

Iran's President Rowhani: A Nuclear Fig Leaf

Naive observers of the recent Iranian presidential election call it a "game-changer." Such optimism warrants a sober assessment of the election, Hasan Rowhani and the context within which he operates.

An unelected body of 12 Islamic jurists selected eight candidates (after rejecting over 600 for being women, religious minorities or inadequately zealous). Rowhani, a 64-year-old regime loyalist, was the most "moderate" of the final voter options. But he led the crackdown on a 1999 student uprising and helped the regime to advance its nuclear-weapons program.

Had Mir Mousavi, the reformist leader of the 2009 green movement, been released from house arrest and allowed to compete freely against Rowhani, Mousavi would have likely won by epic margins. Rowhani's electoral victory was essentially just a protest vote against Khomeini.

Fortunately, the will of the Iranian people was so overwhelming this time that it couldn't be dismissed by Khomeini, who in 2009 engineered election results to favor his preferred candidate, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This time, Khomeini's survival required acquiescence because (1) much more fraud would have been needed to produce his preferred winner in 2013, (2) far greater global scrutiny and skepticism attended this poll after the 2009 elections and (3) his regime desperately needed to avoid the unrest produced last time—particularly after Syria's 2011 uprising demonstrated how quickly and severely things can deteriorate.

But that doesn't transform Rowhani into some kind of Iranian Gorbachev who will or can revamp Iran's entire political

system (or even just its nuclear policy). Such a “black swan event” is hardly predicted by Rowhani’s past.

Consider the article he published in the spring 2010 issue of the *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*. Despite the veneer of academic neutrality, Rowhani’s worldview is clear: Iran is a model Islamic state that positively impacts the world, and militant hostility toward Israel is good (as is Hezbollah, the Iran-backed terrorist organization). According to this summary of a May 2012 interview, Rowhani noted that nuclear policy won’t change with a new president because any policy differences relate only to the pace of Iran’s nuclear progress.

When Rowhani was Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator under President Mohammad Khatami, he gave a speech in 2004, explaining his approach to the nuclear talks then conducted with the “EU-3” (Britain, France and Germany). Rowhani boasted about playing for time: “While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the [nuclear conversion] facility in Isfahan. By creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work there.”

Rowhani also explained Iran’s strategy of forcing the world to accept its nuclear program as a *fait accompli*: “The world did not want Pakistan to have an atomic bomb or Brazil to have the fuel cycle, but Pakistan built its bomb and Brazil has its fuel cycle, and the world started to work with them. Our problem is that we have not achieved either one, but we are standing at the threshold.”

Thus, Rowhani is a nuclear fig leaf. His academic and diplomatic polish could enable him to secure the international legitimacy that eluded his crude and outrageous predecessor. Indeed, if Ahmadinejad—despite all of his Holocaust denials and threats to destroy Israel—achieved so much nuclear progress, then world powers will be totally impotent with the more palatable Rowhani.

Even if Rowhani wanted to soften Iran's nuclear policy, it is Khomeini who decides such matters, and his intransigence is well-established (e.g., Khomeini banned presidential candidates from later making concessions to the West, and last February he vetoed direct talks between Iran and the United States).

Suppose Khomeini disappears. The realpolitik considerations guiding the Iranian regime would remain. Iran, which considers itself a protector of Shiite Islam, fears a Sunni takeover of Alawite-ruled Syria. The Alawites are an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and Iran just committed 4,000 troops to Syria to help fortify Bashar Assad's regime there.

Iran's alignments mean it will also continue supporting Hezbollah, another Shiite force fighting alongside Assad's military. These realities ensure that Shiite Iran's relations with its Sunni neighbors will grow increasingly adversarial, and that too will reinforce Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Those who cautioned that military action against Iranian nukes could alienate ordinary Iranians and minimize the odds of internal regime change must now concede that the regime has "changed." Any further change could take years, because president-elect Rowhani must work within a complex system, developed over decades, and he's not about to overthrow it. Nor are the millions who elected him. They got the president they voted for, so they have no reason to protest any time soon (especially after 2009, when they had strong grounds to protest but their voices brought only brutal crackdowns without democratic gains).

To show good faith and establish his "moderate" credentials, Rowhani should cease all nuclear enrichment until the next round of diplomatic talks concludes. But in his first press conference last Monday, he vowed to continue enrichment. Rowhani's assumption of the presidency this August deserves the briefest honeymoon. If he offers no substantive nuclear

compromise within weeks, the West must halt Iran's nuclear program with a firm ultimatum backed by force.

The only time Iran showed any willingness to compromise on its nukes was when it feared an attack: after US forces swiftly devastated Iraq's military in 2003. If Obama thinks that—without the threat of force—his outstretched hand will now be embraced by a reformer, he has fallen for the illusions of a fist that was unclenched for sleight of hand.

Iran has already enriched enough uranium to make several nukes and will get the bomb during Rowhani's first term as president unless an effective diplomatic and military strategy is pursued. This is no time for naivete about "moderates."

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