



## PRESIDENT- ELECT HASSAN ROWHANI AND THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

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The results of Iranian presidential elections last month should have belied the boiler plate prognosis of many experts and analysts of the developments within the Islamic Republic. Proved wrong was a general expectation about a win by conservatives close to the Supreme Leader Khatemei . Given his clear reformist credentials, Hassan Rowhani's lead with a big margin over his rivals for the Presidential poll showed that the political processes in Iran resist simplistic assessments and accommodate greater diversity than Iran's detractors might wish to concede. On the other hand, with just over 50% votes in all, Rowhani's reformist constituency too is not as solid. For instance, in some southern provinces the conservative candidate Mohsen Rezaei did better than Hassan Rowhani. Variation of voters choice within the same state, such as Khorasan, was also significant in that in its south the hardliners Mohammad Bagher Qalibaf and Jalili together polled higher than Rowhani but reformists led in the state capital Birijand. Rowhani's share in Sistan, Baluchistan and Kordestan was well over his national average even as Isfahan and Qom swung to the conservatives. In the National Assembly the conservatives still hold sway.

As for where the president elect comes from there is considerable published material about his candid and forthright views spread over the past few years. His own memoirs which appeared in 2011 in the form of a book of 1000 plus pages entitled "National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy" contain a virtual blow by blow account of his engagement with the Iran nuclear file, from October 2003 till he sought to be relieved in August 2005, after Ahmadinijad's election, of his responsibilities as the head of Iran's negotiating team. He also comments in this

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book about the achievements and challenges brought about during Ahmadinijad's years. Some of his comments are relevant to analyzing how under his forthcoming presidency things may develop – even though he would conform fully with Khatemei's nuclear policy. He observes in his book that "We can say that 20% enrichment has in some ways created increased deterrence" but "with the heavy cost paid it should have progressed more". In another comment quoted from his book he points out that "now taking (Iran) out of the Security Council is a complex and costly affair. In effect, we have endured the biggest harm in the areas of development and national power. We may

not have benefited much on the whole in terms of national security either. The foundation of security is not (in) feeling apprehensive. In the past 6 years the feeling of apprehension has not been reduced." He mentions his preference to have continued the engagement he led since 2003 and would have liked to negotiate with the US. He was also not too hopeful of any gains from talking with the East i.e. China and Russia. A comment attributed to him about this can

be indicative of his thinking: "negotiating with US is like driving a Mercedes Benz while doing it with the East is like driving the *Pa'yan*, the Iranian car, and talking with the nonaligned is like riding a bicycle".

His campaign plank had what is described as "more conciliatory foreign policy" by a respected professor<sup>1</sup> who also underlines that Rowhani's campaign stressed the need to "de-securitize" the country – a controversial line which is quite familiar to other democracies too, including India's own. After the election he is reported to have said to a meeting of clerics "We have a lot of problems facing us. No government in the history of Iran has

faced the problems that this government is facing," adding that, "The problems cannot be solved in a matter of days or months." Such a bold and candid assessment of his country's predicament is consistent with his writings of past few years. It is hard to dismiss this anguish lightly as campaign rhetoric since he brings with him enormous experience in what may be called mainstream security and governance issues as well as legislature and the religious orthodoxy. This can possibly give some insight into the *angst* of his supporters across the country.

Comparing Iran's situation today with that in 2003, when Rowhani was lead negotiator with the EU 3 on Iranian nuclear program, would more likely provide a mixed assessment: Iran has more than 13000 centrifuges running today at Natanz and a new underground location protected by the mountain, at Fordow, has about 646 advanced centrifuges working which can take enrichment to way above 20% - all in defiance of UN Security resolutions but still under IAEA's comprehensive safeguards. In 2003, Iran was the butt of suspicion and allegations of what the US called *breach of safeguards agreement* despite being far from even a pilot scale plant for uranium enrichment. The political process led by EU 3 was attempting to bring Iran fully under compliance with its legal commitments and there were no Security Council sanctions; even though the US had domestic laws in force against Iran, such as ILSA (Iran Libya Sanctions Act) and pressure was mounting within the IAEA Board of Governors. The crude prices then were low while today they remain comfortably high for Iranian economy, even though total production and trade in oil is severely curtailed due to the effects of severe sanctions by US, Europe and UN.

In 2003, Iran's immediate neighbours had strong US troop presence and Washington was in no mood to even consider talking to Iran which it had declared as part of the axis of evil. Today US is part of the official interlocutors of Iran in the P5 plus process and has been on record at the highest level to be ready to hold talks with Iran. There are no US troops on the western borders in Iraq where the regime is much closer to Iran than at any time in the history of the Islamic revolution. US problems in Afghanistan show few signs of relenting even as it is set to quit by 2014, when the Taliban would jump to claim as victory. US relations with Pakistan are far more expensive and riddled with problems; and very different from the bonhomie of Musharraf years - no matter how hard Messrs Hagel and Kerry might be trying. Notwithstanding Israel's loud warnings no one in Europe or America envisions military action against Iran. Bushehr has gone fully operational. Russia is reportedly considering another nuclear power plant in Iran. China has evinced strategic interests in the

Chhabahar port project. Strongest opponents of Iran in the Arab world are confined to the Gulf today since Egypt is beset with unending domestic turmoil. Syria, of course, is in deep morass with Iran's staunch ally Assad hounded by rebels aided and armed by the West, while Geneva II Conference does not so far envisage inviting Iran.

That President-elect Rowhani should call this mixed situation unprecedented is a reflection of the acute anxiety of Iran's upcoming establishment. It is not clear whether by declaring such a predicament Rowhani is hedging vis-à-vis domestic hardliners his position as a reformist who wants to ameliorate the situation at home, uplift economy, moderate media, internet and the overall people-oriented discourse. His choice of words is bold, for example, in remarking about Islamic Revolutionary Iranian Broadcasting (IRIB)<sup>2</sup> on Twitter that when the Iranian TV tells story about the birth of a panda in China that does not interest its people as much as "unpaid workers protesting" - implying that controls on TV and internet in Iran is out of tune with people's liking. His appeal for moderation at home and for focus on people's aspirations and problems is scarcely likely to please the hardliners who so far have ostensibly lauded his victory as demonstrating vibrancy of their democracy. In this milieu his opening on the nuclear issue is bound to be cautious and calibrated. The moot point is the extent and substance of such openness that would be in play when Rowhani's team is formed next month and, is expected to resume engagement with the West. Pressure to show results would be much more on a leader professing domestic moderation than on his predecessor.

The Assembly in Iran remains in control of the hardliners - and it is important to recall that what Rowhani as chief negotiator had agreed with the EU 3 in 2003-04, namely adhering to the Additional Protocol of the IAEA, was put paid to by the National Assembly. It is of a piece with Iranian negotiating practice, by now well understood by its interlocutors, that the negotiator may be tripped by his own team or those stopping him from the capital. Be that as it may, his comments about engaging with the outside world do not show the abrasive cockiness that Iranian leaders have displayed in recent years - even as he underscores dignity and self respect of his nation and skepticism about the Americans. It remains to be seen if he has to fall in line to boast about achievements in the nuclear field. He might prefer ducking giving too much credit to Ahmediniazad whose harsh attitude has earned Iran much more trouble than gains.

Latest in the unfolding events externally is an expression of concern about P5 plus one talks by the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Ryabkov that "There is no agreement

now on when and where the next round will be. That worries us". He lamented, "After the election of the Iranian president, we stepped up work in preparation for a new round of talks but so far the work is not being done transparently." On the US side, Reuters reports that Thomas Countryman, Assistant Secretary for International Security and Non-Proliferation, said that "Washington was "determined" to try to resolve the nuclear stand-off with Tehran diplomatically and urged Tehran to return to negotiations" and that "The window for such a solution is open and we intend to pursue it". The key point of caution in US official statement seems to be "We are willing to be optimistic about the possibility of a changed policy in Tehran but it needs to be expressed through actual negotiations and not simply with rhetorical statements."

The US caution rests on what has been stated by Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei who recently charged the West of being inflexible in negotiations. Khamenei as well as every other Iranian leader have generally stressed that the resolution of issues should mean removal of sanctions and accepting Iran's right to enrichment under the NPT. The variant, on which negotiations hitherto have stumbled, is the extent of relaxation of sanctions which might elicit Iranian forward movement, for instance, about the broad band formula of "stop, shut and ship" which, more or less, implies shutting Fordow on and beyond 20% enrichment, stopping of more centrifuges in Natanz and shipping out or converting enriched uranium into metal fuel under full cooperation with IAEA's demands for inspections. At the April 2013 talks in Almaty Iran according to its western interlocutors did not reveal its position on what it can give. It is also generally assessed in various commentaries

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that Iran may not fully accept the demands placed on it and would instead proceed in a step by step process whereby at each step its negotiators would demand respectable take aways for Tehran – in conformity with what Iran calls dignity and national self respect.

What is relevant in this context is the introduction of larger political and security issues concerning the Middle East ( such as the Nuclear weapon Free Zone in the Middle East, Syrian situation, just to name a few) that has also dogged these talks from the beginning. Moderation and flexibility in the US approach as advised by a group of

eminent retired diplomats in Washington earlier this year, more forthcoming attitude witnessed in pronouncements from the US leadership and lowering the clamour about all options being on table are straws in the wind – which risk being blown away by every successive tightening and widening of the US sanctions on core sectors of Iranian economy, revelations in the US about Stuxnet and IAEA's persistent expressions of dissatisfaction with Iranian authorities. Iran has also shown over confidence about the role it is playing so far despite biting sanctions. Iranian academics in Track II meetings have even invoked Ken Waltz's thesis about living with Iranian bomb – coming from Iranian commentators does this smack of latent ambition regardless of denials from Tehran at the highest level ? Whether Rowhani's soft talk presage flexibility on the part of his team remains the crux of the problem.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Brumberg, Daniel, Co-director of Democracy and Governance Studies at Georgetown University.

<sup>2</sup> Hassan Rowhani was head of the Supervisory Council of IRIB from 1980-83.



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