



Iran under President Rohani: False hopes?

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le Chef de bataillon Thomas GRASSER

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Histoire & stratégie

The election of Hassan Rohani as President of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) in June 2013 is helping to strengthen the grip of the current regime. This regime, based on the theocratic concept of the velayat-e faqih,^[1] benefits externally from the overwhelmingly positive image of the new president, both in the West and in Iran. Internally, however, Hassan Rohani risks becoming the scapegoat of the Supreme Guide Ali Khamenei, as the challenges awaiting the new executive seem so delicate to take up in the four years to come.

1) The "tutelage of the jurisconsult", which consecrates the political predominance of the high clergy through the central function of Supreme Guide, currently occupied by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Towards normalization of Iran's relations with the international community, a trend beneficial to the current regime

The election of Hassan Rohani coincides with a policy of détente which should not, however, obscure the reality of Iran's ambitions as a regional power. This foreign policy, implemented by the new President, remains fundamentally linked to the will of the Supreme Guide.

- Clear signs of détente

The conferences held in Geneva in September and November 2013 respectively illustrate the easing of the Iranian position on the nuclear issue. Tehran finally accepted a limitation of the uranium enrichment process, as well as a tightening of the control regime exercised by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The reopening by Iran and

the United Kingdom of their respective embassies is also a striking symbol of this beginning of normalisation of relations between Tehran and the main Western capitals. After ten years of diplomatic deadlock over the nuclear questions, the image of Hassan Rohani is now directly associated with a renewed Iranian policy.

This détente comes at a time when the international situation favours the Iranian regime. Indeed, Barack Obama is currently drawing the guidelines for his second term, aspiring to tangible successes in the Greater Middle East [1], following the American setbacks in the attempts to stabilise Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, opportunities are presenting themselves to the Iranian regime, which require it to soften its image on the international scene. As such, the outcome of the Geneva conferences is encouraging. It is, however, necessary to recall that as early as 2003, when Hassan Rohani was responsible for the negotiations on the nuclear dossier, Iran had already signed an additional verification protocol, but these hopes of a lasting *modus vivendi* were subsequently dashed [2]. Hassan Rohani had then suffered sharp criticism from the conservative camp for his naivety, criticism that was widely repeated during the last presidential campaign. Thus, not only will the new president not question the core of Iran's power politics, but he will rather help to legitimize it.

- On the substance, the maintenance of a policy of regional power

Even if the signs of détente mentioned above call for more optimism, Iran's claim to be the dominant regional power remains its top priority. This policy of power, which the new President will help to establish, clearly rests on two axes.

The first of these axes is the search for greater influence in the Levant and the Middle East. Two examples are emblematic of this policy of influence. The first is Iran's entry into Iraqi internal affairs through the close support it has given to the Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Secondly, this policy of influence is manifested in the military and financial aid granted to the Syrian state [3] mired in a civil war. In the medium term, Tehran's Syrian policy is aimed at preventing the Sunni radical forces, which hate Shiite Iran, from gaining further momentum. But in the longer term, the aim is probably to guarantee Iran's freedom of action and influence in the corridor leading to the shores of the Mediterranean via Iraq and Syria. This objective is interesting from an economic and symbolic point of view. It is part of an ongoing rivalry with Turkey, Saudi Arabia and, to a lesser extent, Egypt. By allowing the Syrian regime to continue until the presidential elections of 2014, Tehran will have won the first stage of its bet on the future.

The second axis is based on nuclear policy. In this policy, the civil and military aspects of the programme appear to be intrinsically linked, as they could be for France when the atomic energy commissioner was created. The animosity aroused in the Middle East by Israeli policy is also a pretext for the Tehran regime to undertake nuclear development. Thérèse Delpech wrote in 2006 that "(...) if Israel is not the cause of the Iranian nuclear programme, it represents for Iran an excellent explanation to provide to the region [4]". 4) Through this programme, Iran wishes to acquire tools at the service of its regional ambitions. As a result, it would be premature to consider that the advances recorded in Geneva constitute a lasting change in Tehran's position, especially since the technical deficiencies of Iran's advanced industry need time to be remedied. As a result, a slowdown in the programme makes it possible to relax international sanctions and to focus on the modernisation of the national industrial fabric. For the regime, this calculation is rational.

- Hassan Rohani's foreign policy, an implementing action subordinate to the choices of Supreme Guide Ali Khameneï

The political system, formalised by the constitution of the IRI and enshrined in practice, makes the Supreme Guide the only authority capable of defining the country's strategic orientations. These orientations are then implemented by the Government under the President, but also by senior State administrations such as the Supreme Council for National Security, of which Hassan Rohani was Secretary General in the past. Iranian foreign policy thus evolves when the Supreme Leader decides, even if the President proposes solutions and then conducts the policy developed at the higher level. The weekly *Al-mushahid Assiyassi*, in a very interesting article of August 2013 analysing the main challenges facing Hassan Rohani, shows that the Supreme Guide remains in any case "the master of the final decision" [5]. 5] The Supreme Leader's critical comments about the symbolic telephone conversation between Barack Obama and Hassan Rohani in September 2013 are a reminder of the hierarchy of power. The criticisms made on the same subject by the Commander-in-Chief of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, a military organisation inherited from the revolution which weighs on both the foreign policy and the economic structures of the country, confirm that the Iranian President is subject to various internal forces which ensure that his actions are supervised.

The foreign policy of the Rohani era, which has become synonymous with openness, is for the moment in line with the regime's interests on the international level. Domestically, there are also high hopes for the president, but it is here that the risks are greatest for the rest of his political career.

Hassan Rohani's domestic policy challenges, a high risk for his image among the Iranian people

- The economic challenge

In domestic politics, Hassan Rohani's major challenge lies in rescuing a drained economy. This challenge is probably the most important for the future of the new president, but also the most delicate, since Iran is accumulating factors of economic weakness. Largely linked to the international sanctions regime affecting the country, this weakness is mainly reflected in chronic inflation of around 40% for the year 2013 and a loss in value of the national currency, although this trend could favour exports at a time when a gradual relaxation of the sanctions regime is underway. In any case, perhaps the most worrying figure is youth unemployment, which has reached 28%[6]. 6] In a society that has completed its demographic transition, but where the share of young people in the overall population is much higher than in Western Europe, this factor is likely to rapidly erode the credit enjoyed by Hassan Rohani if it does not significantly reverse the trend.

The choice of Bijan Zanganeh to head the Ministry of Petroleum shows that economic policy in general and energy policy in particular are among President Rohani's high priorities. Indeed, Bijan Zanganeh has solid experience in this area. He has served in various governments and was Minister of Petroleum under Mohammad Khatami from 1997. Bijan Zanganeh's proximity to the green movement could have prevented him from obtaining a ministry. But if this proximity was reproached to him by the conservative ranks in August 2013 - at the time when Parliament voted on each of the personalities proposed by Hassan Rohani to occupy a ministry[7] - it will not have left him out in the end. In the

field of energy, Iran has an immense gas and oil potential, the optimisation of which is currently facing two pitfalls. The first is that of international sanctions, which have limited the number of the country's customers, the main one being China. The second is the underdevelopment of Iran's refining industry, which forces the country to export hydrocarbons with very low added value.

- The social challenge

In 2007, Thierry Coville published a book entitled "The War in the Middle East" by Thierry Coville. Iran, the invisible revolution. It is now very different from the one published in 1979. Thus, the author notes that "the democratic legitimacy restored to honour by Mohammad Khatami has become, contrary to appearances, an important feature of the political system" [8]. 8] The way in which local elections are held and the last presidential election took place confirms this idea. Ali Khamenei's refusal to take sides with any candidate shows that he has taken into account the value of the democratic fact in the contemporary Iranian political system. Certainly, Hassan Rohani is indeed 'Mister Nobody,' as Bernard Hourcade points out [9]. 9] This expression minimizes the singularity of Rohani's victory, as he, like each of the other candidates, was deemed compatible with the system, failing which his candidacy would have been invalidated by the Council of the Guardians of the Revolution. However, the presidential campaign, the result of which emerged in the last three days before the elections, was in line with democratic canons. This result also surprised all political analysts, and probably the Supreme Leader himself.

Ali Khamenei thus chose to take advantage of the momentum caused by the victory of Hassan Rohani to make a significant shift in the country's foreign policy and to show that he had fully grasped the expectations and changes of an Iranian society weary of economic difficulties. The Rohani presidency therefore constitutes a cardinal asset for the regime insofar as it shows qualities of openness and pragmatism, which are beneficial both internationally and internally. Indeed, the Rohani method is a change from the radicalism of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, even if the new president does not in any way question the system. This marked alternation, at least from the point of view of style, comes at the right time for Iran and paradoxically risks strengthening the bases of the regime. Indeed, this regime has learned the lessons of the waves of protest that have shaken neighbouring countries. When the time comes, it will know how to blame the President for the economic and social failures to come.

The election of Hassan Rohani as President of the IRI helps to strengthen the foundation of the current regime. Taking advantage of the new president's positive image in the West as well as in Iran, the Supreme Leader is skillfully carrying out the reforms that are essential to the regime and its ambitions for Iran.

1] The American conception of the Greater Middle East is extensive and includes the Maghreb and Central Asia.

2] Hassan Rohani had obtained from the regime that the protocol be applied even before it was ratified in Parliament, but the application of the agreement did not last more than a year and a half, due to the deterioration of diplomatic relations.

3] The Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah-ePasadran) implements this aid through military and influence actions coordinated with the Lebanese Hezbollah, as well as through logistical support.

4] Thérèse Delpech. Iran, the bomb and the resignation of nations", 2006, p.28, Autrement editions.

5] Al-mushahid Assiyassi , Volume (17) Iss 902/11-17 August 2013, p. 24.

6| Al-mushahid Assiyassi , Volume (17) Iss 902/11-17 August 2013, p. 24.

7| It is not the government as a bloc that must receive a vote of confidence from Parliament, but each potential minister, whose appointment is validated or not by national representation.

8| Thierry Coville.Iran, the invisible revolution*» , 2007, p. 126.

9| Bernard Hourcade used this expression at a conference held on October 24, 2013 at the École normale supérieure.

Battalion Commander Thomas GRASSER comes from the Engineer Corps. He served as a platoon leader in the 2nd Engineer Regiment as well as in the Coëtquidan Schools, then as a company commander in the 19th Engineer Regiment. Laureate of the 2013 session of the War School competition, he has been studying Arabic and Persian at the National Institute of Oriental Languages and Civilizations since September 2013.

Title :	le Chef de bataillon Thomas GRASSER
Author (s) :	le Chef de bataillon Thomas GRASSER
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