

# “Moderate” cleric wins Iranian presidential election

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Amid deepening social and economic crisis, Hassan Rouhani won Iran’s presidential election last Friday with an outright majority of 50.7 percent, avoiding the need for a second round run-off. Rouhani, a cleric, had the backing of key figures of the so-called reformist faction of the regime—former presidents Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mohammad Khatami.

Rouhani issued a statement declaring his win a victory of “moderation” and “progress” over “extremism and bad behaviour.” During the campaign, he criticised President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad for failing to prevent the imposition of harsh US-led economic sanctions over Iran’s nuclear program and called for “dialogue and interaction with the world.”

Rouhani was able to capitalise on the widespread public hostility to incumbent President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who won a clear majority in first round of the 2009 election with populist promises to improve living standards, but proceeded to implement far-reaching cuts to price subsidies that contributed to soaring inflation.

While detailed electoral results are not yet available, sections of the working class and rural poor clearly voted for Rouhani in the hope that he will alleviate the worsening social disaster. Following the imposition of an embargo on Iranian oil exports last year, the value of the currency has plummeted by 50 percent, and annual inflation has hit 30 percent. The minimum national wage has fallen in US dollar terms from \$275 a month (300 rials) in 2010 to \$134 (487 rials).

The official unemployment rate is 14 percent and over 20 percent for 15–29 year-olds, but is widely believed to be far higher. The working class has been hard hit by factory closures resulting from sanctions which the US extended this month to the country’s auto industry, as well as tightening bans on financial

transactions.

Rouhani also benefited from divisions in the regime’s so-called conservative faction, which fielded five of the six approved candidates, and the side-lining of candidates linked to Ahmadinejad. Having served two terms as president, Ahmadinejad was prevented from standing, and his protégé, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei, was excluded by the Guardian Council that vets candidates.

After the 2009 election, differences emerged between the “Principlist” faction, aligned with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Ahmadinejad—over Ahmadinejad’s veiled criticisms of the clerical establishment and his populist economic policies.

The runner-up to Rouhani, Tehran mayor Mohamad Baghir Ghalibaf, won only 16.6 percent of the overall votes, followed by 11.3 percent for the country’s top nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalali. Mohsen Rezai, former head of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, secured 10.5 percent, former Foreign Minister Akbar Velayati 7.3 percent; and Mohammad Gharzai at just 1.2 percent.

All of the candidates, and the factions that back them, are tied to the state apparatus that emerged following the suppression of the working class that launched the 1979 revolution that ousted Shah Reza Pahlavi. Their differences reflect the interests of rival sections of the Iranian bourgeoisie that have been greatly exacerbated as a result of the international economic blockade and escalating economic crisis.

Rouhani is closely aligned with Rafsanjani, the billionaire businessman who served as president between 1989 and 1997. Rouhani served as Rafsanjani’s national security adviser, continuing in that role under “reformist” president Mohammad Khatami. He was also the country’s top nuclear

negotiator in talks with European powers between 2003 and 2005.

The US and its European allies have quickly called on the Iranian government to re-enter talks over the country's nuclear program.

In 2009, Washington backed the right-wing Green Movement based on privileged sections of the urban upper middle class to challenge Ahmadinejad's victory. The US reaction to Rouhani's victory has been quite different.

In the lead-up to last Friday's election, Under Secretary of State Wendy Sherman branded the poll as "unfair, unjust and unrepresentative." Following Rouhani's win, the White House changed its tune, pledging to "respect the vote of the Iranian people" and announcing its readiness to engage in talks with the new government.

The Obama administration will undoubtedly seek to use the situation to extract whatever concessions it can from Tehran, while offering little or nothing in return. Since 2003, the US has fanned unsubstantiated allegations that Iran is building nuclear weapons as the pretext for an aggressive campaign of economic sanctions and threats of war. Having crippled the Iranian economy with sanctions, the US will accept nothing less than complete capitulation from Tehran—with an end to Iranian support for the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and to Iran's nuclear programs as starters.

While Rouhani may seek to compromise with the US, neither of these demands is acceptable to any section of the Iranian regime, which has already experienced repeated rebuffs to its overtures to the US for some form of rapprochement. Most notably in the early 2000s, under President Khatami, Iran privately supported the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, only to confront mounting pressure from the Bush administration over its nuclear program. Bush branded Iran as part of an "axis of evil" with Iraq and North Korea.

Rouhani, as Iran's top nuclear negotiator, was directly involved in talks with Britain, France and Germany, the so-called EU-3—agreeing, with the backing of Supreme Leader Khamenei, to temporarily suspend uranium enrichment. Without US support, European promises of a comprehensive package of economic and diplomatic measures proved to be a

disappointment, contributing to the victory of Ahmadinejad and his hard-line stance in the 2005 election.

The other factor that led to Ahmadinejad's win in 2005 was profound hostility in the working class and among the rural poor to the pro-market restructuring policies of the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations, which produced a deepening social gulf between rich and poor. Ahmadinejad defeated Rafsanjani in the second round in large measure because he promised to use the wealth generated by rising oil prices to alleviate poverty.

In the recent election campaign, all six candidates blamed Ahmadinejad for the country's economic crisis. Their accusations of "economic mismanagement" were directed at what they regarded as his failure to go far enough in slashing public spending and imposing new burdens on working people. Ahmadinejad abolished price subsidies in line with IMF demands, but was heavily criticised for replacing them with limited hand-outs to the poorest layers of the population.

The new Iranian administration will seek to moderate the US-led economic blockade, but above all it will accelerate the austerity agenda begun under Ahmadinejad, leading to a rapid emergence of new political crises.



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