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Congressional Testimony

**“ELECTIONS IN IRAN:
THE REGIME CEMENTING
ITS CONTROL”**

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Overview

Madam Chairman and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

Hassan Rouhani's unexpected June 14, 2013 victory in Iran's presidential race was another humbling reminder that there are no experts on Iranian politics, only students of Iranian politics. What was most surprising was not that Rouhani received the highest number of votes: As the lone moderate candidate on the ballot in a nation suffocating under tremendous internal and external political and economic pressure, Rouhani's late-hour surge was a reflection of deep discontent with the status-quo rather than a deep-seated affinity for the candidate himself.

What was more surprising, however, was that Rouhani was permitted to win by an unelected conservative establishment—namely Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—who over the last decade have systematically purged moderates and reformists from the corridors of power using force and intimidation. Paradoxically, the deliberate process of counting the 37 million ballots in 2013 made it clear to many Iranians that that the ballots were not counted in President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's abruptly announced, and highly contested re-election in 2009.

While the Iranian public reacted jubilantly to Rouhani's victory—the equivalent of a light rain after eight years of drought—expectations about his will and ability to affect meaningful change in both Iran's internal and external behavior should be tempered. Although Rouhani was endorsed by key reformist figures, including former President Mohammed Khatami, he is less a reformer than a consummate regime insider who is committed to the preservation of the Islamic Republic. Indeed, if he was anything less, he would not have been permitted to run. His campaign focused not on pursuing democracy, or altering the Islamic Republic's strategic principles, but rather moderating its style more than its substance.

Rouhani's victory is unlikely to alter Iran's foreign policy principles, and hence is not likely to create the conditions needed for a rapprochement between the two countries. If Washington's goal is détente with Tehran, however, Rouhani's victory was likely the best possible outcome of a deeply flawed and unfree electoral process.

Domestic Implications of a Rouhani Presidency

The position of president in the Islamic Republic of Iran is neither authoritative nor ceremonial. The vast majority of the country's constitutional authority rests with the Supreme Leader, who will likely continue to have effective control over Iran's key institutions of power, including its military, media, and judiciary. Nonetheless, Iranian presidents play an important role in helping to manage the country's economy as well as its internal political and social atmosphere.

Rouhani will have the opportunity to bring in different personnel to manage the country's bureaucracies. In contrast to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who valued political loyalty and ideological fealty over competence, Rouhani will likely attempt to bring back experienced managers and technocrats to the government. During the era of reformist president Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) the political and social atmosphere—for NGO, newspapers, university students, and simply young people wanting to live freely—was palpably more tolerant than it has been during the eight-year tenure of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013).

Rouhani's victory raises important questions about the Islamic Republic's internal power dynamics, particularly the power of Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC).

Rouhani's victory has been commonly interpreted as a defeat for Khamenei. This may well prove to be true, but it is not necessarily a foregone conclusion. While voters clearly repudiated Khamenei's policies—given the poor showing of Khamenei's two closest acolytes, nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and former foreign minister Ali Akbar Velayati—in allowing them to do so Khamenei likely helped rehabilitate his deeply tattered image. Indeed, Khamenei's approval rating today is likely much higher than it was just prior to the election.

The medium and long-term impact of Rouhani's win on Khamenei's authority is less clear. At the moment Iran's most powerful institutions—namely the Revolutionary Guards, *bassij* paramilitary, Guardian Council, Expediency Council, parliament, judiciary, intelligence ministry, and wealthy religious foundations (*bonyads*), to name a few—are led by individuals who have been either handpicked by Khamenei or publicly deferential to him. To the best of my knowledge, there is not a single example in which Khamenei has been even mildly, directly criticized by one of these institutions.

Will these forces remain deferential to Khamenei, or do they sense that the Supreme Leader's political prowess has peaked? Will forces aligned with former presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammed Khatami, both of whom believe the constitutional authority of the Supreme Leader must be curtailed, be emboldened by Rouhani's win? Will Rouhani himself, similar to his three predecessors, over time begin to challenge Khamenei's authority?

Over the last several years, there has been a prevailing narrative that the institution of the Revolutionary Guards has eclipsed the institution of the clergy in terms of their internal political and economic influence and their management of the nuclear program and sensitive foreign policy files like Syria. While I believe this narrative to be broadly true, it is interesting to note that Rouhani handily defeated two men—Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf and Mohsen Rezaei—who were former senior IRGC commanders. This arguably reflects concerns, from either society or Khamenei or both, about the growing role of the military in Iranian politics.

Popular expectations of Rouhani are unduly high. Liberals who voted for him with the hopes that he will attempt to alter the constitution of the Islamic Republic, or aggressively champion human rights, will likely be disappointed. While Rouhani has vowed to pursue a national reconciliation, it remains to be seen whether it will be a priority for him to pursue the release of 2009 opposition presidential candidates Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karubi, both of whom have been under draconian house arrest for three years.

Foreign Policy Implications of a Rouhani Presidency

The Iranian president is the country's public face to the world and plays an important role in shaping its international image. This is especially true given that Khamenei has not left Iran since 1989. Whereas reformist president Mohammed Khatami is best remembered internationally for his slogan calling for a "Dialogue of Civilizations," Ahmadinejad will be remembered for his Holocaust revisionism and demagoguery. It is not coincidental that under Khatami Iran avoided UN Security Council censure, while under Ahmadinejad the Islamic Republic was sanctioned six times by the UN.

Given that the Supreme Leader will likely retain veto power, Rouhani should not be expected to significantly alter the deeply entrenched strategic principles of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy,

namely opposition to U.S. hegemony, the rejection of Israel's existence, and support for "resistance" allies such as Hezbollah, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Assad regime in Syria. Indeed there remain deeply entrenched forces in Iran—including, I would argue, Supreme Leader Khamenei—who see resistance against America, and the rejection of Israel's existence, as inextricable elements of Iran's revolutionary ideology, and among the few remaining symbolic pillars of the Islamic Republic.

In his first press conference as president-elect, Rouhani repeated Khamenei's frequent assertion that a pre-requisite for improved U.S.-Iran relations will require Washington to refrain from interfering in Iran's domestic affairs. I continue to believe that Khamenei's opposition to the U.S. is cloaked in ideology, but driven by self-preservation. Khamenei has risen to the top, and preserved his power, in a closed environment. An opening with the United States could bring about unpredictable changes that could dilute, rather than entrench, his grip on power. In the words of Machiavelli, "There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things."

Rouhani's immediate focus is likely to be the nuclear file, an issue with which he's intimately familiar having previously been Iran's chief nuclear negotiator. In contrast to Saeed Jalili, the ideologically rigid current nuclear negotiator, Rouhani's previous nuclear negotiating team—diplomats Javad Zarif, Hossein Mousavian, and Cyrus Nasserri—were all U.S.-educated, came from merchant backgrounds, and favored improved ties with Washington.

Like Rafsanjani, Rouhani belong to a camp in Tehran—sometimes referred to as "pragmatic conservatives"—who are deeply committed to the Islamic Republic but favor privileging economic expediency over revolutionary ideology. "It is good to have centrifuges running," Rouhani said in one of the presidential debates, "Provided people's lives and livelihoods are also running." This is in contrast to Khamenei, who has argued that compromising on the revolution's principles could lead to the system's unraveling, just as Perestroika, he believes, expedited the Soviet Union's collapse.

Apart from philosophical differences regarding how to best sustain the Islamic Republic, Rouhani's room for diplomatic maneuver could likely be constrained by Khamenei's longstanding belief that compromising under pressure projects weakness and invites more pressure.

Implications for the United States

Iran continues to have sizeable influence over several key U.S. foreign policy challenges, including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorism, energy security, and, perhaps most urgently, nuclear proliferation. While on some of these issues—such as Afghanistan and terrorism, particularly mutual fears of Sunni radicalism—there are overlapping interests between the two sides, on others—namely Israel's existence and Assad rule over Syria—Iran and the U.S. are embroiled in a fierce, zero-sum game that is unlikely to change in a Rouhani presidency.

Even in this context, however, it makes both strategic and tactical sense for the Obama administration to make a sincere attempt to commence a process of dialogue and confidence-building with Tehran. If skeptics, like myself, are incorrect, and Khamenei is genuinely interested in finding a nuclear accommodation with the P5+1—which would entail making meaningful nuclear compromises in exchange for meaningful sanctions relief—this would be beneficial for U.S. national security interests.

If, however, the Obama administration makes another concerted effort to engage Iran and is rebuffed, we will continue to expose the fact that Tehran, not Washington, is the intransigent actor.

Obama's unprecedented but unreciprocated overtures to Tehran achieved a much more diverse and robust international coalition against Iran than the Bush administration ever managed to achieve.

It is important for Washington to think more creatively, beyond just economic sanctions, about how to facilitate political change in Tehran. Iran is one of the few countries in the Middle East where America's strategic interests and its commitment to democratic values align, rather than clash. Whereas representative governments in the Arab world, for example, have the potential to bring about political systems that are even less tolerant, and less sympathetic to U.S. interests, than the status quo, in Iran a more representative government would likely augur both greater political and social tolerance and a more cooperative working relationship with Washington.

In this context, an important priority for Washington should be to pursue policies that expedite, rather than potentially hinder, Iran's transition to truly representative government, one in which all its citizens—including religious minorities, the non-religious, and women—can potentially be president. The best way to accomplish this goal is to inhibit the Iranian government's ability to control news, information, and communication.

In this context, Congress can play a very important role. Both empirical studies and anecdotal evidence suggest that the vast majority of Iranians get their news from television more than any other source. Satellite TV is by far the most important tool for Iranians seeking to access independent news coverage or information beyond the government's censorship and control.

Unfortunately, the Voice of America's Persian News Network (PNN) is woefully underperforming in this respect. While in just a few short years of existence BBC Persian TV has managed to become arguably the most trusted news source for Iranians—playing an indispensable role in informing people in both the 2009 and 2013 presidential elections—PNN has in contrast been plagued by perennial mismanagement, unprofessionalism, and substandard productions.

Like the Islamic Republic, PNN's problems will not be resolved with merely a change in a few top personnel, but will require a fundamental overhaul. Nearly everyone who has closely monitored PNN has reached the similar conclusion that it is simply not possible to attract top-tier journalistic talent and produce modern, creative, Persian-language television within the confines of the U.S. government.

As such, I believe that it is critical for PNN to be taken outside the confines of Voice of America and rendered a public-private partnership, much like the BBC, which is supported by the U.S. government but managed by media professionals rather than government bureaucrats. This will not require additional funding, beyond PNN's current budget. For less than the cost of one F-15 fighter jet, we can play a significant role in helping to inform the thinking of tens of millions of people in Iran who are desperate for their country to emerge from international isolation.