



Spotlight on Iran



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Who is Hassan Rowhani, Iran's president-elect?



The June 14 Iranian presidential election was won by Hassan Fereidoun Rowhani. With approximately 51 percent of the votes, he was far ahead of the five other candidates.

Rowhani was born in 1948 in the north Iranian city of Sorkheh, Semnan Province. He is a cleric who carries the title Hojjat-ol-Eslam. In 1960 he began studying religion in Semnan Province and then transferred to the religious seminary in the city of Qom. As a young man he was involved in the revolutionary movement against the Shah, for which he was arrested on several occasions by Iran's security services. In 1978 he joined Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic revolution, who was living in exile in Paris.

He has received extensive Western education in addition to his religious training. He has a B.A. in law from Tehran University as well as an M.A. and Ph.D. in law from Glasgow Caledonian University, Scotland.

Rowhani is one of the founders of the Iranian regime and, even though his political status has declined over the past several years, he still holds several important roles in the regime. In 1980-2000 he was a Majles member. Since 1991 he has been a member of the Expediency Discernment Council and head of its Center for Strategic Studies. Since 1999 he has also been a member of the Assembly of Experts, which oversees the activity of the Supreme Leader. In addition, he has held a number of security positions, including chairman of the Majles Defense Committee (1985-1989), deputy commander-in-chief during the Iran-Iraq War (1988-1989), supreme commander of civil defense (1985-1990), and commander of the Khatam-ol-Anbiya Headquarters.

His most notable position so far has been secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (1989-2005). He is still Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's personal representative on the council. As secretary of the council, he was put in charge by Khamenei of Iran's nuclear case and represented Iran in the nuclear talks with the international community. During his term as secretary he was a key partner in directing the nuclear policy and was instrumental in Iran's decision to suspend the enrichment of uranium in 2003. His conciliatory approach drew criticism from conservative circles, and he resigned from the council after Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected as president in 2005.

Rowhani is considered a close ally of former President Ali-Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He is affiliated with the pragmatic wing of the traditional-conservative camp, but also has the support of the reformist camp thanks to his moderate positions.

His views on the nuclear issue are considered relatively pragmatic. While he does stress that Iran has the right to peaceful nuclear energy, he supports a more lenient stance on achieving that right and conducting the nuclear negotiations. In the June 7 presidential debate, Rowhani expressed support for his country's uranium enrichment program but said that it's not only about keeping the centrifuges in motion—it's also about making sure that Iranians can live well. He also said that the nuclear program should not be pursued if it means closing down factories. He criticized the uncompromising approach taken by Sa'id Jalili, the current secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, in the nuclear negotiations with the world powers and

argued that it is the government's extremist policy over the past several years that led to the U.N. Security Council's decision to impose sanctions on Iran. He also reiterated his stance, which he has expressed in the past several years, in favor of the nuclear policy pursued by Iran during his term as secretary of the Supreme National Security Council.

Rowhani has also taken a moderate stance on the issue of Iran's relationship with the United States and called for an improvement in Tehran-Washington relations. In a recent interview to the London-based Saudi daily Al-Sharq al-Awsat, Rowhani said that he strives for a dialogue between the Iranian and the American people to achieve mutual respect between the two nations.

During the presidential campaign he also discussed regional issues in Iran's foreign policy, calling for a de-escalation of tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors, particularly Saudi Arabia, and announcing his intention to strengthen Iran's ties with Arab countries. In the interview to Al-Sharq al-Awsat, Rowhani reiterated Iran's official stance on the crisis in Syria, based on supporting the Syrian regime and accusing foreign governments of fanning the violence in the country and supporting radical Islamic groups working against President Asad. However, he also called for free elections in Syria in 2014 and for the election of a government that will be able to restore stability and security to the country.

As for the Israeli-Arab conflict, Rowhani stated that the Palestinian issue has a prominent place in Iran's foreign policy, and that Iran will continue supporting the Palestinians after the presidential election. He said that the only solution to the Palestinian problem is to realize the aspirations of the Palestinian people and fully restore their rights.

In the economic sphere, Rowhani holds liberal views supporting the decrease of the government's involvement in economy. He is partial to the policy pursued by Rafsanjani during his presidential term (1989-1997), based on privatization, deregulation, and economic openness. During the presidential campaign he announced his intention to reopen a number of economic institutions closed down in recent years by President Ahmadinejad, including the Management and Planning Organization and the Supreme Economic Council. He noted that he intends to continue the subsidy policy reform launched by Ahmadinejad, with changes designed to make it more successful and effective.

In the area of domestic policy, Rowhani declared his support in principle for expanding individual rights and the freedom of the press and expression, and for loosening censorship restrictions. He also called for the release of political prisoners, including those detained in the 2009 riots.

Rowhani's ability to promote domestic policy reforms, advance political initiatives in the regional and international scene, and make a real change in Iran's policy depends on how much leeway he will get from the Supreme Leader to implement his plans.