

Report

Tough choices for Rouhani following Khatami and Rafsanjani's Paths

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New Iranian President Hassan Rouhani speaking to the press in Tehran [AFP]

Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, was the only presidential candidate in Iran to raise issues of freedom and the threats to security that plague Iranian society.(1) During the presidential debates, Rouhani clashed with his rival, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, over the issue of the 2003 attack on students at Tehran University. The incident had occurred when Rouhani was secretary of the National Security Council and Ghalibaf was a police commander. Rouhani defended himself by saying that he had recommended that the student protest be banned. He maintained that security laws required that the students be arrested after the protests. In the debates, Rouhani outdid his rival by reminding him that, unlike him, Rouhani was a 'man of law, and not a police commander'(2).

Rouhani was heavily criticised for his position during the student protests that followed the closure of the pro-reform newspaper, Salam, in 1999. Many people claimed that he had called for those arrested in the protests to be charged with sabotage and destruction of public property, and executed if convicted, but he denied the claim. In 2009, Rouhani joined protesters and expressed his support for the protests that followed the 10th presidential election. He also criticised the government for opposing the right to demonstrate peacefully.

Voters seemed to respond positively to this discussion. Ghalibaf, however, could not eliminate his 'policeman' image from people's minds despite the praise he received

during the 2005 presidential elections for being a good supervisor and having achieved remarkable success as the mayor of Tehran. In his election campaign, Ghalibaf attempted to modify his rhetoric. This backfired, however, as it was described as 'hostile' and 'offensive.' He put Iran's economic crisis at the top of his election agenda,(3) and expressed his desire to improve relations between the people and the government. However, he placed security before freedoms. While sermons during Tehran's Friday prayers warned against lavish spending on election campaigns, Ghalibaf's campaign was rather extravagant relative to those of other candidates. Many viewed his campaign as insincere and withdrew their support.

Unlike Ghalibaf, who vehemently stood against Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, Rouhani spoke about the 'rights of citizenship,' and guaranteed political freedom as well as the release of political prisoners. Along with other prominent political figures, he maintains that the house arrest imposed on Karroubi and Mousavi is illegal and must end.

In many ways, Rouhani's reputation was threatened during his campaign. There were queries about his PhD, which his supporters said he had obtained under his former name, Hassan Feridon. Furthermore, his book, National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy, sparked accusations that could lead to his indictment for disclosing nuclear secrets (4). Many also turned on Rouhani after learning of the suicide note left by his son in which the latter criticised his father.

A day before the election, Hashemi Rafsanjani's website stated that his eligibility to compete in the election was well earned and well established, referring to the mass support he had received for his decision to run(5). Two days before the poll, Rafsanjani had revealed secret details about a discussion regarding his candidacy with the Supreme Leader. He accused security of intervening to prevent his candidacy after a high-profile security figure met with the Guardian Council just prior to its decision to reject his candidacy. Nonetheless, he preferred to steer clear of confrontation and refused to request a decree from the leader of the Islamic Revolution to instruct the Guardian Council to review its decision. The widely-respected politician swallowed his anger and vigorously backed his friend, Rouhani, who is also his closest political ally and the candidate that is most loyal to his ideology. Rouhani's election posters clearly expressed Rafsanjani's opinion: "Rouhani is the best candidate of all because he is rational during tough and critical situations such as conflict and war and has demonstrated prudence and knowledge. The nuclear issue was dealt with most effectively under Rouhani's application of logic and moderation. Rouhani believes in the sacredness of freedom." As soon as Rouhani's victory was announced, a picture of Rafsanjani with Imam Khomeini

was posted on the former's website, sealed . It was sealed with the logo of the late leader of the revolution and read: (translation) "Let evil seekers know that Hashemi is still alive"(6).

Former reformist president Mohammad Khatami comprehended the attack that the security institution and the Iranian daily, Kayhan, had unleashed against him. He chose not to run, but played a major role in uniting reformists. He also convinced his friend and former vice-president, Mohammad Aref, to withdraw from the race in order to give Rouhani a better chance to win(7). By declaring Rouhani a reformist candidate and garnering Aref's support for this decision, Khatami proved that he was still the leader of reformists. He coordinated effectively with Rafsanjani who has become a relative through a recent marriage. After Aref's withdrawal, Rouhani's election campaign exhibited pictures of him side by side with Rafsanjani and Khatami. On the streets, youngsters were chanting slogans in favour of Khatami while holding Rouhani's pictures(8).

The fundamentalists were harshly defeated in these elections. In fact, many Iranians believe that rejecting the fundamentalist movement is more necessary than 'earning their daily bread'(9). Seen as the 'next Ahmadinejad,' Jalili did not receive the support he expected as the masses believed that Iran needs a change to overcome the crisis. The fundamentalists also failed to agree on a single candidate, and the withdrawal of Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel did not have much effect. Most polls indicate that Jalili did not stand a chance.

Regarding domestic policy, Rouhani has called for the codification of citizenship rights. He stressed that over the years Iran's domestic policy has ignored the country's ethnic and linguistic diversity. He argued that 'respect for equal rights for all citizens, and the protection of human dignity and social justice' were not the previous government's priorities(10).

Rouhani is fluent in more than five languages and was educated in Western universities. He has called for the improvement of and larger spaces for universities, and promises advancement in human rights. Universities in Iran have been governed with an iron hand. Many professors had been prevented from teaching; teaching halls were segregated along gender lines; and women were prevented from studying in certain disciplines. Students who participated in the demonstrations after the 2009 presidential campaigns faced harsh repercussions. There is also widespread police monitoring of women's clothing in public spaces and interference in people's private lives. Despite the onerous task all of this gives him, Rouhani has pledged to protect freedom of expression

and association and combat injustices and violations of privacy and rights that were heavily infringed on in the past eight years.

Rouhani, like other candidates, allocated a large part of his election campaign to the economic issue(11). He promised a multiphase plan to pull the Iranian economy out of its seemingly chronic crisis that recently worsened. The implementation of 'the government-supported rationalisation programme' in 2010 led to an unprecedented rise in the prices of basic commodities and aggravated unemployment. The economic sanctions imposed by the West also exacerbated the crisis especially due to the oil embargoes. Although 'economy of resistance' was the slogan put forward, according to official calculations, in March 2013 inflation reached 35% and unemployment 13%. According to unofficial figures, however, inflation exceeded 40% and the unemployment rate about 20%.

Ahmadinejad's economic policies were not the only reason for the crisis. The Iranian economy has suffered from fundamental, chronic problems that emergency measures could not solve. The state controls the economic sector, foreign investment is absent, and domestic production is significantly low. In addition, corruption is prevalent and there is an underground economy. The Revolutionary Guard Corps also refuses to submit to the government's economic control. Harsh sanctions played a major role in bringing the economy to its knees.

Regarding foreign policy, Rouhani harshly criticised what he described as a focus on 'deceiving policies' that lack strategy. He was specifically referring to policies that caused a number of negative consequences,(12) including:

- Endowing the Islamic Republic with a façade of security;
- Uniting Iran's enemies;
- Weakening Iran's international reputation;
- Granting legal character to foreign threats;
- Causing Iran to be seen as the primary threat to global security;
- Weakening Iran's strategic options; and
- Escalating conflict with Arab Gulf states and exacerbating already frail Arab-Iranian relations(13).

Political experts advise against having too many expectations for fundamental change in foreign policy, as such change is not in the hands of the president alone. A group of institutions are involved in drafting a strategy but the Supreme Leader will have the final say. However, Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, a former deputy minister who ran Rouhani's election campaign, believes that the president-elect has adequate experience

and skills and relations with other political factions that are strong enough to be influential in developing foreign policy, including policy toward the Syrian crisis(14).

Parliamentarian Ali Motahari believes that Iran missed the chance to use Rafsanjani to address internal and external problems. He believes, however, that Rouhani has a better chance of doing so than others(15).

Rouhani has promised that a government of 'prudence and hope' will find honourable solutions to sensitive issues. These include confrontation with the West regarding the nuclear programme, the deterioration of Iran's international relations, and the isolation of Tehran from the international community. Rouhani will continue Rafsanjani's diplomatic path with regard to the United States after it had severed relations with Iran when Iranian students stormed the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979. The impasse, Rouhani believes, should not continue(16).

Rouhani's policy will be a combination of the Rafsanjani and Khatami ideologies, merging Islamic modernity, cultural dialogue, social development, and economic liberalisation. He will attempt to bring Iranian society back to the original project initiated by Rafsanjani and continued by Khatami to take it from being a revolutionary society to becoming a civil one. This ideal had been severely affected by Ahmadinejad's rise because, like many other fundamentalists, he believed that the revolution had diverted from its course.

Rouhani's mission will not be easy. In addition to the heavy burdens inherited from Ahmadinejad, he may have to deal with the same problems as those faced by Rafsanjani, Khatami, and even Ahmadinejad in their second presidential terms. In his first term, Rafsanjani succeeded in enhancing the position of the middle class. However, he gradually lost control over the key ministries and security organisations in his second term. Since then, albeit not explicitly, the Ministry of Intelligence has become under the control of the Supreme Leader – or as is commonly known in Iran, Beit Rahbari ("Home of the Leader"). Parallel powers in the government were being institutionalised,(17) and intellectuals were subjected to suppression and assassinations that shook the society. This caused Khatami to resign from his post as Minister of Culture.

A similar thing occurred when Khatami was president. In his first term, he succeeded in enhancing his reputation within Iranian society. Certain political freedoms were extended to political parties, associations and civil society. This did not continue in his second term, however, and more than seventy people, mostly intellectuals, were assassinated. The Iranian intelligence services were involved in this, and Khatami found himself confronting a parallel government that successfully crushed his plans. Nevertheless, he

insisted on continuing his term as president, and refused to yield to the pleas of his supporters and friends to turn to the opposition. Ahmadinejad attempted to hand over the economic activity of the Revolutionary Guards Corps to the government but failed. He found himself in conflict with parliament was nearly toppled before his term ended, being accused of 'deviation.'

After the recent election, the Supreme Leader congratulated Rouhani. It is unlikely that Iran will witness an immediate clash between the presidential institution and the institution of the Supreme Leader. The possibility remains, however, that a clash will occur when Rouhani confronts the parallel powers that have been institutionalised over the past few years, centred in a security corps close to the Supreme Leader. If Rouhani wants to implement his political and economic programme, a clash will be inevitable.

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- (8) Author's observations.
- (9) Tabnak, 'Voters Say No to Fundamentalists'. 15 June 2013. <http://www.iran-emrooz.net/index.php/news2/46094/>.
- (10) 'The government of prudence and hope', the election programme of Hassan Rouhani, Khordad 1392, Tehran, page 11.
- (11) 'The government of prudence and hope', the election programme of Hassan Rouhani, Khordad 1392, Tehran, pages 21-43.
- (12) 'The government of prudence and hope', the election programme of Hassan Rouhani, Khordad 1392, Tehran, pages 93-110.
- (13) 'The government of prudence and hope', the election programme of Hassan Rouhani, Khordad 1392, Tehran, pages 96-100.
- (14) Author's interview with Mohammad Reza Nematzadeh, Tehran, 6 June 2013.
- (15) Author's interview with Dr Ali Motahari, Tehran, 11 June 2013.
- (16) 'The government of prudence and hope', the election programme of Hassan Rouhani, Khordad 1392, Tehran, pages 102-105.
- (17) 'Building power in the Islamic Republic: Iran – populism to pluralism and the military character of the state'.
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