

President Rouhani presents an opportunity, but one the West should approach with a sober and realistic mindset

The newly elected Iranian President Hassan Rouhani constitutes an opportunity to change the nature of the relationship between Iran and the West, but it is one that must be approached realistically and with an eye on the domestic determinants and repercussions of engagement, according to a new RUSI Briefing Paper. There's a summary and link on the next page

A Fragile Opportunity: The 2013 Iranian Election and its Consequences, written by Professor Ali Ansari, outlines Iran's complex domestic political landscape which led to the election of President Hassan Rouhani and his seemingly moderate overtures in his first few weeks of office where, in foreign policy 'a new realism has taken hold'.

Following the successful conclusion of the first round of talks on Iran's nuclear programme in Geneva last week, the Briefing Paper warns against premature celebrations in the absence of substantive changes at home and abroad.

'For all the positive change in tone towards politics and society, Iran's immediate policy is being directed towards economic stabilisation through sanctions relief.'

While there is general agreement that the economic crisis must be addressed, there is widespread disagreement as to how best to achieve this and even less consensus on the need for political change. Rouhani's victory has therefore challenged the status quo but not overturned it, and there is much that remains to be settled.'

More than ever, style will have to be matched with substance. There has to be some permanence to the changes in Iran before genuine progress can be made; and the more substantive these are, the better. This will require bold choices and even more courageous leadership' writes Ansari.

'For the West, Rouhani presents an opportunity, but one that should be approached with a sober and realistic mindset. The lessons of the reform era loom large for all to learn and there is palpable anxiety that the mistakes of the Khatami era should not be repeated. The right lessons need to be learnt, and this applies to Iran's politicians as much as to anyone else. Above all, these relate to clarity, the management of expectations and a recognition of historical and political realities.'

In the West, in particular, there needs to be a greater appreciation of the relationship between Iran's domestic and foreign policies: how Western policies affect the domestic environment in Iran and how this, in turn, will influence Iran's own foreign-policy posture.'

Nevertheless, although the West must play its role judiciously, it will ultimately be up to the Iranian state to deliver that for which the people have voted. Rouhani inherits a much more difficult presidency than that which Khatami took over in 1997, with the economy in a critical condition. He is tentatively supported by a fragile coalition of elite players, many of whom have no interest in the progressive agenda he has articulated. But he currently enjoys the support of at least two of the three grandees of Iranian politics, and has, at the very least, the tacit support of the third. Whether he fulfils his promise depends, as ever, on just how 'heroic' that third person in the triumvirate Ayatollah Khamenei can be persuaded to be. The stakes have rarely been higher.'

To read A Fragile Opportunity: The 2013 Iranian Election and its Consequences in full see www.rusi.org/iranelections2013

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