

The Iranian Message

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MADRID – The Iranian people have spoken, and their voice has been heard. More than 70% of eligible voters turned out to elect the most moderate of the eight presidential candidates approved by the Guardian Council, the body that, among other things, vets candidates for public office. Hassan Rowhani's unexpected first-round victory could open doors, both for diplomacy and for Iran's sanctions-ravaged economy.

This opening is important, but the potential for change that comes with Rowhani's victory is no means limitless or certain. After all, Iran's president does not stand alone at the head of his country. Still, the election's outcome is a strong and hopeful signal, and Iran's international negotiating partners must pay proper attention and react in kind.

The mood in Tehran this weekend could not have been more different from the last election in 2009. In Iran, as elsewhere, the street is the country's best social barometer, and Iran's 75 million inhabitants – frustrated with sky-high inflation and economic hardship – saw reason to celebrate. After hand-picking the eight candidates from among almost 700 who sought to run (notably discarding reformist former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's protégé Esfandiar Mashaei), Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei carefully allowed his country to speak.

The shape of Rowhani's victory is important: with 18.6 million of the 36.7 million votes cast, Iran's former chief nuclear negotiator defeated the six conservative

candidates decisively. But he was far from being a front-runner at the start. Many were convinced that Saeed Jalili, Iran's current chief nuclear negotiator, would win, consolidating Khamenei's hardline rule across the government.

But the centrist-reformist axis swung into action with pinpoint timing. In the week before the vote, both former President Mohammad Khatami and Rafsanjani publically endorsed Rowhani. Three days before the election, the only other candidate in the moderate camp, Mohammad Reza Aref, dropped out of the race at Khatami's request. With the centrist and reformist camps united behind him, Rowhani surged to victory.

In the presidential debates, which I followed closely, Rowhani – himself a cleric – advocated a rebalancing of international relations and better economic management at home. With their vote, Iranians sent a strong message of support for that pragmatic agenda, overwhelmingly rejecting Ahmadinejad's policy of resistance and giving priority to restoring the economy over the pursuit of national glory.

In his post-election press conference, Rowhani reiterated his promise to recalibrate Iran's relations with the world. He promised greater openness and to repair the country's international standing, offering greater nuclear transparency in order to restore international trust.

Clearly, on the nuclear issue, a return to the situation in 2003 is impossible. The offer that was on the table when I last sat across from Rowhani is no longer available. But, with his victory, Iran has taken a step forward; it is now up to its negotiating partners to recognize that this is the best chance for diplomatic progress in at least four years, and to make a similar move.

Obviously, it would be senseless to forget that the Supreme Leader remains firmly in control of the nuclear issue. But, by accepting Rowhani's victory, Khamenei may have sent a hint, if not a clear signal, that a change of course may be afoot.

It remains to be seen how this would be translated into practice: the true question is how much leeway Khamenei will grant Rowhani, who, like any leader, will be tugged from many sides in his foreign-policy endeavors. Particularly on the nuclear issue, which, for Iranian diplomacy, dominates most others, Rowhani must walk a political tightrope.

Slowly but surely, lines of communication – between Iran and the United States in particular – must be reestablished. But a window has opened for both sides. Through careful diplomacy and precisely measured incentives, some rapprochement is feasible. As we know, such an opportunity is rare, and it must be seized, given the peril that the nuclear issue poses in Iran's incendiary neighborhood.

But there is a further international question that cannot go unasked, concerning the role of Iran's regional proxies. Though Rowhani will not have sole decision-making power on this issue, he will have to face it squarely if his plan is truly to recalibrate Iran's international relations.

The question that Rowhani must answer can be put as follows: What is Iran's vocation? Is it willing to act as a responsible regional actor, taking its place in negotiations on the serious problems in its neighborhood? Or will it continue to pursue its interests through its violent, destabilizing proxies in Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria?

I know Rowhani to be a rational and reasonable man, and I am hopeful that meaningful international dialogue can be started. Though efforts to chart a new diplomatic path will meet opposition and resistance from hard-liners at home, the international community should trust the Iranian people and listen to the message that they have sent. It is time to send a message back, by opening constructive, incentive-based channels of communication that enable the international community to achieve a safe resolution of the nuclear issue – and that enable Iran's leaders to focus on the economic recovery and growth that their people demand.

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