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Rouhani's victory won't change anything in Iran

Marc Martinez
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After a difficult campaign marked by the strongest opposition ever faced by an incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani's re-election has been welcomed by many with a sense of relief. Having bagged 57 per cent of the ballots – 23 million votes in total – Mr Rouhani emerged as the undisputed winner of the presidential elections. His nearest competitor, Ebrahim Raisi, a 56-year-old hardline cleric recently appointed custodian of the largest Shiite charity organisation by Iran's supreme leader, managed to win only 38.5 per cent of the votes.

Despite money and connections, Mr Raisi failed to overcome the unpleasant reputation he acquired for his role in the execution of thousands of Iranian political prisoners in 1988. He has reinforced his hardline image in his capacity as a judge ever since. Mr Rouhani's success is, therefore, also partially due to Mr Raisi's personality, as it pushed many undecided Iranians to cast their ballots. And while conservatives have envisioned him as the future supreme leader, they are probably reconsidering a strategy that may fragment the Iranian population.

Conservatives even failed to force Mr Rouhani into a run-off election. In order to prevent another first-round victory for the moderates after Mr Rouhani's election in 2013, conservatives tried to avoid vote dispersion by limiting the number of hardline candidates. The Guardian Council barred Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president, from entering the race, the supreme leader offered veteran politician Ali Akbar Velayati the position of head of the prestigious Azad University, and forced Mohamed Bagher Ghalibaf, Tehran's mayor, to withdraw from the race in favour of Mr Raisi, the clerical establishment's candidate. Conservatives even took a leaf from

the moderate playbook by using social media – including platforms they have banned, such as Twitter, Instagram and Facebook, and online message applications such as Telegram – to reach out to young voters.

The large turnout – about 70 per cent, according to official numbers – is a testament to the complexity of Iran's "undemocratic democracy", in which people spent hours in queues in the hope their ballot would change things, forcing the authorities to extend the deadline from 6pm to midnight. More importantly, the elections were a plebiscite for Mr Rouhani's decisions and ambitions.

Despite the lack of economic results since the signing of the P5+1 nuclear deal and the subsequent lifting of international sanctions in January 2016, Iranians demonstrated with their vote a strong attachment to the agreement and what it represents: an opening to the world and the hope for a better future.

Will Mr Rouhani's re-election change anything in Iran? The short answer is a sobering no. Mr Rouhani is a moderate, not a reformist like Mir Hossein Mousavi or Mehdi Karroubi, who are still under house arrest after they ran for the presidency in 2009 and opposed Mr Ahmadinejad's controversial re-election.

While Mr Rouhani's second term is a clear mandate for further changes, he will not be able to launch the societal reforms his supporters hope for. Iran's president is but one relatively weak piece of a complex oligarchic machinery in which power is shared by institution, such as the clerical establishment, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, the merchant class and the supreme leader. Disregarding this popular aspiration could push the pendulum away from moderates, and open the way for a populist candidate in four years time.

The Iranian regime is conscious the country needs a certain level of reform. It did not oppose, for example, Mr Rouhani's initiative to decrease the number of executions, as it could help alleviate tensions with the European Union.

But more crucially for Iran's future, the magnitude of this victory makes Mr Rouhani a kingmaker, and a potential future candidate for supreme leader. The next four years, and his ability to manage Iranians' expectations without disturbing the political equilibrium, will decide his future role in the Islamic republic.

While Mr Raisi, like five other candidates, pledged his support for the P5+1 nuclear agreement, the election of such a polarising individual would have pushed international companies to delay their investment in Iran even further.

Mr Raisi's support for the supreme leader's "economy of resistance" policy would have sent negative signals to western companies.

On the other hand, Mr Rouhani's re-election means he will have four more years to entrench the idea that the Iranian genie is not going back into the bottle. Even if Donald Trump, the US president, has adopted a stronger stance on Iran than his predecessor, he did not rip apart the

nuclear deal, and the new sanctions he imposed on a small number of Iranian individuals and entities for their participation in the ballistic missile programme have no noticeable effect on a worldwide trend.

Iran will soon have to focus its attention on re-establishing dialogue with the GCC, as the tensions are preventing companies with interests in Saudi Arabia and the UAE from investing in Iran.

The country's slow economic revival will be boosted if Tehran can discuss the first conditions of a *modus vivendi* with its neighbours.

The long-negotiated participation of Iranian pilgrims in this year's Haj as well as Mr Rouhani's recent visit to Kuwait and Oman demonstrate a willingness to talk.

The development of diplomatic and economic connections may lead to the emergence of a mutually acceptable negotiator, such as former president Hashemi Rafsanjani in the past. Getting to know the other better will be the first step in a meaningful dialogue between the two sides.