

CHANGE OF HANDS IN IRANIAN PRESIDENCY

Prelude

The Iranian presidency is changing hands on 03 August with moderate Hassan Rowhani assuming the office for the next four years. Perceptibly, the change marks an end to eight years of conservative presidency and beginning of a new period of test and trials for 'moderate leadership'. The new presidency has the potential of offering more than the routine continuation to Tehran's treatment of the domestic polity as well as the country's foreign policy. In this context, these developments merit a closer attention of Pakistan's foreign policy managers

Background

Hassan Rohani enjoying the support of opposition activists and reformist political parties, won Iran's June 14 presidential election. He garnered 50.7 percent of a total of 36,704,156 ballots. Reportedly, the voter turnout in the election was 72.7 percent.

Out of 686 registered nominees, only six candidates were in the final race on 14th June. Five candidates on the conservatives side were: Ali Akbar Velayati, former foreign office minister; Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, the current Tehran Mayor; Mohsen Rezaie, former commander of the Revolutionary Guard; Mohammad Gharazi, former member of parliament; and Saeed Jalili, Iran's current chief nuclear negotiator. The pragmatists and reformists had only one representative, Hassan Rouhani, a former nuclear negotiator.

The President is the country's highest directly elected official, he is the chief of the executive branch, the second most important position after the Supreme Leader. The office of presidency in Iran is constrained in a system built around a divine mandate. Yet, it has emerged as an influential player to shape the domestic and foreign policy of the country.

Context

The results of June fourteenth election mark a perceptible departure from the conservative politics of eight years. But what really needs to be observed over the next

few weeks and months is whether the new Iranian President adopts a non-confrontational approach vis-à-vis the West, since not only will this have a bearing on ties between Tehran and Washington, but also on the broader geopolitical scenario.

Appraisal

In the current setting, Iran is faced with multiple issues of domestic preoccupation and international concerns. Domestically, the new government is faced with an economy that has been badly hit by EU and US sanctions targeting the key oil and banking sectors. On the international front, the acceptance of country's nuclear program, tightening sanctions regime, tensions with US and Israel, lengthening civil war in Syria and Iran's future regional role remain the big questions.

In the present context, nuclear issue and its resolution holds the key to Iran's most acute problem; the economic crisis. Sanctions have had an adverse effect on the economy which is slowly emerging as a serious issue of public discontent. Rohani with his experience and deliverance on nuclear issue in the past offers hope for some flexibility. Thus, there is strong likelihood on renewed engagement on nuclear talks in the near future. While it may not result in closing down of Iran's nuclear programme, it might result in some additional concessions from Iran in return for some economic sanction ease by the West – a 'face saving exit' for all parties.

While defending Iran's nuclear program and regional agenda, Rohani understands that simply issuing ultimatums to the West and escalating tensions rather than striking compromises will not win relief from sanctions. In this regard, he resembles the reformist former President Mohammed Khatami, under whom he served as chief nuclear negotiator. It was during this period when Rouhani's foreign policy credentials became best known in the United States and Europe. It was also during this period when Western and Iranian nuclear negotiators came closest to reaching a deal.

Rouhani can therefore be expected to adopt a less incendiary tone in foreign policy than Ahmadinejad and to cooperate with other domestic power centers, like those of the supreme leader and the military and security forces. Although with his moderate views, Rohani seems committed to breaking Iran's diplomatic isolation; however, one should be cautiously optimistic about the prospective change if any. We must remember that Iran's constitution, with the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as the Supreme Leader and the

Guardian Council having the final say on all policy issues, is still intact, which means the president does not have the power to make drastic policy changes.

Israel considers Iran a threat and therefore, it would be hard to expect any miraculous change in Iran-Israel relationship given the depth of mutual mistrust and rhetoric. However, the departure of Ahmadinejad and his frequent rhetoric that "Israel does not deserve to exist" may ease some of the hardliners in Israel. Due to the civil war in Syria, Iran's fate in the country is linked with the survival of Assad regime. While US like Israel, considers Iran a threat, however, it seems unlikely that Obama will support Israel in attacking Iran. In addition to that, recent revelations about the US-Iran undercover talks prove that US favours talks rather than confrontation with Iran, with Israel being the only obstacle.

With the change in Pakistan's government and Iran's presidency complete, Pakistan needs to start seriously working on building meaningful relationship with its neighbours to face the upcoming domestic and international challenges. In this regard, the timely completion of Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline should get the precedence. More importantly, Pakistan can try to mediate between the US and Iran. Rather than seeing opportunity in US-Iran tensions, Pakistan must seek gains in bringing them closer. For that to work to its benefit, Pakistan has to seriously re-visit its Afghan policy. It needs to be understood that such a shift should already have been facilitated by improved relations with India. This will lead to a change in the India-centric security paradigm and Pakistan would be able to seek security in increased economic relations.

To sum up, the convincing victory of Hassan Rohani, a moderate in Iran's political spectrum, is good news for Iran, Pakistan-Iran relations, and for Iran's relations with the rest of the world. The general expectation is that Hassan Rohani will pursue a moderate approach in handling Iran's internal and external affairs. For Pakistan, timing is very crucial for any policy to achieve the intended targets.