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Is Mahmoud Ahmadinejad about to make a political comeback?

Shahram Akbarzadeh
September 17, 2016

Next year's presidential election in Iran is shaping up to be a major test for Hassan Rouhani. There was a buzz around his electoral victory in 2013, but opposition to his government has been growing, especially since the 2015 nuclear deal. The question is: can Mr Rouhani return to office for a second term?

Three key factors present risks for Mr Rouhani: the growing assertiveness of his conservative critics; the prospect of a wild card as former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad tests the waters, and the slow progress Mr Rouhani has made in bringing Iran into the international fold.

The conservative faction has been hostile to the nuclear deal and sees it as nothing less than political capitulation and a betrayal of the ideals of the 1979 Islamic revolution. The imposition of new sanctions by the United States in response to Iran's ballistic tests (soon after the signing of the nuclear deal) has given more fodder to these critics.

The themes of resistance and self-sufficiency are invoked by the conservatives as a response to the nuclear deal. In August, for example, the supreme leader advised Mr Rouhani to focus on the "resistance economy" and cease other distracting activities – a transparent reference to his efforts to bring Iran out of isolation.

Another surprising development is the growing popularity of Gen Qasem Soleimani, who led the Iranian military engagement in Iraq and Syria against ISIL. Gen Soleimani is celebrated as a war hero and seems to be feted by the conservative faction as a serious contender in the presidential race, although he has remained quiet on this point.

A further factor that could upset Mr Rouhani's re-election campaign is the re-emergence of former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Speculation about Mr Ahmadinejad's comeback has been rife in the Iranian media as the firebrand former president has chosen to challenge Mr Rouhani's policies.

Mr Ahmadinejad remains a popular figure in the rural parts of the country and among the urban poor, as he made a point of diverting ad hoc funds and allowances to them while in office.

The result for the economy was devastating as inflation took hold and, combined with international sanctions, sent the Iranian currency into a nose dive. When Mr Rouhani came to office Iran's inflation rate stood at more than 30 per cent. It is now less than 10 per cent. But Mr Rouhani's critics have been emboldened by the failure of his government to achieve a significant turnaround in the economy. Mr Rouhani made improving living standards one of the centrepieces of his 2013 campaign. Removing economic sanctions and bringing Iran in from the cold were also integral to Mr Rouhani's plan.

Much to the disappointment of his supporters, however, the tangible effects of the 2015 nuclear deal have been slow to emerge. The international banking system continues to be cautious about dealing with Iran. Major international investment in Iran's ageing infrastructure remains elusive – save for the Chinese eagerness to commit to Chabahar Port on the Arabian Sea. Boeing's much anticipated deal with Iran has been shelved due to pressure from the US. Visa regulations for Iranian citizens visiting the United States have also been tightened in the last year. Mr Rouhani's electoral victory rested on the convergence of pragmatic leaders and the reformist camp. But his prioritisation of economic revival at the expense of social and political reforms has led to disquiet in the reformist ranks. The Islamic judiciary appears to have gone into overdrive since the signing of the nuclear deal. Mr Rouhani seems unable or unwilling to challenge the judiciary, even when an aide close to his nuclear negotiation team was arrested on suspicion of being a spy.

But not all is lost for Mr Rouhani. He still has the capacity to mobilise support and inspire the reformist voting bloc by pointing to the alternative. Reformist voters fearing a return of the hardliners, in the shape of Gen Soleimani or Mr Ahmadinejad, could be persuaded to support Mr Rouhani's re-election. Mobilisation is key here because the reformist camp has benefited from high voter turnout in the past. Mr Ahmadinejad's first electoral victory in 2005 was widely attributed to the political disengagement of reformist voters who stayed away on polling day.

Mr Rouhani could also benefit from the momentum generated through the 2016 parliamentary elections which delivered a major blow to the conservatives, leading to prominent figures – such as the speaker of the parliament Gholam Ali Haddad-Adel – losing their seats.

Capitalising on this momentum by pushing measures through parliament could prove decisive in suggesting possibilities to the electorate if he is returned to office. Furthermore the Ahmadinejad wild card could split votes in the conservative camp.

Mr Rouhani faces serious challenges, but if he can kick-start the economy in the coming months, his hand will be significantly strengthened in the election.