

Rouhani’s Iran: Sources of Change

by Ghoncheh Tazmini

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March 6—In an article appearing on the website of the Foreign Policy Association Feb. 21, Tazmini writes that “Analysts have been quick to make assumptions about President [Hassan] Rouhani’s diplomatic maneuvers, translating his diplomatic skills as reminiscent of Gorbachev’s era of Perestroika and Glasnost.” She cites Jochen Bittner of *Die Zeit* who asks: “Is Rouhani an Iranian Gorbachev?” The *Wall Street Journal*, *Foreign Affairs*, and other Western publications offer similar points of view. However, Tazmini notes, “such comparisons shed little light on the direction of Iran’s political evolution.”

She concludes, “If we are to improve our understanding of the sources of change in Iran under Rouhani, we need a more eclectic and multifaceted analytical framework.”

Here is her analysis.

The Pillars of Change in Iran

There are four guiding principles that have motivated successive Iranian political heads of state over the years. In fact, the political inclination of Iranian leaders in the past has been very much determined by the prioritization, instrumentalization or sometimes the interplay of these four principles.

Iran stands at the intersection of multiple, often contingent factors that shape its political reality. Rouhani’s challenge is to strike a balance between these factors and achieve a balance point or the *nokhteh taadol*.

1. Republicanism and Participation (*mosharekat*): The emphasis is on popular sovereignty (*mardom salari*), civil society (*jameh madani*), and pluralism. This element was central to Mohammad Khatami,

whose reform movement symbolized an effort to consolidate the rule of law and to stimulate civic activism.

2. Economic Development (*tose’eh*): This was the cornerstone of Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s presidency. Described as a pragmatic centrist, Rafsanjani surrounded himself with technocrats in an effort to revive the post-war economy. In the late 1920s and 1930s, economic restructuring was the linchpin of Reza Shah Pahlavi’s state-sponsored modernization program.

3. Economic Justice (*edalat*): The pursuit of justice was one of the main pillars of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s political platform, which was predicated on tackling poverty and corruption, and redistributing wealth. His personal former website *Mardomyar*, or “the People’s Friend,” epitomized this mission.

4. Independence/Freedom: The emphasis is on resistance of foreign interference and encroachment through nationalism. This was the cornerstone of Mohammad Mossadeq’s short prime ministership in the 1950s. He insisted that his country’s fight for possession of its oil resources was not only a quest for profits, but also a fight for liberty. This was also the leitmotif of Ayatollah Khomeini’s revolutionary slogan—“*Esteghlal* (independence), *Azadi* (freedom), *Jomhuri Islami* (Islamic Republic).”

Iraniyaat and Islamiyaat

Let us envision these four elements on an axis. This axis runs on two tracks: *Iraniyat* and *Islamiyat*. *Iraniyat* relates to Iran’s pre-Islamic heritage, Persian history, culture and civilization. *Islamiyat* corresponds to Iran’s Islamic past, values, dogma, and tradition as well as classical revolutionary themes and slogans relating to Shi’a revolutionary revivalism, nationalism and populism.

Islamiyat runs on a continuum. On one side is *Ejtehad-i Islamiyat*, which, in the case of foreign policy articulation, advances a more moderate, enlightened and dynamic narrative, predicated on integration and dialogue. On the other side of the spectrum is *Jihadi Is-*

1. Previous coverage of Dr. Tazmini appeared in the Aug. 13, 2013 [EIR](#), and the Dec. 7, 2012 [EIR](#).

lamiyat, which is characterized by a principalist and atavistic discourse.

The *Jihadi* and *Ejtihadi* approach to independence is very different. In *Jihadi Islamiyat*, independence translates into autochthonous, Soviet-style economic independence, guided by revolutionary ideals of self-sufficiency.

On the other hand, *Ejtihadi Islamiyat* advocates representation in and interaction with, international organizations, integration into the global economy and a non-confrontational political discourse.

The recent nuclear deal brokered by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif exemplifies an *Ejtihadi* reading of independence.

Iraniyat also bifurcates in a similar way. To illustrate this point, let us focus on the concept of national independence. On one side of the spectrum, the emphasis lies on the radical negation of other civilizations (particularly the West), typified by the “Westoxication” or the “Clash of Civilizations” discourses.

In foreign policy, national independence is found in isolationism, the avoidance of political and economic entanglements, and a defensive and confrontational rhetoric. Ahmadinejad and his hardline supporters centered their perception of national independence on this approach.

The other end of the spectrum is characterized by integration and interaction. Khatami’s “Dialogue Among Civilizations” thesis best captures this orientation. Independence is found through emphasis on cultural commonalities and shared histories through an integrative narrative.

Rouhani’s approach falls squarely in the middle: National independence is found through calibrated and cautious engagement. His administration is challenged by hardline elements that need to be appeased, thus engagement with outside powers needs to be measured.

Furthermore, history may have taught Rouhani that full-fledged dialogue does not always yield the anticipated result. Khatami’s international campaign ironically led to Iran being placed on an “axis of evil.”

The body politic—the leadership, the elite, civil society, institutions—is so complex and variegated in relation to political culture, intellectual orientation, preference for certain ideas or categories of thinking, traditional or normative values, that it is not easy to decipher and decode the nature of Iran’s political evolution.

The newspapers and dailies in Iran alone are a testament to this diversity. Let us relate them to the four cat-

egories above. For example, the daily *Salam* places greater emphasis on *Islamiyat*, less on independence, and even less on justice, participation, freedom, or development.

Jahan gives special importance to *Islamiyat*, independence, and social justice, but less significance to participation, freedom, and development.

On the other hand, *Sobh Emruz* prioritizes participation, freedom, and development, placing less emphasis on *Islamiyat*, independence or justice, while *Kayhan* gives prominence to themes relating to *Islamiyat*, independence and justice.

Between Continuity and Change

So what does change really entail in Iran? A viable strategy for reform at this critical juncture in Iran’s history entails striking a balance between the four elements described above.

Moreover, a viable path requires the reconciliation of disparate orientations through the art of principled compromise. It means finding a balance between continuity and change, between *Islamiyat* and *Iraniyat*.

Rouhani is not wearing rose-colored lenses, and is very much aware of the conservative resistance that lies before him—very much like Khatami, whose presidency was mired in factional wrangling and rivalry.

The difference is that Rouhani has a luxury of leadership that Khatami never knew. He enjoys political authority that flows from two sources: 1. the fact that he cannot be labeled either reformist or conservative (in an earlier article I argued that Rouhani himself embodies the reconciliation of disparate and competing ideologies); and 2. the broad-based realization that Iran needs change: change in outlook, in perspective, in strategy, and in leadership style.

Rouhani clearly articulated the discursive foundation of his foreign policy approach during the 2013 presidential campaign: “constructive and dignified engagement with the world” (*ta’amol-e hadafmand va ez-atmand ba jahan*). The pursuit of all four pillars outlined above remains a priority. However, Iran needs to upgrade the exhausted methods of the past.

This is something both sides of the political spectrum recognize (hardliners, moderates, liberals, and everything in between). With more executive steering power (and most importantly, the Supreme Leader’s tacit support), Rouhani might just succeed in striking that delicate balance—the *nokhteh taadol*—a task that Gorbachev never lived up to.