

What Does Hassan Rouhani's Surprise Landslide Election Mean for Iran and the World?

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In the aftermath of Iran's presidential elections, much analysis has focused on what Hassan Rouhani's victory might mean for Iran's foreign policy. Even though presidential power on security and foreign policy matters is constitutionally limited, there are grounds for cautious optimism. Rouhani might be granted a mandate for implementing nuanced shifts in smoothing the domestic political atmosphere and in channelling new diplomatic initiatives, particularly on the nuclear issue. Much though will depend on the composition of the cabinet and on the response of the 'West' to the election of the so-called "diplomatic Sheikh".

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On 14 June, defying most predictions, Hassan Rouhani has been elected Iran's President, and, by being sworn in on 3 August, he will officially end Ahmadinejad's second and last mandate.

By obtaining 50.71 percent of the votes and the absolute majority, he affirmed himself in the first round, countering what most expected to be a victory to be decided through a runoff on the 21 of June. Rouhani's affirmation is the result of the reformist front's success in coalescing behind one single candidate. The conservatives failed to undertake a similar move, and in doing so, lost by splitting the votes amongst various candidates.

The reaction to Rouhani's election in Tehran has been mixed. On one end, it raised hopes of an improvement in Iran's economic situation, citizens' individual rights and relations with the international community. On the other, the failure of a reformist-led government to deliver change, between 1997 and 2005, decreased, to some extent, the expectations toward the ability of the newly elected president to meet his electoral promises. Being aware of the difficulties that the executive power will have in contending with the other governmental institutions, former President Mohammad Khatami asked the electorate, in the aftermath of the elections, to "be careful not to misplace expectations for the government".

Rouhani has held several high-ranking positions in the Islamic Republic and had working relations with the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, as his representative in the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). Rouhani might be granted a mandate for implementing nuanced shifts in smoothing the domestic political atmosphere and in channelling new diplomatic initiatives, particularly with regard to the nuclear dossier. In the last days of the presidential race, he benefitted from the crucial support of prominent reformist

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figures, such as Mohammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani. However, based on his statements, the quest for moderation and his relation with the establishment, he will most likely form a cabinet inclusive of moderate officials from both the reformist and the conservative factions. Particularly interesting will be the assignment of sensitive positions, such as the Foreign Ministry and the Secretariat of the SNSC, which in turn will also determine the chief nuclear negotiator.

The Iranian President will have constitutionally limited power with regard to foreign and security issues, given that the Supreme Leader remains the ultimate decision-maker. Nevertheless, Rouhani might be able to implement at least part of his programmatic platform, oriented towards increasing constructive relations with both regional and international powers. He was known as the “diplomatic Sheikh” for his compromising and engaging approach in handling the nuclear dossier in his former post as chief nuclear negotiator between 2003 and 2005. Hence, the President-elect might, in turn, be able to shift the tone and attitude of the Islamic Republic, without a sweeping change in the country's national interests.

In his first press conference since being elected, Rouhani emphasised the importance of reducing tensions with the outside world, focusing on a rapprochement and on translating “hostility into tension”. Saudi Arabia was, for example, singled out by him as a country that Iran had many things in common with and therefore needed to establish positive relations with, following a rupture with the past administration. However, Rouhani also stated that Iran would not consider halting its uranium enrichment activities and that the “Syrian people should decide their own fate in the presidential election in

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2014”, thus confirming the commitment to preserve Iran’s strategic national interests.

All in all, Rouhani’s election raises some guarded hopes that the shift in tone and overall approach might produce a more constructive environment for dialogue with Iran on the nuclear dossier, as much as on pressing regional issues, such as the Syria crisis. But Rouhani’s election itself is unlikely to suffice in bridging the chasm between Iran and the West. Much will also depend on the ability of the West to respond to the opportunity provided by Rouhani’s election by re-calibrating its strategic posture toward Iran.

Aniseh Bassiri Tabrizi is Freelance Researcher on our [Avoiding Military Confrontation with Iran Project](#).

Image: Hassan Rouhani. **Source:** [Penzanews.com](#).

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