

COMMENTARY

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Hassan Rouhani: Result of Western Pressure?

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Iran's President-elect Hassan Rouhani, took office on 4 August 2013, has thrown up a wild card for those wishing to predict the future of Iran's nuclear programme and of the US-Iran relations. Rouhani's campaign was based on a moderate reformist campaign that promised to engage the West and address the issue of Iran's failing economy. He also brought up the question of releasing some political prisoners and working towards more political openness. The Iranian people, it would seem, despite their country's highly undemocratic political power structure have managed to exert their right to elect a man who, they believe, can bring about change for the better. Iran is an oasis of relative stability in a region torn by strife and upheaval. Elections, no matter how undemocratic, are still many steps ahead of the shaking if not collapsing governments in Iran's neighbourhood.

The US seems to have taken a self-congratulatory stance linking Rouhani's election directly to the severe economic sanctions that have been imposed on Iran. Numerous commentators and observers have taken for granted that the moderate stance that has been seen in these elections by Rouhani and the votes he garnered are a result of these. Its nuclear programme, which has been a major bone of contention between Iran and the western world, led to these sanctions and Rouhani has, earlier, been a part of the negotiations with the latter in this regard. As part of his campaign, Rouhani once more brought up the contentious issue and reiterated that it was aimed at peaceful uses, that is, for energy and medical purposes. But, at the same time he noted that the sanctions were having a tremendous impact on the people of Iran and proposed increasing transparency and building trust with the US and western countries. This move has been seen by the latter as a sign of weakness and the tone with which this development is being referred to in academia, is hardly short of smug.

This explanation for Rouhani's success seems rather simplistic as he was not the only moderate candidate. Mohammad Reza Aref, the other moderate candidate dropped out of the race to strengthen Rouhani's candidacy. Supreme Leader Khomeini is the ultimate authority on Iranian foreign policy and his power struggle with former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is well known. Khomeini did not seem to want another President under him who might give him trouble and the approved list of candidates for the election reflected this. But none of the candidates

closest to him united their constituencies and without any candidate having clear support of the Supreme Leader or the Revolutionary Guards, the hardliner vote was split, thereby giving Rouhani the edge.

Another observation that goes against the sanction theory is that Rouhani was not the only one who criticized the resistance approach to the nuclear negotiations. Other than Saeed Jalili, most other candidates were in favour of taking a softer approach. Perhaps the severity of the economic sanctions affected the combined opinions of the candidates. But to claim that they directly impacted Rouhani's election would be overstretch, especially, since Rouhani has, on record, defended the pre-Ahmadinejad nuclear programme and has stated that he means to continue with it. His strategy is to bring the West over to his point of view and not to cave in to their demands. Based on the reactions and statements of the people of Iran, Rouhani's election had less to directly do with the sanctions and more to do with the hope of a change in the power equation in favour of democracy and away from Khomeini's more authoritarian economic, political and military institutions.

Some other factors also lead us to believe that sanctions may not have played as significant a role as the West would like to believe. It seems that while the sanctions can be linked directly to the monetary and occupational woes of the people, a direct link to the outcome of the Iranian elections is more difficult to ascertain.

There is vitriol on both sides of the fence on the issue and western scholars are coming away from the debates looking like they are trying to justify the imposition of economic sanctions on Iran and are pre-empting the justification for a possible increase in their severity. The Iranian scholars, on the other hand, sound like they are affected by a severe bout of nationalism that takes away from academic credibility.

Increasing sanctions might lead to extreme shortages of essential commodities in the country and could turn the people further against the West. At this juncture, perhaps it would be prudent for the West to concentrate on actual engagement with Iran instead of prematurely patting themselves on the back for a victory well won. Change is not as certain as all that.

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