

West must temper expectations of what Rowhani can deliver

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It says something about the modern Middle East that the West can be optimistic about a newly elected leader in Iran -- a country with which it is engaged in a proxy war in Syria -- while it joins forces with decidedly undemocratic Arab states to oust the Assad regime.

Hassan Rowhani's unexpected first-round win in the presidential poll last weekend was remarkable after a campaign that only came alive in the last few days. By persuading Muhammad Reza Aref, the only other reformist candidate, to stand aside -- followed by the public backing of two former presidents in Muhammad Khatami and Hashemi Rafsanjani -- the "moderate" camp could provide a single focus for reformist-minded voters.

Disillusionment was high after the controversial 2009 election loss and the barring of Rafsanjani from running this month.

Cautious optimism is the most common response to Rowhani's win. The optimism comes from the fact that he is carrying the banner for all Iranian reformists, has signalled that he wishes better relations with the West, is religiously credentialed, a polyglot and has a PhD from a Western university. The caution arises because the powers of the president are circumscribed -- constitutionally and through practice. His ability to change foreign policy, particularly the nuclear issue and all the isolation that has resulted from the Iranian stance, is limited.

Rowhani has secured a surprising electoral mandate, but knows this does not mean *carte blanche*. As the only moderate candidate, he secured a fraction over 50 per cent of the vote, meaning the other conservative candidates were backed by nearly half the population.

Rowhani is also enough of a regime insider to understand he will need to use his mandate carefully in his relations with the Supreme Leader. Khatami, the last president dubbed a reformer, was elected in the first round in 1997 and 2001, with 69 and 77 per cent of the vote, respectively. But even with this much larger degree of popular support, he was unable to shift the Iranian regime in any lasting way.

Rowhani's experience within the Iranian security and political establishment means he is unlikely to over-reach. This will disappoint those in the West who hope for rapid change in Iran's foreign policy. In his first press conference this week, Rowhani was conciliatory, but gave no ground on the nuclear issue or Iran's interests in Syria.

In style he is likely to continue to be conciliatory to the West and the region. But the president needs to be more closely concerned with domestic issues, where he has greater influence, and it is here that some early confidence-building measures could occur. The release of political prisoners and a relaxing of social policy are two issues that could win him early plaudits and be achieved at low cost to the establishment. The Tehran stock exchange rose more than 2 per cent after the election and the rial firmed against the dollar, both signs that business has confidence that Rowhani may ease Iran's economic isolation.

Given the public backing of Rowhani by two leading reformers, there is likely to be an unstated suspicion from the conservative establishment that Rowhani could develop a reformist power base. The new president will have to navigate Iran's internal conservative political scene, improve the economy and achieve social liberalisation to satisfy his domestic support base, pay the political dues he is likely to owe Khatami and Rafsanjani and adopt a conciliatory approach to the West in foreign policy issues over which he has little control.

All the while he will know that half of the Iranian people voted for his conservative opponents.

Expectations of exactly what Rowhani will be able to deliver should be tempered.

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