

Analysis: Change to Come Slowly After Election of Iranian Moderate

The victory of a moderate in Iran's presidential election has kindled the hopes of liberals for a return to the "golden years" of reformist president Mohammad Khatami, when Iranians enjoyed more freedoms and Tehran had better relations with the West.

But like Khatami, former nuclear negotiator Hasan Rowhani will face obstacles from the conservative establishment. He will be unable to move fast and may not want to move far since, unlike Khatami, he has close ties with the religious leadership.

"Dr. Rowhani and the Supreme Leader have been friends for more than four decades," said Hossein Mousavian, who worked directly under Rowhani when he was chief nuclear negotiator.

"It is a relationship of trust."

That trust is a clue to the puzzle of an overwhelming victory for reformist-backed Rowhani after a pre-election clampdown on reformists left many expecting a hardline victory.

"This outcome more likely came about because, not in spite of, the Supreme Leader who allowed Rowhani to enter the race, gain momentum, and win," said Ali Vaez, Iran analyst at International Crisis Group.

While the president-elect is unlikely to seek such far-reaching reforms as Khatami, his position at the heart of the Islamic Republic will provide him with a wider political base to get things done.

Rowhani has said he intends to pursue constructive interaction

with the world and “more active” negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program, after his predecessor’s belligerence was met with painful Western sanctions and military threats.

He has said suspension of uranium enrichment was out of the question but his more moderate approach could lead to a part thawing of the frosty relations between the Islamic Republic and Western powers who suspect Tehran of seeking to develop nuclear weapons, allegations it denies.

Israel, fearful of such a thaw, made clear on Monday it foresaw no change in the nuclear policy of its long-time foe and few expect any early end to its support for Syrian President Bashar Assad in that country’s civil war.

Different Roots

Khatami was director of the national library before his landslide election as president in 1997 ushered in an era when strict controls were relaxed and a vibrant press and flourishing arts scene sprang up.

But entrenched conservatives fought a rear-guard battle, blocking further reforms and banning reformist newspapers.

By contrast, Rowhani earned his revolutionary spurs through his closeness to the founder of Iran’s theocratic state, Ruhollah Khomeini, and former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was disqualified from running in the election but regarded as a “pillar of the Islamic Republic.”

Rowhani played a central command role in the Iran-Iraq war bolstering his status and influence, because of its overriding priority in securing the future of the Islamic Republic.

He was rewarded with a string of high-profile positions and remains a member of the Expediency council and the Assembly of Experts, two influential advisory bodies. Significantly, he is Supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei’s representative on the Supreme National Security Council.

“Compared with Khatami, he is in a better position to have Khamenei’s support while in office,” Vaez said.

To this end, he is expected to draw up a team that includes reformists, conservatives and principlists, but that excludes radicals from any faction, said Mousavian.

Although elated that eight years under hardliner Mahmoud Ahamdinejad are drawing to a close, many reform-minded Iranians question whether their president-in-waiting can or wants to deliver what he promised and already sense disappointment.

Chief among those concerns is whether he will take on the issue of the two reformist leaders who have been under house arrest for more than two years over what critics have decried as their seditious role in the post-election protests in 2009.

Supporters stirred memories of 2009 during this campaign, chanting the names of the two men, Mirhossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karoubi, at rallies and intensifying calls for their release.

“We may see the release of Mousavi and Karoubi. After the election there could be no role left for them to play,” said Mehdi Khalaji, a senior fellow at the Washington Institute.

Yet the issue of the two leaders remains deeply sensitive. Rowhani’s first official news conference as president-elect was cut short after a slogan was shouted in favor of Mousavi.

Limitations

With his pre-election emphasis on rights and freedoms, Rowhani may also be forced to confront the issue of human rights and abuses by Iran’s notorious security agencies.

Yet he may find little ability to extend his influence over them, especially after he beat their favored candidates current chief nuclear negotiator, Saeed Jalili and mayor of

Tehran, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, to the presidency.

"Rowhani will be able to decrease tensions and slightly relax the security atmosphere which has gripped much of the country for four years," said Eskandar Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, a researcher on modern Iran at Oxford University.

"But he will not have much or any say over the Ministry of Intelligence, the Revolutionary Guards and will find himself hedged in."

When president, Khatami was faced with thousands of students in 1999 protesting against the closure of liberal newspapers.

The reformist president was accused of standing by, allowing the hardliners to crush the dissent, which left several dead.

Several days after the protests, Rowhani, then head of the Supreme National Security Council, told a pro-government rally security forces would "deal with these opportunists and riotous elements if they dare to show their faces".

Despite the foreboding message, a pragmatic Rowhani who advocates progress above and beyond ideology, was also visible.

"The events of the last few days told us that violence and inclination towards violence in any form is deplorable and everyone should move towards law and the rule of law," he told the same rally, an apparent criticism of the vigilantes who stormed the dormitories and beat up protesting students.

The balance he strikes in office will not become clear for a while. He will not be sworn in until August and it will then take several weeks for his choice of ministers to be confirmed by parliament.

"Rowhani was the best choice to buy time from the West on the nuclear issue. It will take a long time to form his team and no-one expects him to make progress in the first month." said

Khalaji of the Washington Institute.

“It was a very clever tactic.”

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