

Rouhani: A New Perspective for Iran

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Introduction

Iran is likely to change substantively under Hassan Rouhani’s leadership.¹ Allow me to qualify “change.” Change is not regime change, nor is it change toward a more secular, liberal political system à la the West. Change in Iran means qualitative change, it means breathing new life into the Islamic Republic. There are two reasons why Rouhani can change Iran.

The first is that his moderate inclination will bring about the same subtle, yet tangible results that Mohammed Khatami’s Presidency [1997-2005] brought. These are qualitative and conceptual changes rather than quantitative. They are palpable, substantive changes that will reverberate within Iranian society. At the state level, he will bring about the “politics of normalcy,” which will have a direct bearing on society.

The second reason stems from the fact that he is as much a conservative, establishment figure as he is a moderate figure. Thus, he will have more political “purchasing power,” and will elicit piecemeal results, because he is cut from the same cloth as establishment figures.

Politics of Normalcy

In order to glean some insights that will support the claims made above, it is necessary to evaluate Iran’s

recent history. The father of reform, Khatami, has always been the subject of mixed reviews. Critics argue that Khatami failed to achieve concrete results. While there were huge discrepancies between Khatami’s campaign promises, popular expectation, and what was really achieved, the “Khatami experiment” unleashed a vibrant civic activism and budding pluralistic momentum that prevailed well beyond the end of his eight-year Presidency. The reform movement ushered in a critical transition in modern Iranian history, with reverberations that can still be felt today.

More significantly, Khatami tried to move Iranian politics beyond tumultuous times towards a regular mode of politics. In the context of Khatami’s reform campaign, the “politics of normalcy” reflected the state of a country that had endured years of turbulent social and revolutionary change. In the years following the 1979 Revolution, both state and society were thrust into a purposive, ideological, state-driven transformation—the creation of the democratic-theocratic Islamic Republic—an extraordinary experiment without historical precedent. The attempt to link up with the past, to restore the torn fabric of society, to draw on intellectual traditions and the cultural and religious values of the past, all reflected the post-traumatic pursuit of a usable past as the grounding for contemporary Iran.

Khatami’s pragmatic approach was rooted in the attempt to base Iran’s politics in the repudiation of revolutionary politics. While the reformer-President embraced the contributions of these extraordinary times, he pushed for change through simultaneous engagement with the future as well as the past. As such, his movement gave enormous importance to the defining features of modernizing societies. A break from the past, in the current situation, would encompass the promotion of civil society, greater openness, the rule of law, economic integration, and gradual rapprochement with the international community—the core features of Khatami’s political platform.

Khatami believed that modernity was compatible with Iranian culture and that Western-inspired practices could be successfully woven into Iran’s national, religious, and historical tapestry. His mission was to initiate a civilizational upgrade, and to push the Islamic Republic into the 21st Century.

Revival under Rouhani

Likewise, Rouhani’s Presidency is likely to represent the explicit project of a return to normalcy through

1. Hassan Rouhani was elected President of Iran on June 15, 2013, and took office on Aug. 3, 2013.



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Ghoncheh Tazmini: "In Rouhani's Iran, we are likely to see a revival of the politics of normalcy where ideological radicalism will give way to Iran's broader interests."

progressive reform. The politics of normalcy refers to a country that is seeking to avoid diplomatic isolation, and a nation that is seeking to rid itself of revolutionary-style politics, self-reliant economic policies, and rigid social mores. It is a shift towards more pragmatic politics characterized by an effort to base Iran's politics on the repudiation of revolutionary politics—politically, economically, and socially. In Rouhani's Iran, we are likely to see a revival of the politics of normalcy, where ideological radicalism will give way to Iran's broader interests.

Khatami's identification with the politics of normalcy is one of the lasting legacies of his political program. A pragmatist, cognizant of the forces of civil society, market forces, and globalization, Khatami sought to construct a model of normality that combined Western-inspired reforms with something broader, taking into account Iran's unique culture, history, and place in the world.

Khatami had effectively consigned the revolutionary period of Iran's politics to history, but carried forward the original revolutionary ideals of social justice, freedom, and equality. With Rouhani's victory, a new chapter of normality has been inaugurated—and this will very much characterize the essence and spirit of change.

In one of his first statements following his victory, Rouhani hinted at the possibility of a relaxation of

social restrictions. He expressed opposition to meddling in private lives, gender segregation in society, and Internet filtering. He has vowed to promote the freedom of expression, to limit artistic and cultural censorship, while fostering rapprochement. The President-elect has pledged that he will form a broad-based "trans-factional" cabinet from across the political spectrum. The rumored members of his cabinet include two females, and seasoned technocrats from both the Khatami and Hashemi-Rafsanjani (a moderate-centrist) eras.

Neither Reformer nor Hardliner

Like many religious-minded scholars before the 1979 Revolution, Rouhani was drawn to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Heard mentioning the Ayatollah in a Tehran mosque, he became a target of the last Shah's dreaded intelligence service. He was forced to leave the country, eventually joining Khomeini in exile in Paris. Rouhani is a solid establishment figure: Since the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, in which he played a strategic role in the military command, he has not been excluded from regime institutions. Unlike many reformist and centrist leaders before him, he still enjoys a relationship of trust with the Supreme Leader [Ali Khamenei].

Rouhani's approval by the Guardian Council, while centrist Hashemi-Rafsanjani was disqualified, is a testament of his impeccable revolutionary credentials. However, Rouhani does not share the visceral anti-Americanism of the Iranian revolutionary tradition: For example, in 2003, he attracted attention by visiting the scene of the Bam earthquake, and thanking the U.S. for its help.

Rouhani is neither reformist nor hardliner. He is the synthesis or product of a thesis (the reformist/pragmatist camp, excluding the more radical, secular Green Movement supporters), and an antithesis (Ahmadinejad and the more conservative-traditionalist, principalist elements). Rouhani is the reconciliation of the contending and competing ideological tension between these two camps—a compromise of sorts. This will be Rouhani's "brand," and one could argue the beginnings of an alternative construction of civic national identity.

The pushes and pulls of Iran's recent history have brought to the surface a President-elect who will be able to benefit from both socio-political constructs. He will be able to prioritize or instrumentalize either discourse, depending on political realities. As such, he will have more nuanced conceptual tools with which to address Iran's trials and tribulations. Between 1997 and

2005, Khatami's reform efforts were stifled amidst intra-elite wrangling. Khatami found himself in an institutional gridlock, and was unable to maneuver around the political structure or to reconcile the political rifts that impeded his program for change.

Rouhani, on the other hand, straddles the fence, and this will give him a freer hand in implementing change. One can even say that Rouhani is closer to bringing harmony to the complex Byzantine hybrid of the Iranian theocracy-democracy, and of acting as an antidote to a socially divided Iran. He has demonstrated that while he is sensitive to the concerns of the conservative establishment, he remains committed to the goals and aspirations of the popular will.

Rouhani's campaign made clear that he acutely understands the extraordinary economic strain the Iranian regime and society are under. To relieve the pressure, Rouhani appears open to a diplomatic agreement that would place limitations on Iran's nuclear program; one that would significantly increase transparency in exchange for acknowledging Iran's rights and the lifting of sanctions over time. He has even hinted that he would ease Iran's preconditions for direct talks [with the U.S.] in an effort to end Iran's international isolation. This suggests a more dynamic and creative logic of engagement, and the repudiation of the politics of resistance and confrontation. While he is a staunch supporter of Iran's nuclear program, Rouhani does recognize the importance of rehabilitating Iran's sanctions-battered economy, and its foreign relations.

This balancing act is Rouhani's key to eliciting change. Again, Khatami's Presidency can shed some light. Diehard reformists felt that Khatami had not pushed for reform assertively enough, that he had been too passive. While Khatami persistently showed reluctance to "rock the boat," in retrospect, this may have been his strongest feature. This kind of conservatism will work to Rouhani's advantage in effecting change.

Back in 1999, Khatami received harsh criticism for not reacting aggressively enough to the raid of student dormitories by paramilitaries during the student protests. Khatami issued a harsh rebuke against the perpetrators but he tried to quell the unrest rather than to stoke it—as Mir-Hossein Mousavi [Prime Minister, 1981-89] did during the post-election protests in 2009 that swept across Iran. To this extent, Khatami was



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President Hassan Rouhani "has vowed to promote the freedom of expression, to limit artistic and cultural censorship, while fostering rapprochement."

Mousavi's polar opposite. While Mousavi capitalized on the widespread social dissent by urging the masses to protest, Khatami maintained social order by suggesting that the public express civic activism through the print media, academic interventions, and most importantly, the ballot box.

Like Khatami, Rouhani will eschew social disorder and tumultuous revolutions in favor of gradual and cautious change. In 1999, Rouhani took a tough stance against student demonstrators, declaring that the perpetrators arrested for sabotage and vandalism would face severe charges. With respect to the 2009 protests, while Rouhani did not support the Green Movement, he instead offered a practical solution, suggesting a random recount of 20% of the votes.

The defining, and indeed lasting, feature of Khatami's approach was his reluctance to engage in, or support, any behavior that would threaten the foundation of the Islamic Republic. Khatami wanted to reform the system in order to save the system. Change under Rouhani will mean the same thing.

Recently, Khatami urged the Supreme Leader to collaborate with the President-elect in carrying out his mission. This could very well happen. Here we see how Rouhani's deeply entrenched conservative background works to his advantage.

They are the credentials he needs to transcend the dichotomy between conforming to native traditions and practices, and encouraging progressive change.