. While such a shift in tone toward sensitive foreign policy issues, such as the nuclear dossier, were anticipated, the complexities of Iran's political system mean that his ability to deliver on electoral promises should not be taken for granted.

The electoral process

In the first presidential race since the controversial 2009 elections, Hassan Rohani became Iran's president-elect following a turnout of over 72 percent (at least according to official data). This high turnout ran counter to most expectations, generating surprise domestically and abroad. With 50.71 percent of the vote (or about 18 million votes) Rohani won an absolute majority in the first round, rendering a runoff between the two leading candidates unnecessary.

Despite being largely unknown to the Iranian general public, Rohani saw his chances increase dramatically about 72 hours before the end of the electoral race, when reformist candidate Mohammad Reza Aref, the former first Vice President under President Mohammad Khatami, withdrew his candidacy. Aref's decision was based on the request of the 10-member consultative council, led by Khatami, which managed the campaign of the reformist front and recognized Rohani as the candidate with the greater chance of attracting votes. This move, strengthened by the public endorsement of Khatami and of Hashemi Rafsanjani, was crucial in diverting votes toward Rohani, the only cleric and moderate figure in the race who was successfully vetted by the Guardian Council of the Constitution – a 12-member body that screens candidates' credentials against constitutional standards for the office.

The failure of the conservative front to undertake a similar move, despite the candidates' initial agreement to coalesce behind the best placed candidate in terms of popular support and legitimacy, contributed to Rohani's affirmation. Even after the withdrawal from the race of former speaker of the Iranian parliament and Khamenei's relative-by-marriage Gholam-Ali Haddad Adel, the other

conservative candidates decided to compete against each other. By running independently, former Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, Tehran's Mayor Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, and current nuclear chief negotiator Saeed Jalili split the conservative vote and revealed a deep fracture within the front. Consequently, Rohani polled three times as many votes as his nearest rival, Qalibaf, while Jalili, whom many considered the frontrunner in the race, obtained only 11 percent of votes.

Who is Rohani?

Rohani, 65, is a seminary-educated cleric with a law background and a PhD in Constitutional Law from Glasgow Caledonian University. He has had a hand in many of the Islamic Republic's principal institutions, and, among other prestigious posts, he has been the head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team between 2003 and 2005 and one of the two leaders' representatives in the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), a key institution in shaping Iran's national security policy. The president-elect is currently the head of the Expediency Council's Centre for Strategic Research, a foreign policy think-tank that he has directed since 1992 and where he works closely with a large number of the country's diplomats and technocrats.

Since his election, analysts have increasingly attempted to categorize Rohani by exploring his background and past statements, in order to understand whether he can be considered a true reformist. His aggressive stance toward the 1999 crackdown of student protests, which took place during the first reformist government of Khatami, and his condemnation of the Green Movement's demonstrations in support of the Arab uprisings in February 2011, are often cited as examples of his lack of genuine reformist credentials.

Furthermore, analysis of the election results suggests that Rohani's popular mandate represents the electorate's rejection of the policies of the outgoing administration, rather than a call for reform. This is confirmed by the fact that he obtained a large number of votes in rural areas, not the traditional electoral base for reformists. Given the low profile and narrow political spectrum of his opponents, it seems likely that Rohani was the figure that best addressed the broad reservoir of pro-moderation sentiment and the desire for pragmatism and gradual change in both domestic and foreign policy.

Rohani's programmatic platform in foreign policy

Throughout the three televised presidential debates, Rohani focused mostly on foreign policy, highlighting the legacies of Ahmadinejad's administration and Iran's unprecedented isolation, stressing that Iran can now count the number of its allies on one hand. His main electoral promise was the reduction of tensions with the outside world, which he argued was necessary for Iran's crumbling economy to recover.

Despite being an establishment figure, Rohani's nickname, "diplomatic sheikh," indicates a history of taking a conciliatory approach, particularly with regard to the nuclear issue. During the electoral campaign he sharply criticized Jalili's confrontational stance toward the six powers negotiating Iran's nuclear ambitions (the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Russia, China and the United States), calling for a more constructive nuclear diplomacy to strike a nuclear deal and roll back the crippling international sanctions.

Rohani also defended his achievements as former chief nuclear negotiator (a position from which he resigned following the election of Ahmadinejad), during which Iran signed two agreements (Saadat Abad, 2003, and Paris, 2004) with the UK, France and Germany to suspend enrichment and reprocessing activities, temporarily and voluntarily, in exchange for substantial technical and economic incentives.

During his first press conference since being elected, Rohani asserted his commitment to preserving Iran's national security interests under his administration. His support for Assad and his conviction

that Syria's future should be decided by the Syrian people, in the presidential election in 2014, are likely to continue. The same reasoning applies to Iran's uranium enrichment activities, which he stated could be subject to greater transparency, but will not be halted. There will, however, be a change of tone, which will differ drastically from the rhetoric adopted under Ahmadinejad. And such a step might be crucial in reducing tensions with the outside world. Rohani's statement singling out Saudi Arabia as a country with whom Iran has much in common is one example of how a conciliatory tone might have an indirect but significant impact on regional and international developments.

But whether the election of Rohani opens a new window of opportunity for resolving Iran's nuclear standoff and for a shift in the country's regional posture will depend on his ability to deliver on his electoral promises.

Can Rohani effectively alter Iran's foreign policy?

Rohani will have to face the challenges of a complex political system which constitutionally limits the powers of the Iranian president, particularly with regard to foreign policy, where the interaction between the multi-layered institutions of the Islamic Republic is particularly strong. Under the Constitution the Leader is the final decision-maker in all security and foreign policy matters, while the president, as the formal executive power, is mostly a spokesman who can occasionally channel new diplomatic initiatives and set the overall tone. The relationship of the president-elect with the Leader is therefore crucial in determining his ability to deliver on his electoral promises.

Given the importance of his former positions and his close working relationship with Khamenei, it is likely that Rohani will does not represent a threat to Khamenei or to the establishment, and that, unlike Ahmadinejad, he will be able to interact constructively with the leadership and other government institutions. The decision of the Council Guardians to veto the candidacies of Rafsanjani and Ahmadinejad's right-hand Mashai seem to confirm this reading.

Accordingly, Rohani might be granted Khamenei's indirect endorsement and mandate for implementing nuanced shifts in Iran's foreign policy, particularly with regard to the nuclear dossier, in which he has significant experience.

The composition of Rohani's cabinet and of the nuclear team in particular will be crucial in determining the extent to which he will be able to influence Iran's foreign policy once the new government is sworn in on August 3rd. For now, there is reason for guarded hope that Rohani will have some room for manoeuvre to use his limited constitutional powers to deliver on his electoral promises.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[All the Supreme Leader's Men: Presidential Elections in Iran in 2013](#)

[The Third World, Global Islam and Pragmatism](#)

[Assessment of the Security Situation in Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria and the Arab Gulf States](#)

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