

## **The Global Impact of the Iranian Presidential Elections and the Need for Hassan Rouhani to Gain a Second Term**

**By: Jason E. Higgins**

**Summary:** Iranian president Hassan Rouhani, is seeking a second term in the elections. A moderate and under his term, the world has seen a softening in Iran's dealings with the West. A contrast from the policies driven by the previous leadership of the country.

**Take Away:** Incumbent president Hassan Rouhani is running for re-election. Since taking office in August 2013, he repeatedly underscored creation of new jobs for the country's young labor force as the main priority. Rouhani plans to boost sustainable trade ties with the world and easing foreign trade via modifying Iran's trade policies. In his last words during the televised debate, he promised normalization of relations with the West, greater foreign investments, and a revival of tourism<sup>1</sup>. This has been an expansion of his initial vision.

When originally elected to office in 2013, Rouhani signaled his intention to lead a new Iran on to the international stage at the United Nations, laying out a manifesto for personal freedom at home and compromise abroad.

*In today's world, having access to information and the right of free dialogue and the right to think freely is the right of all people, including the people of Iran.*

Rouhani also vowed that Iran would never seek nuclear weapons and insisted his government had "complete authority" to resolve the 11-year international impasse over Iran's nuclear aspirations<sup>2</sup>. In the following years of his presidency, he has taken measures to make good on many of his initiatives.

Speaking in the northeastern city of Mashhad in Khorasan Razavi Province, Rouhani stressed that he would not give in to the monopoly of power in the province. His remarks were an implicit reference to some of the high-ranking authorities in the holy city who have banned concerts and imposed tough restrictions on art events there. The president said a minority does not have the right to rule over the majority.

He also slammed an attack on Saudi Arabia's consulate in Mashhad. Protesters attacked the Saudi Embassy in Tehran and its consulate in Mashhad in January 2016 in protest to the kingdom's execution of a prominent Shia cleric. The chief executive further called on security and military forces to stay away from politics<sup>3</sup>. Rouhani has come out swinging against hard-liners, including the powerful Revolutionary Guard, which plays an outsized but unelected role in Iranian politics. In one memorable debate moment, he criticized the Guard for launching a ballistic missile bearing the words "Israel must be wiped out" in Hebrew<sup>4</sup>.

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1 <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/413542/Highlights-of-economy-in-presidential-debates>

2 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/sep/19/hassan-rouhani-vision-iran-free>

3 <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/193002.html>

4 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1101381/middle-east>

Iranian women have made significant strides towards more liberal measures regarding their freedom under moderate President Hassan Rouhani. Rouhani's government has been slowly expanding social freedoms and job opportunities for women. His administration was the first to name women to roles, including an ambassador and a foreign ministry spokesperson, in the Islamic republic. Several female governors have been appointed. The government also lifted gender-based quotas for university admission in some subjects and, at 51 percent, women actually slightly outnumber men at universities. The administration has also prepared a bill to further protect women against domestic violence at home as well as in the workplace and on the streets<sup>5</sup>.

What has made the most significant difference in the world spectrum has been Rouhani's dealings regarding Iran's nuclear program. Hassan Rouhani staked his political future on opening Iran ever so slightly to the outside world and overcoming hard-liners' opposition to secure an historic nuclear deal in exchange for relief from crippling sanctions<sup>6</sup>. He headed Iran's former nuclear negotiating team and was the country's top negotiator with the EU three – UK, France, and Germany – on Iran's nuclear program<sup>7</sup>. The result was the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which will ensure that Iran's nuclear programme will be exclusively peaceful, and mark a fundamental shift in their approach to this issue.

JCPOA will be followed by a gradual evolution, at a reasonable pace, of Iran's nuclear programme (including its enrichment activities) to a commercial programme for exclusively peaceful purposes consistent with international nonproliferation norms. Successful implementation of this JCPOA will enable Iran to fully enjoy its right to nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under the relevant articles of the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in line with its obligations therein, and the Iranian nuclear programme will be treated in the same manner as that of any other non-nuclear-weapon state party to the NPT. This JCPOA will produce the comprehensive lifting of all UN Security Council sanctions as well as multilateral and national sanctions related to Iran's nuclear programme, including steps on access in areas of trade, technology, finance and energy<sup>8</sup>. The president once again threw his weight behind a 2015 nuclear deal known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

He has wisely touted the accord. Arguing it has pushed the West to recognize the Islamic Republic's nuclear rights. The chief executive touched upon the achievements of the JCPOA saying they have contributed to lifting anti-Iran sanctions, changing Iran's image in the global atmosphere and reducing the inflation rate<sup>9</sup>. As part of his domestic platform, Rouhani has been an ardent supporter of free market ideas to boost Iran's economy.

Rouhani has highlighted the role of the private sector in turning the economy's wheels, underlining that he will set up a proper platform for the private sector to expand activities via improving the business environment and divesting shares of state-run-companies. The moderate president has also put the modification of the banking system and the reinforcement of the capital market to fund economic projects on his agenda. He further plans to boost sustainable trade ties with the world and easing foreign trade via modifying Iran's trade policies<sup>10</sup>. Great steps have also been taken in boosting agricultural, oil and gas production, as well as attracting investments and exporting domestic products. In addition to Iran's active

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iranian-women-fear-gains-will-be-lost-rouhani-loses-election-n760816>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1101381/middle-east>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/National-Security-and-Nuclear-Diplomacy.htm>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/245317.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.iran-daily.com/News/193002.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/413542/Highlights-of-economy-in-presidential-debates>

role in the petrochemicals market, they are about to join the global market in the fields of steel and the auto industry<sup>11</sup>. Rouhani's agenda has been a drastic turn from the traditional policies of the regime.

The presidential election is currently hosting six candidates. The lead contender to the incumbent is Ebrahim Raisi, a hardline Shi'ite cleric. He is a former protege of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. He is widely supported by religious conservatives who support a strict enforcement of Shariah law which puts women in an inferior position to men<sup>12</sup>. He is seen by many as being close to Khamenei, and has even been talked about as a possible successor to him. He is a law professor and former prosecutor who heads an influential religious charitable foundation with vast business holdings. He has gained is notoriety through his populist posture, anti-corruption rhetoric and get-tough reputation — bolstered by his alleged role condemning inmates to death during Iran's 1988 mass execution of thousands of political prisoners<sup>13</sup>. He has been a serious critic of Rouhani's diplomatic policies towards the west. Raisi has faulted Iran's economic performance under Rouhani and his pursuit of detente that in 2015 yielded a landmark deal with world powers under which Tehran curbed its disputed nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of sanctions<sup>14</sup>. As part of his platform, Raisi favors a populist agenda. He blames Rouhani for a rise in the unemployment rate from about 10.5 percent to above 12 percent and unfavorable living standards in the society, arguing that Rouhani has been unable to solve economic difficulties of ordinary people. Raisi and his supporters have claimed that Iran is facing an economic crisis with rampant unemployment, recession and inflation. They classify the Iranian nation into two categories of rich and poor, with a huge gap between them and the rich minority. Both candidates have promised a sharp increase in monthly cash handouts to the majority of people. Proposing 2.5 million rials (around \$66) from the current 455,000 rials (around \$12) per month<sup>15</sup>. This election will have a grave and rippling effect not just in the Middle-East but on the global stage.

**Additional Considerations:** Several factors revolve around this particular election. It is a standoff between the moderate new political movement versus the ranks of the old guard. It will, most likely, be an election that changes the long-term path of the country. Khamenei is 77 years old and only the second person in Iran's history to hold the top job. He underwent prostate surgery in 2014 prompting speculation about his health. The president is one of three members on a temporary council that takes over the supreme leader's duties should his post become vacant until a successor is named by the panel known as the Assembly of Experts. Rouhani and Raisi both sit on that assembly. The winner of the elections will significantly shape the choice of the next supreme leader and the direction of the country<sup>16</sup>. This election could determine the future place Iran plays in the world.

**Conclusion:** It is likely the Supreme leader will either retire or not live through the next four years. This will leave an opening for a new Supreme Leader. The one who occupies the current president's seat will be in a key position to assume the role. At the very least, he will have significant influence over choosing the possible candidates. Hassan Rouhani offers the possibility of pushing the country's foreign policy in a more moderate direction. Right now, the situation in Iran shows a weakening of the hard line theocratic regime and a strengthening of a new moderate liberal movement. Whether this liberal movement continues to progress and gain strength or whether the old regime gains momentum and takes back control will ultimately depend on Iran's economic progress. Rouhani has staked his nuclear deal on the

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11 <http://president.ir/en/99109>

12 <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/iranian-women-fear-gains-will-be-lost-rouhani-loses-election-n760816>

13 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1101381/middle-east>

14 <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-elections-raisi-idUSKBN17B0DZ>

15 <http://www.tehrantimes.com/news/413542/Highlights-of-economy-in-presidential-debates>

16 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1101381/middle-east>

grounds that it will create warmer relations with the west and open vast new opportunities for Iran. It is imperative that the western world respond to Rouhani's actions. This has to be done by loosening economic sanctions and offering friendlier diplomatic approaches that result in better trade relations for Iran.

This will be a complicated affair as Rouhani still continues to operate with aggressive foreign policies. Under his administration, Iran has continued to support of the Assad regime in Syria and maintains tenuous relations with the Sunni dominated Gulf countries.

Hassan Rouhani did win his second term last week by a sizeable margin. This win shows there is the possibility of a new era taking hold of the Iran. If it is to be sustained, the Western powers are going to have to respond to it in a positive way. For the western powers, this will inevitably mean balancing relations between a moderate liberal government in Iran against the Sunni nations in the Gulf and Israel, who still view Iran with grave suspicion. However, the alternative is that with no significant benefits to show for Iran's agreements over nuclear development or embracing the west, it will only pave the way for the old political leadership to gain momentum and regain control of the country.

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