

Position Papers

Iran Between Rouhani and Raisi: Is There a Difference?

August 2021



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Introduction

While Iranian President Hassan Rouhani has left office and the Raisi government is preparing to take office, a spectrum of divergent views have been formulated around the new Iranian government's ability to confront the ongoing challenges. The departing president gave his last speech on August 2, 2021, with the aim of absolving his government from any responsibility for the situation in Iran and revealing some of his successes that the political system deliberately concealed. At the same time, during his inauguration ceremony on August 3, 2021, the new President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi delivered

a speech at the premises of the authorities connected to the supreme leader's office in central Tehran. The speech reflected the different opinions and perspectives of Iranian officials on the fundamental challenges that concern the Iranian public inside and outside Iran, most notably the economic crisis in Iran and the new Iranian government's stance on the nuclear talks. The speeches of both Rouhani and Raisi also demonstrated the fundamental divergence in understandings and plans of action that each president adopts.

In light of the ongoing developments inside and outside Iran, the

present report analyzes the speeches of Raisi and Rouhani to explore the extent of the difference between their approaches, the most prominent of their solutions and plans, and the chances of success for Raisi's approach based on the experience of the Rouhani government in dealing with the same crises.

1. Legacy of Complicated Crises

The new Iranian president takes the reins at a time of critical crises which he acknowledged during his inauguration ceremony. Raisi pointed to Iran's economic crisis, notably a budget deficit, instability in the stock market, and the inability to control inflation, which increased to 44 percent, the high cost of living, and liquidity which mounted to 680 percent.

In addition, Iran is facing regional and factional protests as a result of poor living conditions and a severe lack of basic services, particularly in Ahvaz. Ahvazis have been protesting over water shortages and for economic, political and cultural reasons associated with the systematic policies against them. Their protests coincided with a protest wave over electricity blackouts in a number of Iranian cities and factional protests by many workers and craftsmen to demand improved conditions and incomes. Some of these crises are a result of the collapse of the 2015 nuclear deal. The United States withdrew from the pact, rendering it worthless and depriving Iran of the deal's benefits, most prominently the economic gains — leading Iran to face sanctions and isolation again. Since 2018, Iran has been deprived of nearly \$100 billion as sanctions on its oil sector pushed down the country's oil revenue, and its overseas funds were frozen and tough financial restrictions were placed on the use or transfer of these funds to Iranian banks. In his last speech on August 2, 2021, Rouhani said that the most important issue ahead for the 13th administration is negotiating and interacting with the world; there is no other option. And the second priority is economic issues, Rouhani added.

2. Rouhani's Last Words of Advice

Rouhani also said in his last speech, "constructive and effective interaction with the world" is the best way to save the country from its

crisis. By stating these remarks, he tries to make a difference between his “moderate” orientation supported by the “reformists” and Raisi’s “hardliner” orientation. Rouhani’s spent two terms in power believing that the “moderate” approach is the most effective way to achieve Iran’s interests.

Through adopting policies of moderation and interaction, Rouhani aims to avoid extremism and mitigate the restrictions and guardianship imposed on society. In contrast, Raisi emphasizes the need to maintain the revolution’s values and to renew its zeal at a time when the country is experiencing widespread outrage over the political system. The outrage undermined the political system itself; internal conflicts between its wings were made public, threatening the stability of the ruling system.

Externally, moderation and constructive interaction in Rouhani’s terms mean to maintain dialogue and diplomacy in dealing with the West in general and the United States in particular. Rouhani believes in pragmatism in Iran’s foreign policy with emphasis on adopting it within the framework of national interests.

For Rouhani, negotiation and dialogue do not mean trust as much as the achievement of interests, which is the fundamental principle of relations among states. This principle does not necessarily entail the achievement of all interests since other countries have their own interests to achieve. This can be used as a response to Khamenei’s accusations to the Rouhani government at the end of July 2021 when he said, “Whenever you made our affairs contingent on reaching an agreement with the West and the United States, you were unsuccessful and unable to advance. But whenever you didn’t count on them and began to use different methods of our own, you made progress.” Rouhani insisted that this approach saved the country from a war that the West intended to launch on Iran. He succeeded in concluding the nuclear deal with the P5+1 group, leading to a suspension of seven international resolutions against Iran and giving a substantial boost to the Iranian economy. This had subsequently contributed to the launch of many development projects during his two terms, gaining public support to continue his approach. Rouhani sees no option for his country except for negotiations and constructive interaction with the world.

Rouhani believes his government has been unfairly blamed for internal and external factors. His government's policies had been directed by the supreme leader and its internal achievements had been hidden from the public. Moreover, Rouhani's term has faced a number of problems including the reimposition of UN sanctions as well as the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic.

He also believes that his government was not merely criticized but attacked with the aim of tarnishing its image, and that he was personally subjected to an unjustified attack. He said that all of his policies were made in accordance with the framework set by the supreme leader, however, his government lacked sufficient internal support. Rouhani said that the supreme leader designated him that as the commander of the economic war. But, "I was a commander without soldiers and equipment," Rouhani said. By saying this, Rouhani attempted to attribute part of the blame for the situation in Iran to the supreme leader as Rouhani emphasized that he actually lacked the power to make decisions.

3. Raisi's Options and Opaque Program

In contrast to Rouhani's pragmatism, Raisi's approach towards defining Iran's internal and external interests stems from an identity-based ideological principle. Speaking about internal issues, he emphasized that his government's program is making changes as part of the "Second Phase of the Revolution." He also identified the most important features of his government's policy in the speech he gave during his swearing-in ceremony at the Parliament. During the speech, he suggested that the pressure and boycott policy used against Iran will not prevent it from pursuing its rights and the boycott against Iran must end immediately, adding that he welcomes any diplomatic project that achieves this goal. He also noted that Iran's enemies are waging a war against it. As for Iran's nuclear project, Raisi tried to send reassuring messages to the world, saying the project is "completely peaceful" and reechoing previous remarks that nuclear weapons are religiously forbidden based on a fatwa of the supreme leader. In the presence of prominent figures of the so-called "resistance" supported by Iran, Raisi stressed that his government will work on confronting the intelligence and

oppressive forces and will work to support the Palestinian people and will be a supporting voice for the vulnerable. Such remarks give a clear indication that the Iranian political system will continue with its expansionist project and ideology, which is based on exporting the Iranian revolution. The prominent figures of the “resistance” were placed in the first row, in an indication of the continuation of the confrontational approach and mobilization, and the continuation of support for militias and organizations deployed in the region. With the aim of pleasing the Western audience and absolving himself of the accusation attributed to him with regard to human rights violations while heading the judiciary, Raisi indicated that his government would seek to constructively engage with the world and defend human rights.

Raisi also addressed regional crises, noting that the solution lies in putting an end to foreign intervention, adding that the meddling of foreigners is the problem itself. “I extend a hand of friendship and brotherhood to all countries of the region, and I warmly shake their hands,” he said. He also rehashed Iran’s old slogans that it will not be an enemy to the countries of the region. Raisi undermined the role of regional countries in maintaining regional stability, saying, “The power of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the region establishes security...The will of the people was independence and resistance to the extravagance of the arrogant and oppressive power.” He may have considered regional countries as part of the “arrogant” powers in contradiction to his remarks about extending the hand of friendship to the countries of the region.

In an apparent contradiction, he said that the world is changing and the interests of nations depend on understanding the new world and strategic interactions with emerging powers, and a successful foreign policy will be a balanced foreign policy, whilst repeating the claim that the world is plotting against Iran. This statement is a condemnation in itself. The world is changing, as he indicated, except for Iran, as the new president did not point to adopting a conciliatory, diplomatic approach towards the world.

With regard to internal affairs, he praised his country for adopting what he called “religious democracy” and repeatedly attributed the weak performance of the government to the enemy’s propaganda and

the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. He announced that he intends to form a government that achieves transparency and justice through careful planning. Yet, what he calls for may not be accepted by the Iranian people who suffer from deteriorating conditions in all aspects of life as a result of corruption, poor planning, and the government's ultimate focus on expansionist projects at the expense of the Iranian people.

With regard to the economy, Raisi promised, as expected, to achieve maximum transparency; make the Iranian economy resistant to economic shocks; control inflation and price hikes; and strengthen the national currency. However, the circumstances surrounding his presidency indicate that these promises cannot be materialized on the ground in light of his approach towards the international community.

Despite this approach which seems repetitive, it can be said that ambiguity still surrounds Raisi's program. Throughout his election campaign, the incoming president's statements and speeches included loose promises that cannot be assessed and measured. He avoided making specific promises in the economic, diplomatic and social fields, with the exception of some social projects. He mainly focused on criticizing the status quo without adopting specific programs to address the current situation in Iran. Therefore, Raisi followed in the "hardliners" footsteps who have been leveling accusations against the members of the Rouhani government with the aim of depriving them of power and access to decision-making institutions.

It is widely known that Raisi came in order to restore revolutionary zeal; consolidate the revolution's fundamental rhetoric and principles; entrench the "hardliners" in power; maintain the cultural values of society; and proceed with Iran's project of expansionism beyond its borders. According to many estimates, Raisi came to power for the purpose of using the presidency as a steppingstone in preparation for the more critical project of securing a safe transition to the position of the supreme leader in the post-Khamenei era in order to guarantee the continuity of Velayat-e Faqih as Iran's system of governance.

As for foreign affairs, Raisi underlined Iran's identity-based rhetoric in dealing with the West, particularly the United States. This was evident in Raisi's tough stance on negotiations and his stance on reach-

ing an understanding regarding some controversial issues, such as Iran's regional behavior and its ballistic missile program. Here, Raisi adopts distrust towards the West and the United States, insisting on linking the internal crisis with the Western and US will and pursuing the path towards thwarting sanctions instead of lifting them through diplomatic dialogue.

Thus, it seems that Raisi is fully committed to the position of the supreme leader to the extent that he defended it against Rouhani's implicit accusations in his last speech. The supreme leader outlined the country's overall policy on negotiations with the West, underpinning that the outgoing government's experience of engaging with the West should be taken into consideration and that it has shown "trusting the West does not work." Drawing a path for the next government, the supreme leader said, "Governments should never make their programs dependent on negotiations with the West, because they will definitely fail." This approach is adopted by Raisi whose inauguration speech confirmed that improving his country's economic conditions will not be left to "the will of foreigners." In his speech, Raisi said that his government would seek to lift "oppressive" US sanctions but would "not tie the nation's standard of living to the will of foreigners."

Coinciding with the end of Rouhani's term, the official website of the supreme leader as well as Iran's state-run television and radio reported a previous debate between Khamenei and Hashemi Rafsanjani over the previous nuclear negotiations before 2015. The timing of the publication sparked speculation that Khamenei is paving the way for an indirect end to the negotiations with the United States in Vienna, especially since Khamenei stated during Raisi's inauguration ceremony that Iran's various problems will take time to be resolved. This indicates that Khamenei believes negotiations to revive the nuclear agreement will not be resolved soon.

4. The Chances of Success of Raisi's Government

The Rouhani government was facing significant restrictions on the implementation of its program, as Rouhani indicated in his last speech that he was "a commander without soldiers and equipment." He also said that the media did not support his government and that

the supreme leader was aware of the decisions he made, proving that he was a hindrance rather than a support. Raisi, on the other hand, enjoys the full support of the supreme leader, all state institutions and the media in the country. During his inauguration ceremony, Khamenei praised Raisi saying he enjoys popular support and has extensive experience. Expressing satisfaction with Raisi's performance as judiciary chief, Khamenei said that Raisi has a proven track record as a leader. Despite the low voter turnout in the presidential election which Raisi won, the supreme leader said the election boycott was planned in the political circles of Iran's enemies and that the Iranians foiled the plot and accused the "enemies" of seeking to reshape Iranian public opinion.

The support Khamenei showed to Raisi probably suggests that the latter will not face internal opposition to his policies. Since the "hardliners" dominate decision-making institutions, the chance for drawing the political system's policies through consensus among elected and non-elected institutions will be greater. However, the reality shows that Raisi's seemingly reactionary orientations will not be accepted internally, as Iranian society has gone through fundamental changes that makes it aspire for change while Raisi's policies seem to be pulling the country back rather than taking a step ahead.

Raisi has previously stated that his government would be popular based on the principles of the 1979 revolution and the approach of its founder, Khomeini. This clearly confirms that Raisi will make no radical changes to Iranian internal politics, and that he will be submissive and obedient to the supreme leader, as his predecessors were. The Iranian Parliament is poised to pass a bill to increase internet censorship. Such a policy will surely not be opposed by Raisi who, from a revolutionary perspective, wants to control society and its values. Yet, the populist economic policies — which are adopted to address the current crises based on the resistance economy — will not help the political system amid the grave situation regarding the country's economy and its dire need for more resources and liquidity in order to address basic life problems that cannot be bargained over with the people, nor can they be suppressed in any shape or form.

At the international level, the ideology-based approach may halt the

Vienna talks and may also lead to a clash with the West and the United States in particular. Then, the free-cost return to the nuclear deal with the same benefits that the Rouhani government had obtained would be almost impossible.

In fact, the United States has set strict conditions for reviving the nuclear deal that could be extremely hard for the Raisi government to accept, given the fact that the Iranian Parliament had forged radical policies regarding the country's nuclear activities and imposed restrictions on Rouhani's moves in regard to the nuclear file. Yet, in case the new Iranian government decides to return to the nuclear deal with the bitter taste of defeat to give Raisi the privilege of signing the nuclear deal, the decision may diminish the credibility of both the Parliament and Raisi.

Moreover, the US administration is trying to include two files in the agreement on the nuclear program: containing Iran's regional role and controlling its missile program. Nevertheless, the most likely scenario, based on the Iranian political system's orientations and tough stance on implementing some of its objectives and policies, is that the two files will be rejected by the Raisi government. These two files are of primary importance to the Iranian political system in general and the IRGC in particular.

Raisi's remarks in the first conference held after he won the presidential election clearly illustrate that Iran's policy of intervention in the internal affairs of the countries in the region will continue. He said that the elections were "the continuation of Khomeini's approach, and the continuation of Qassem Soleimani's path." He also insisted that regional issues and his country's ballistic missile program are "non-negotiable;" a contradictory statement to his talk about his country's desire to improve its relations with neighboring countries.

The attack on the Israeli tanker in the sea of Oman on August 3, 2021, and the subsequent international reactions, for which Israel blamed Iran, have further complicated the international community's relationship with Iran, highlighting the militant role played by Iran's IRGC, which aims to strengthen Iran's position in the negotiations. This will add more complexities to the Vienna nuclear talks in the short run.

In case Raisi moves ahead with the "hardline" approach to achieve

the IRGC's ambitions, the Vienna talks will probably collapse. In such a scenario, Raisi might face domestic instability, which would hinder the process of the peaceful transition of power and the responsibility assigned to his government with regard to reviving revolutionary zeal. Intransigence and insistence on the option of resistance and confrontation will cost Iran economic and social consequences along with potential public unrest. If the opposite happens and Iran accepts the US conditions for reviving the nuclear deal, Khamenei will have to bear the consequences of making such a decision which will diminish his credibility.

Although Iran argues that it will not be dictated to with regard to the negotiations with the 5+1 group, it will find justifications to accept the great world powers' proposals if the country is stuck between a rock and a hard place. In such a deadlock, Russia and China would not support Iran's tough stance. In the meantime, however, it is expected that the negotiations will likely be extended by Iran with the hope that it can find a way to disrupt the international efforts to weaken the US position.

Based on the aforementioned, media and diplomatic pressure should be exerted on Iran's nuclear program, its regional behavior, and its long-range missiles due to the threat they pose to regional and international security. Attacks on vessels at sea which target international maritime navigation; missile and drone attacks to threaten neighboring countries and global energy security are examples of Iran's regional behavior. Due to the fact that the nuclear negotiations are directed by the supreme leader and the Supreme National Council, it is expected that the Raisi government's policy will continue the same way of its predecessor or even adopts a more "hardline" approach in dealing with the international community. Accordingly, Iran's escalating actions will likely continue, unless a game-changing factor exists such as flaring up greater public anger.

Conclusion

It can be said that the political rhetoric of both Rouhani and Raisi, though stemming from the core of the ruling system and from its two currents (which alternate power under the leadership of the supreme leader; the de facto ruler of Iran), it reveals a superficial clash of vi-

sions between the two presidents. After supreme leader has managed to undermine the Rouhani vision that is seemingly appear to be as more “moderate” and interactive, people inside and outside Iran await actions to be taken according to the “hardline” vision of Raisi. The latter is faced with two difficult choices: to either compromise and accept the West’s demands or endure a harsh campaign of sanctions and isolation, leading him eventually to face the fate of the Rouhani government.



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