



# Iran's Rigged Election

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Iranians closed the page on the tumultuous eight-year tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad when they went to the polls on June 14 to pick a new president. In a national election marked by tremendous fervor and massive turnout (some 75 percent of Iran's roughly 50 million eligible voters are estimated to have participated), the victor was Hasan Rowhani, a soft-spoken cleric widely billed as a "moderate" among Iran's field of presidential contenders.

Predictably, Mr. Rowhani's election has fanned hopes among many of a more pragmatic tilt to Iranian politics — and of a new potential partner in Tehran for the long-running international negotiations over the Iranian regime's stubborn nuclear effort. Yet the end of the Ahmadinejad era isn't likely to usher in a political rethink in Tehran or spark a substantive turnaround in Iran's relations with the West.

That's because Iran's electoral game was rigged from the outset. Prior to formal vetting by the Iranian regime's governmental oversight body, known as the Guardian Council, some 700 candidates had thrown their hats into the political ring. Following the council's intervention, however, the field of contenders was whittled down to just eight, all of whom fell well within the ideological mainstream of Iran's revolutionary regime.

Iran's new president is no different. An original compatriot of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, he agitated for Iran's revolutionary-in-chief while the latter was in exile in France, eventually joining him there in the late 1970s. After the Islamic republic was established, Mr. Rowhani assumed a succession of top posts in government, culminating in a stint as secretary of Iran's powerful Supreme National Security Council. His longevity in Iranian politics is a testament to his embrace of core regime principles, and to his good standing with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Khomeini's successor as supreme leader. In other words, Mr. Rowhani — for all of his political rhetoric about the need for "constructive interaction" with the West — is a company man through and through.

That's certainly a change from the recent past, which saw Mr. Ahmadinejad and his ideological fellow travelers wage an increasingly acrimonious tug of war with Iran's traditional clerical elite on a variety of social and political issues. Instead, the victory of Mr. Rowhani, a 64-year-old cleric in the good graces of the supreme leader, is a resounding affirmation of the clerical status quo. It's also an opportunity for Iran's ayatollahs to turn back the clock and consolidate their political power after years of acrimonious infighting.

Neither will Mr. Rowhani's election temper Iran's enthusiasm for the bomb. True, Iran's new president is widely known as the "face" of the regime's atomic effort, having served as the Islamic republic's chief nuclear negotiator with the West from 2003 to 2005. As such, his election has fanned hopes in many quarters of a more constructive stance from Tehran on the nuclear front. That isn't to be, though, because Iran's nuclear "file" resides squarely under the purview of the supreme leader, who has time and again reiterated the correctness of his regime's current course.

Iranian officials made that perfectly clear in the run-up to the election. At the conclusion of the final presidential debate on June 8, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi took pains to emphasize that while the various presidential hopefuls might have their own "perspectives," the office of the president "will not impact Iran's foreign policy after the election."

Even if Mr. Rowhani does end up exerting some influence over Iran's nuclear direction, it's highly unlikely that it will be positive. Back in 2006, Mr. Rowhani famously boasted that the Islamic republic succeeded in using more than two years of negotiations with the European Union "troika" (Great Britain, France and Germany) to add permanence to its nuclear effort. His tenure as president is sure to bring more of the same.

For its part, the White House has responded to Mr. Rowhani's election with cautious optimism and reiterated once again its willingness to "engage" the Iranian regime — a hallmark of the Obama administration's policy toward Iran to date. But policymakers in Washington would do well to understand that Mr. Rowhani's election won't alter the fundamental tenor of Iranian politics or its march toward nuclear status. Those trajectories have been fixed for some time, and not by Iran's president.

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