

Why Rouhani's victory could be Khamenei's best gamble

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On 14 June 2013, the last man foreign observers were expecting to triumph won the 11th Iranian presidential election. On the first round, Hassan Rouhani, a moderate cleric supported by Reformists, finished in first place with 50,7% of the votes. In Tehran and in the other main Iranian cities, people celebrated his victory in the street dancing, singing, some even calling for the freedom of Moussavi and Karoubi, the former leaders of the Green Movement who still remain under house arrest. The streets of Iran hadn't seen so many people since the deceptive re-election of M. Ahmadinejad in 2009. This time, however, the Regime let them keep their votes. Hope replaced anger.

What can Iranians really expect from this election? Not much, in fact. As with Khatami between 1997 and 2005, Iranians may face disappointment with their new president. Of course hope exists but the highest the expectations, the strongest the disillusion. First of all, it is important to keep in mind that Rouhani is not a true Reformist, even if Reformists supported him in the elections. He is a Moderate, a centrist politician able to build bridges between the population's expectations and the conservative Establishment. But he is still a follower of the Islamic Republic. On this point, his victory can be compared to a safety valve for the Regime, which does not take any risk. Of course, Rouhani was not Khamenei's first choice but he was the only candidate who was able to satisfy the population's need for change without threatening the Regime's foundations. Indeed, any change that would occur would be skin-deep, rather than deep. With Rouhani's victory, Khamenei lowers the pressure

on the Regime by giving people a utopian hope. As long as the current Supreme Leader stays in office, nothing will really change in the Islamic Republic. Remember: the president is just the chief of the executive. The Iranian institutional system has been conceived to merge all the power in the hands of the Supreme Leader. If the latter does not accept a government's decision, he can simply cancel it without any further explanation. As a regent waiting for the Messiah's return, he has been appointed by God. Therefore he cannot fail.

Regarding Rouhani's score and the high turnout of this election (more than 70%), it would have been too risky not to let him win. Of course he has won just over 50% of the votes, and maybe if the conservative votes had not been split, things would have been different. We can easily imagine that if Ghalibaf had reached more than 30%, the temptation would have been strong for the Regime to attempt a second round. However, without any conservative candidate over 20%, it was not credible. In other words, Khamenei preferred a centrist president without real power, one that would be able to cheat the population on what they can really hope, instead of risking a new Green Movement again.

In practice, the possible improvements are limited. Maybe Iranians can expect less control by the morality police forces. The reformist press might be less suppressed, but that already occurred during Khatami's presidency.

Another subject of concern is the economy issue,

which is linked to nuclear development. Indeed international sanctions compromise foreign investments and international trade with the Islamic Republic. As Rouhani promised during his campaign, a more conciliatory rhetoric on the nuclear issue is to be expected. However, in reality the Iranian President does not have any power to influence the nuclear program. It indeed stays in the hands of the Supreme Leader and the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guardians Corps) who remain very firm on this topic. Furthermore, Rouhani was very clear about the fact that there would be no giving up the “civilian” and “lawful” nuclear ambitions of Iran. Nevertheless he assured being ready to more open discussions than the Ahmadinejad administration. This could be a joker for Khamenei. If Rouhani presents himself as ready to reach an agreement with the P-5 Group, he might succeed in lifting a part of the international sanctions that suffocate the Iranian economy. This would already be an important success for Iran. But more than words, the international community needs acts. If Rouhani were to fail despite his open-mind rhetoric, his failure could be used by the Regime. Thus the latter could argue that they tried to negotiate, but that in reality the members of the P-5 Group (and specially the United States) were the ones who did not want to reach an agreement. Once again the Islamic Republic would have the opportunity to present itself as the martyr fighting against the injustice of the “Great Satan”. In this scenario, the Regime would see its hard-line politics legitimated.

In conclusion, it can be pointed out that Rouhani’s election is not as bad as one would think for the Regime, for several reasons:

- While Rouhani remains a centrist politician and a follower of the Islamic Republic, his election also satisfies a population that does not recognize itself in the more conservative elements of the Iranian political life. Letting him be elected serves as a security system to decrease pressure on the Regime.
- Rouhani does not dispose of enough power to change the system which he is part of. Therefore he does not represent a real threat for the Supreme Leader, who can still dismiss him at will. Furthermore, many important and non-elected institutions remain in the hands of the Conservatives, such as the Guardian Council that acts as a watchdog during elections.

- With a turnout over 70%, this election is a success for the Islamic Republic. Thus the Regime sees its legitimacy increase, even if the hard-liners close to the Supreme Leader have been defeated.

- Rouhani’s rhetoric could improve Iran’s perception around the world after eight years of aggressive statements by Ahmadinejad.

- Concerning the nuclear issue, Rouhani’s election could only benefit the Regime. Either an agreement is reached, consequently lifting some sanctions, or Khamenei will see his hard-line position justified.

- Regarding Israel warlike rhetoric, it will be more difficult to legitimize a military action against Iran if the new president keeps on proclaiming that he really wants to reach a diplomatic solution. Even if these are just words, Israeli hawks will find themselves in a difficult position to act freely without causing more damage Israel’s international image.

For all these reasons and given the rejection by the population of the Ahmadinejad’s conservative politics, Rouhani could be Khamenei’s best gamble to protect the Islamic Republic from its enemies. Just like a magician, this trick could give the Regime the opportunity to bluff both the Iranians and a part of the international community. In the short term this could protect the Regime, but there is no doubt that in the long term the Islamic Republic will have to reform itself if it wants to survive. Nevertheless, given the balance of power between true Reformists and Conservatives, this scenario will not happen tomorrow.

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