

Will he make a difference?

Iran's new president, Hassan Rohani, has been hailed abroad as a reformist breath of fresh air. But at home he may still have to accommodate the crusty old guard



The first-round victory on June 14th of Hassan Rohani, with almost 51% of the vote in a field of six candidates, stunned both Iranians and the world at large. In the run-up to the contest, the most conservative of the candidates, Saeed Jalili, was widely tipped as the favourite. The supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say in all crucial matters of state, would—it was surmised—look on with approval, perhaps with vote-rigging officials poised to enforce the desired result, as they did last time round, in 2009, when the country was thrown into a year-and-a-half of turmoil. In the event, Mr Rohani, with the overwhelming backing of voters wanting reform, thrashed all his opponents by so wide a margin that it would have been politically impossible to fiddle the outcome, even if the most reactionary of the ruling clerics and the powerful Revolutionary Guard had wanted to.

Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, the mayor of Tehran, came second with 17%, while Mr Jalili limped home with barely 11%. Some 73% of registered voters in a population of 74m turned out. The winner got 18.6m votes, even more than the 17m recorded by his populist predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in his run-off triumph in 2005, when he was elected to the first of his two controversial terms.

Mr Rohani, a 64-year-old cleric, campaigned on a platform of engagement with the West (including on nuclear issues) and an easing of restrictions at home. Though he has served at the heart of the establishment for many years, he was plainly the most liberal of the eventual runners, though all of them had been vetted by the Council of Guardians, a clutch of clerics and lawyers, to ensure their fidelity to the tenets of the Islamic revolution of 1979. It helped Mr Rohani that the so-called “principlist” bloc of the four most conservative candidates, led by Mr Jalili, failed to rally around one man.

Three days before the poll the reformist camp, all but eviscerated in 2009, persuaded its most outspoken candidate, Muhammad Reza Aref, to drop out of the race to let reform-minded voters rally behind the less abrasive Mr Rohani. The next day Mr Khamenei declared, most unusually, that even those Iranians who “did not support the Islamic system” should cast their vote. These two events enabled reformists and some in the conservative establishment to converge on the middle ground, where Mr Rohani cannily emerged as a candidate they could both embrace.

Whether Mr Khamenei helped Mr Rohani along or just watched events unfold is unclear. The result may, at any rate in the short run, boost the ruling establishment. For the first time in many years it looks solidly in control, especially compared with its counterparts in Iraq, Syria and Turkey.

After Mr Rohani was declared the winner, people celebrated in the streets, from middle-class northern Tehran to the holy city of Qom in the conservative heartland. "They knew people had reached their breaking-point," said a joyful 32-year-old engineer in Tehran's tree-lined main boulevard, Vali Asr Street, referring to the country's economic slump as a result of Mr Ahmadinejad's mismanagement and the international sanctions imposed on Iran because of its nuclear ambitions. A student whose hijab was purple, Mr Rohani's campaign colour, asked a policeman if he was happy with the result. "We are happy to see you happy," the policeman replied. "It is better than having to beat you all," he joked. A reformist paper carried the headline "Hope comes again". Another ran an editorial telling Iran's hardliners, "Your era has passed."

An early token of goodwill would be the release of Mir-Hossein Mousavi, the reformist widely thought to have won the election of 2009, and of his fellow candidate, Mehdi Karubi, both of whom have been under house arrest for the past two years. Mr Rohani has not publicly mentioned them by name; he stayed silent at his post-election press conference when an excited member of the audience shouted, "Mir-Hossein should be here!"

The supreme leader and Mr Rohani, who has long served on the supreme leader's security council and was previously Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, have known each other for more than 40 years. Mr Rohani can certainly soften the tone of government. More debatable is how much he can affect nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 (the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany). But he has been quick to call for a rapprochement with the United States, Britain and Saudi Arabia. "Relations between Iran and America are a complicated and difficult issue," he said. "After all, there is an old scar. We must act prudently to heal it." America, he added, must forgo "unilateral and bullying policies toward Iran."

Some analysts suspect that Mr Rohani's diplomatic manner, especially after Mr Ahmadinejad's bellicose posturing, will divert attention from Iran's nuclear programme, perhaps even smoothing its advance. However civilised in manner, says Nima Mina of the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, "his goal is to pursue the nuclear programme...He was allowed to run because he is capable of moving it forward quickly." Others, especially in Israel, caution against seeing Mr Rohani in too gentle a light.

It is also generally assumed that he will back Syria's embattled president, Bashar Assad, to the hilt, as his predecessor and the ruling establishment have done. Much store will continue to be set on strengthening the Shia axis that now stretches from southern Lebanon, where Hizbullah, a Shia party-cum-militia, reigns supreme, through Syria under its Alawite rulers, and across to Iran from Iraq, under the thumb of an increasingly sectarian Shia leader.

But at home and on the wider world stage, a very different sort of president from the previous one, at least in style, is likely to emerge after he takes office on August 3rd. Within a month he is to present a new government, probably including figures from both ends of an argumentative establishment. It may take a while to see whether he will differ in substance.

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