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Rouhani floats on shrinking political base

**By
Akbar E Torbat**

Hassan Rouhani "does not have any political or social base of his own at home". So says Ahmad Pournajati, a reformist and a former member of the Iranian parliament, some of whose members feel spurned. [1] According to Pournajati, Rouhani has not complied with the demands of his reformist allies who laid the ground for him to become the Iranian president.

Such criticism reflects growing sentiment in Iran that Rouhani has lost the support of the reformist camp, and is instead relying on the backing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Western powers.

Rouhani's political base is strong in London and in Washington, say the critics, and this shows in the support he is getting from the Western media and lobby organizations.

The deal Rouhani made with the US to settle Iran's nuclear dispute has raised a lot of criticism in Iranian political circles, including the Iranian parliament. Because Rouhani does not have the people's support, he is seen as a Western stooge who tried to abandon the country's nuclear program.

Critics say his dealings have more to do with getting support from the West to preserve clerical rule in Iran than defending nuclear rights in the dispute.

The president pretends that Iran has not yielded in nuclear negotiations but that the big six - the United States, France, Germany, Britain, China and Russia - surrendered to Iran. [2] When some academics criticized his secret deal, he called them uneducated, although he has given himself a doctorate since he served in the Iranian parliament more than three decades ago.

A British university (Glasgow Caledonian) tried to legitimize his "doctorate" title by publishing a one-page summary of a paper supposedly written by Hassan Fereidon - as Rouhani was then known - dated July, 1998. But that turned out to be an embarrassment to the university and Rouhani himself as the main idea and expressions in the summary were from a book titled *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* written by an Islamic Scholar Mohammad Hashim Kamali, first published in 1989. [3]

Despite all that, US President Barack Obama praised Rouhani and his election in a television message he sent on March 20, for the occasion of Persian New Year, Nowruz.

He said "Last year, you - the Iranian people - made your voice heard when you elected Dr Hassan Rouhani as your new president. During his campaign, he pledged to strengthen Iran's economy, improve the lives of the Iranian people and engage constructively with the international community - and he was elected with your strong support." [4]

It was a surprise to see a country founded on the basis of separation of religion and state viewing the clerical oligarchy in Tehran as the rightful government of Iran.

Rouhani came to office with the motto of "prudence and hope". However, his promise of transparency became secrecy; his promise of political participation for all turned out to be purging his critics from the government institutions; his promise of freedom of the press turned out to be shutting down critical newspapers and giving warning notices to others. [5]

Being afraid of a workers' revolt against the regime, Rouhani did not approve a permit for a march on the May 1 Labor Day celebration that was requested by the state labor organization, Khaneh Kargar.

Despite his promises, Rouhani has made no progress on promoting and protecting freedom of speech. In late March, it was announced that some prisoners had been pardoned or their sentences were reduced by the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, but there was no indication as to whether any political prisoners were among them.

According to Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran, there are about 900 political prisoners in the country. The imprisoning of political dissidents and executions have continued under Rouhani's watchful eyes.

Mohammad-Javad Larijani, head of the Iranian Judiciary's Human Rights Council, has said the world should stop complaining about Iran's executions and instead "be grateful for this great service to humanity".[6]

Rouhani's justice minister, Mustafa pour-Mohammadi, has been accused of executing thousands of Iranian political prisoners in 1988. [7] As a matter of formality, both US and EU officials have publicly criticized Iran's human-rights records under Rouhani, but at the same time they have restarted trade in exchange for Iran dismantling its nuclear program.

Rouhani has filled his cabinet with wealthy ministers. According to Elias Naderan, a member of Iran's parliament, several ministers in Rouhani's cabinet have wealth of around 800 to 1000 billion tomans (US\$265 to \$330 million) - the toman is a superunit of the rial. [8] While most Iranians are suffering from poverty, Rouhani's wife gave a lavish party on April 19 in the previous Shah's Sadabad Palace, which raised strong criticism in the Iranian media. [9]

In February, Rouhani spent pennies of the approximately \$4 billion returned to Iran (a part of the \$100 billion Iran's assets frozen by the West) to give food baskets to the poor, hoping to build a political base among them. However, his action backfired as it was regarded as demeaning to treat the poor like beggars. Ultimately, Rouhani had to apologize on state television for the problems that the handouts caused: The poor had to wait hours outside in frigid weather to get to front of the long line, at which time some found they were not qualified to get the food. Two people died in the stamped in the crowded waiting lines.

The president urged the Iranian people in late April not to apply for monthly \$15 cash subsidies. Contrary to his expectations, 73 million or 95% of the 77-million Iran's population registered to receive the subsidy, which amounts to about \$1.1 billion per month. [10]

In this year's budget, Rouhani increased funding for clerical institutions, while cutting financing for essential subsidies. Under the clerical regime, Iranian workers have become more and more impoverished while the clerics, their relatives and cronies have amassed enormous wealth.

Instead of speaking about what he has done to solve the country's problems, Rouhani frequently criticizes his predecessor, Mahmud Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad gained people's support for his promise to bring Iran out of the hands of the oil mafia led by cleric tycoon Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and his sons.

Rouhani has done just the opposite. His oil minister, Bijan Namdar Zanganeh, has been involved in a major oil corruption case. Zanganeh served as the oil minister in Mohammad Khatami's cabinet (1997-2005). In 2001, it has been alleged that Zanganeh signed the Crescent oil contract through a middleman of the Rafsanjani family. Crescent Petroleum is a privately owned oil and gas company headquartered in the United Arab Emirates.

Under the 25-year contract, the National Iranian Oil Company obligated Iran to sell oil to Crescent at a bargain price of \$18 to \$40 as compared to a market price of over \$100 per barrel. [11] In 2006, Iran unilaterally canceled the Crescent contract. The case is now in the International Hague Arbitration Tribunal for corruption charges.

In the meantime, Rouhani wants to bring back the international oil companies and give them lucrative contracts. In late January, he led a delegation that included Foreign Minister Mohammed Javad Zarif and Zanganeh to attend the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland. Rouhani presented an outline of the new "Iran Petroleum Contract" to replace the former "buy-back" contract format, in order to attract investment.

To encourage oil companies to invest, Rouhani has proposed long-term contracts and faster production rate to the companies. While this is good for the oil companies, it is not good for Iran because it deplete domestic oil fields and will flood the market leading to lower oil prices. At Davos, Rouhani attended a meeting with oil companies' executives including Christophe de Margerie, chief executive of the French oil company Total SA. De Margerie in an interview said, the oil contracts will be "more sexy than before". [12]

Rouhani's political base will be further tested as he has begun to implement the next phase of neo-liberal reforms prescribed by the International Monetary Fund. While the Iranian economy is already in recession, It remains to be seen how the Iranians, 95% of whom have registered to get a monthly subsidy check, will react to Rouhani's economic austerity program.

Notes: 1. As quoted in the daily Kayhan newspaper on February 1, 2014.

2. Iran Times, January 17, 2014.

3. See [here](#), and page 40 of the book [here](#).

4. See [here](#).

5. Bahar, 9 day, Aseman newspapers were temporary banned.

6. Iran Times, March 14, 2014.

7. See [here](#).

8. As reported on April 27, 2014, by Fars News Agency.

9. [Iran president under fire over wife's 'lavish' party](#), Reuters, April 22, 2014.

10. See [here](#).

11. See [here](#).

12. [Iran to Woo Oil Companies With 'Sexy' Contracts, Total CEO Says](#), Bloomberg, January 24, 2014.

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