



Realistic and Unrealistic Hopes from Rouhani

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The victory of Hassan Rouhani on June 14, 2013 as the new President of Iran has generated high hopes towards solving the Iranian nuclear quagmire. The Reformist-backed cleric Hassan Rouhani won against a number of his hard-line and conservative opponents including Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the conservative Mayor of Tehran and Saeed Jalili, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Iran's chief nuclear negotiator who is very close to the Supreme Leader. These two respectively got second and third position in this election.

During the course of the election campaign, it was widely speculated that the heavyweight contenders such as Saeed Jalili and Ghalibaf were likely winners. Such speculations were to a large extent based on the perceived blessings of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei on them. Due to the power struggle that was witnessed during Mohammad Khatami's reform movement and subsequent 'Green Movement' that almost shook the clerical system from roots, it was highly unlikely that Khamenei would risk the regime's fate with another moderate.

Although Rouhani is not a moderate or a reformist in absolute terms, after what was witnessed in Iran during the era of hard-liner Ahmadinejad, Rouhani's past credentials would set him apart from the conservatives or hard-liners, placing him closer to the moderates. Rouhani himself called his victory as a victory of moderation over extremism. In fact, Rouhani had started reaching out to the reformists before the election and was actually supported by the only

reformist candidate in the race, Mohammad Reza Aref who withdrew on the advice of Khatami. Consequently Rouhani was backed by the two ex-presidents, the reformists Mohammad Khatami and the pragmatist Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was disqualified by the Guardian Council.

Prominent among his 'moderate' credentials include his position as the chief nuclear negotiator during Khatami's presidency when the controversial nuclear enrichment of Iran was suspended and Iran signed the additional protocol of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). This is one instance which generates much hope from Rouhani. In particular, Rouhani has been signalling more transparency in Iran's nuclear programme and has indicated a less confrontational stance in nuclear negotiations with the P5+1, i.e. five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany. Another positive sign is that Rouhani has appointed the pragmatic outgoing foreign minister, Ali Akbar Salehi, as the head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization replacing the hard-liner Fereydoun Abbasi-Davani. Salehi was the least controversial amongst Ahmadinejad's cabinet.

Further, after winning Rouhani has given a call for mending Iran's ties with the West through ending the nuclear standoff and his choice of a US-educated former Iranian diplomat to UN, Jawad Zarif as his new Foreign Minister has sent a strong signal that he is serious in what he has been saying. In return, the US too has said that it would engage directly with Iran in order to find a diplomatic solution to the problems emanating due to Iran's nuclear programme. Among primary challenges for Hassan Rouhani include easing the international sanctions imposed on Iran over its nuclear programme due to which Iran has been suffering economic hardships such as soaring inflation, rising unemployment and a consistently devalued currency.

Despite the positive signs emanating from Rouhani's election, a keen watcher of the Iranian domestic politics would be a little cautious in having high hopes from Iran's new president in terms of either the resolution of the nuclear standoff or mending Iran's ties with the West. The power of the President in both these matters is extremely limited in the scheme of Iranian political system, where the Supreme Leader is the final decision-maker. Hassan Rouhani had himself 'revealed' the information on Iran's key players in the nuclear decision making. This revelation was made in an interview of Hassan Rouhani which was published in Kayhan, a

leading conservative newspaper of Iran in its July 2005 edition, shortly before the election of Ahmadinejad. Although this revelation, in which he indicated on the limited power of the president in nuclear decision-making, was made ostensibly to silence the hard-line rivals of the reformists; the public declaration of Iranian internal power structure on nuclear issue potentially creates trouble for Rouhani.

Further, Rouhani's reiteration of Iran's established position that Iran would not give its right to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes such as producing electricity or medical research further creates hurdles towards resolving the Iranian nuclear standoff since the US would not be willing to accept that demand. Nevertheless the fact that Rouhani could not have possibly 'revealed' such facts without the permission of the Supreme Leader also exemplifies that he had the blessings of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

In fact, it may be likely that Rouhani's election was itself according to the wishes of the Supreme Leader who may have wanted him in the position of the president so that there could be some relief from the economic sanctions which were getting increasingly stringent during the tenure of Ahmadinejad. And if that were true, the strife-stricken world has a lot to cheer since in that case Rouhani may be able to meet high hopes being associated with his election.

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