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Rouhani and the Days After a Nuclear Deal

Alireza Nader

The election of Hassan Rouhani as Iran's president provided a new opportunity to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis through negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 (United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany). The November 2013 Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) signed between Iran and the P5+1 is likely to provide the contours of a final deal between the two sides. The JPOA may not have been possible without Rouhani's election; a relatively pragmatic politician, Rouhani aims to resolve the Islamic Republic's state of crisis and decrease Iran's isolation while lifting the most onerous sanctions. Rouhani's new approach has the support of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps. Khamenei and his loyalists, while wary of engaging the West, are nevertheless eager to ease the economic pressure on Iran. They have given Rouhani leeway to achieve a final deal. However, Khamenei and the Guards will insist on preserving a sizeable nuclear program, and if a deal is reached, they are likely to contain and limit Rouhani's domestic and foreign policies. Rouhani may be able to shift some foreign policies, but only within the "framework" established by the Islamic Republic.

Rouhani and the centrist/reformist camp in Iran had come to a mutual agreement prior to the June, 2013 presidential election: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's policies as president had resulted in the most serious state of crisis faced by the regime since the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). The contested 2009 presidential election widened the cleavages within the regime to dangerous levels. Ahmadinejad's extreme rhetoric and intransigent nuclear policies also did much damage, facilitating the imposition of severe American and international sanctions against Iran. Rouhani, one of eight presidential candidates qualified by the Guardian Council, was judged to be the most moderate candidate by the Iranian people. His promise of a "prudent" government resonated with those exhausted by Tehran's decade long nuclear confrontation with the international community. While protective of Iran's nuclear achievements, Rouhani has nevertheless judged the costs of Iran's nuclear pursuits to be too high, and is pursuing a "win-win" scenario in which international fears of Iran's nuclear ambitions are allayed in return for the lifting of sanctions.

Khamenei has supported Rouhani by adopting a policy of “heroic flexibility” in which Iran would not forsake revolutionary principles such as its long rivalry with the United States, but would rather adopt flexible tactics that would serve regime interests. Cognizant of the dangers to the regime, Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards seek a nuclear resolution in order to lift sanctions; but they also want Iran’s nuclear “rights” to be preserved. For them, the nuclear issue is embedded in Iran’s revolutionary struggle with the United States, and Iran’s dismantling of the entire nuclear program, especially its self-declared right to enrich uranium, may be a defeat more costly than the toughest sanctions. Rouhani has the establishment’s support as long as he maintains Iran’s nuclear infrastructure and technological knowledge.

Rouhani also appears to have some leeway in improving Iran’s relations with neighboring countries, especially Saudi Arabia and the smaller Gulf Arab states. However, Iran’s position toward Israel is less likely to change, as Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards will maintain the regime’s ideologically-motivated and geopolitically useful enmity with the Jewish state.

And while Rouhani and his urbane foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, may wish to normalize relations with the United States, Khamenei and his conservative supporters will fear that such normalization would undermine the regime’s revolutionary principles and open Iran to a greater “Western” cultural invasion.

And it is on domestic issues that Rouhani is likely to face his severest test; Iran’s conservatives distrust his association with the reformist movement, labelled by conservatives as the “sedition.” Rouhani’s opponents fear that a nuclear deal would not only empower Rouhani to pursue dangerous foreign policies (détente with the United States) but also help him achieve greater individual (“Western”) rights for Iranians, which he promised as a presidential candidate. Rouhani is unlikely to risk a political and social transformation of Iran, fearing that his foreign and economic agenda (lifting of sanctions and greater foreign investment) would be undermined by a reformist agenda.

It would not be surprising to see a final nuclear agreement between Iran and the P5+1. In particular, both Iran and the United States have ample incentives for a nuclear deal, as long as a final agreement allows the United States to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, but also allows the Iranian regime to maintain a significant enrichment capability. This is not an ideal outcome, but may be the most realistic. At the same time, a nuclear deal is not going to result in a dramatic transformation of the Islamic Republic or a fundamental change in Iranian foreign policy. The radicalism of the Ahmadinejad era will dissipate, but the Islamic Republic’s oppression of Iranians and its undermining of American interests in the region will continue.