

'Principlists' concentrate attacks on Rohani

Gareth Smyth

London

Shortly after Hossein-Ali Amiri, Iranian vice-president for parliamentary affairs, confirmed to the official IRNA news agency that President Hassan Rohani would seek a second term in the election, due May 19th, the president visited Sistan-Baluchestan, a south-eastern province that polled heavily in his favour in 2013.

Front-page pictures of Rohani rising for the national anthem alongside Abdul-Hamid Esmail-Zehi, perhaps Iran's pre-eminent Sunni cleric, conveyed a timely image to Iranian voters of a president seeking reconciliation but standing firm in an unstable world.

Rohani's election platform will be continued international engagement and cautious economic reform.

The omens are generally good. Every Iranian president since Ali Khamenei in the 1980s has won a second term. "I consider Rohani the favourite," said Farideh Farhi of the University of Hawaii. "Continuity and stability are in everyone's mind and there's a dearth of formidable challengers."

■ Rohani's election platform will include continued international engagement.

Iran's reformists may well back Rohani, as they did in 2013. However, a report in the reformist Shargh newspaper that Vice-President Eshagh Jahangiri is liaising between the reformists and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei reflects both the possibility of a reformist candidate and the importance of Khamenei's role in the build-up to the poll.

Rohani should be helped by divisions among principlists – known in Farsi as *osulgarayan* – who have

been critical of the 2015 nuclear agreement, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), with world powers.

Hamidreza Baqaei, vice-president for executive affairs under Rohani's predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has already announced he would stand, although he could well be blocked by the watchdog Council of Guardians, which in 2013 barred Ahmadinejad's chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei.

Other principlists have established the Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces (PFIRF) to agree on a single candidate but are struggling to find a charismatic figure. Among the names bandied about is Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, the Tehran mayor who unsuccessfully ran for president in 2005 and 2013.

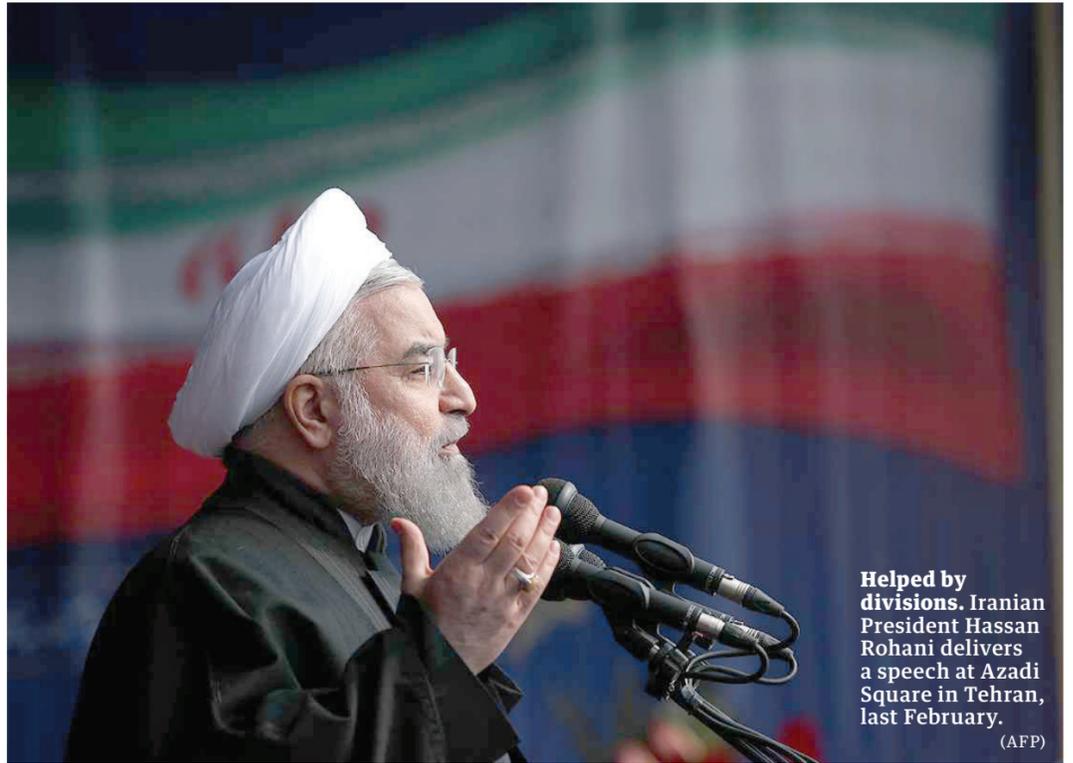
"Ghalibaf is the only potential big-name challenger," said Farhi, "but he's mired in a corruption scandal of his own. The Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces is struggling to come up with a platform to run on beyond the need for principlist unity."

Saeed Jalili, the former top security official who from 2007 to 2013 took a belligerent stance in nuclear negotiations with the Europeans, is another possibility, although in the 2013 presidential election he polled only 11%.

"Jalili seems to be testing an anti-JCPOA narrative that's not getting traction," said Farhi. "(Overall) the critics (of the nuclear agreement) have not been able to come up with an alternative narrative to attract voters."

An outside possibility for a principlist challenger is Ebrahim Raeisi, appointed in 2016 by Khamenei to chair the powerful foundation supervising the shrine in the north-eastern city of Mashhad of Imam Reza, a descendant of the Prophet Mohammad and the eighth Shia imam. Raeisi, though, is less well-known than Jalili and is more likely to concentrate on his existing role.

So far, most principlists are concentrating attacks on Rohani not on international affairs but on high



Helped by divisions. Iranian President Hassan Rohani delivers a speech at Azadi Square in Tehran, last February.

(AFP)

pay levels among technocrats and officials. A populist appeal based on economic equality helped Ahmadinejad win in 2005 and would chime with the egalitarian values of the 1979 Islamic revolution.

It might also tap the popular mood. Despite the glowing International Monetary Fund report released at the end of February noting an "impressive recovery" and 6.6% growth in the year ending on March 21st, most Iranians are unconvinced they have benefited from sanctions relief.

Polling by Iranpoll and the University of Maryland found 51% of respondents saying in December that economic conditions were worsening and 75% said they agreed that the nuclear agreement had not improved matters.

Some in Tehran expected the

election of Donald Trump as US president to bolster the principlists – although eyebrows were raised at the gushing 3,500-word letter from Ahmadinejad to Trump suggesting he had as US president "the historic opportunity with new reforms to be a pioneer of new and great developments and thus make history".

Trump has not replied and talk in Washington is rather different. A recent submission to the House of Representatives Foreign Affairs Committee by Scott Modell, managing director of Rapidan Group consultants and a former CIA operative, proposed that the Trump administration "target the decayed base of popular support for the regime", partly through US-government funded Farsi-language media "spearhead(ing) an information warfare campaign" among disgrun-

ted workers, women and ethnic minorities.

Washington has a poor record in such work. President George W. Bush's attempts to communicate directly with Iranians in his 2006 State of the Union address fell flat, while CIA support for militant ethnic separatists among, for example, the Baluchis and Kurds is likely to foster Persian nationalism.

Clumsy attempts to undermine the Islamic Republic might encourage turnout in the presidential election and, by putting Iran "on notice", the Trump administration may well strengthen the appeal – both to voters and to Khamenei – of Rohani as a reliable but firm hand on the tiller.

Gareth Smyth was chief correspondent in Iran for the Financial Times from 2003-07.

Incumbent faces hurdles in Iran elections, Trump no help

Mahan Abedin

London

With Iranian presidential elections looming, the incumbent, Hassan Rohani, kicked off his campaign in earnest by issuing a mild warning to "armed forces" and other state institutions, including the judiciary, from interfering in the electoral process.

By "armed forces" Rohani means the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and specifically its paramilitary wing, the Basij. The latter has an extensive nationwide network centred on mosques and other community focal points, particularly in working-class and rural areas.

In previous elections, particularly in the disputed June 2009 presidential race, the Basij was accused of using its position to lobby for specific candidates, notably principlist politicians. It is worth noting that the IRGC's foundational charter forbids the military organisation from meddling in politics.

In terms of his electoral prospects, public posturing notwithstanding, Rohani may be less fearful of IRGC intervention than of his relatively weak sociopolitical base. Regional and international events are also conspiring against him, calling into question the long-term viability of Rohani's singular success, notably the nuclear accord reached in July 2015.

From an organisational point of view, Rohani achieved electoral success in June 2013 largely on the

back of campaigning efforts by local groups loosely aligned to the country's embattled reform movement. Despite suffering a shattering defeat at street and political levels in 2009-10 (following the disputed presidential elections), the reformists maintained local networks and can mobilise quickly to support allied candidates.

Rohani's Achilles heel is his lack of an independent political base. This is partly a reflection of his career, which has had less to do with politics than security services and in part a symptom of his uncharismatic and authoritarian personality.

A seurocrat by instinct and training, prior to becoming president Rohani had spent more than 30 years working at the highest levels of the Islamic Republic's security establishment. This is not necessarily the best training for a career in Iranian

politics, for while the latter is notoriously fractious and ill-disciplined, the country's security establishment is remarkably cohesive in ideological and organisational terms.

Furthermore, Rohani's temperament is not best suited for the kind of consistent coalition building required for long-term survival at the apex of Iranian politics. By most credible accounts, the Iranian president is authoritarian by instinct and is ill-disposed towards criticism. This makes it hard for him to reach out to opponents, a prerequisite for sustainable success in the Islamic Republic's labyrinthine political community.

At a strategic level, the Iranian political landscape no longer offers favourable terms to Rohani as it did in 2013. Rohani achieved success by bringing centrists and reformists together, thereby compensating

for his weak organisational base by piggybacking on the reformists' nationwide political networks.

At a leadership level, the reformists continue to be in disarray with the leaders of the so-called Green movement, notably former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi, still subject to severe restrictions. Rohani disappointed reformists by not taking any determined action to secure their release from house arrest.

Moreover, the spiritual leader of the country's reform movement – former president Mohammad Khatami – is also subject to restrictions, notably a media blackout and inability to engage in foreign travel.

Most damaging to Rohani, however, was the death of former president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani in January. A pragmatic centrist, Rafsanjani was key to bridging the divide between Rohani and the reformists by underwriting multiple political deals. Rafsanjani's demise has been correctly interpreted as a boost to the principlists and conservatives in the lead up to May's presidential elections.

The dramatic transformation in Washington heralded by the advent of Donald Trump's presidency does not bode well for Rohani and his allies. Apart from an acute personality clash – Rohani is measured and ultra-rational compared to the mercurial Trump – the latter's hard-line approach towards Iran has effectively ended the tentative *détente* in US-Iranian relations.

Specifically, the Trump administration threatens the centrepiece of Rohani's presidency, namely the nuclear accord and the resulting

partial lifting of the economic siege on Iran. Sanctions relief, however, has been too slow to reap Rohani the desired political dividends.

Qualified sanctions relief speaks to the Rohani administration's overall economic performance, which has been less than spectacular. Lack of a strong economic record, coupled with his overall lack of popularity, considerably reduces Rohani's electoral prospects.

■ In previous elections, the Basij was accused of using its position to lobby for specific candidates.

Significant vulnerabilities notwithstanding, two crucial factors work in the incumbent's favour. First, sitting Iranian presidents have never failed to secure a second term at the polls, no matter how poor their performance. Second, a strong rival to Rohani has yet to emerge.

In terms of competition, Rohani received a huge boost in September when his predecessor, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was effectively barred from contesting future presidential elections.

Nevertheless, one of Ahmadinejad's *protégés*, Hamid Baqai, looks set to contest the elections, unless he is disqualified by the Council of Guardians. With an Ahmadinejad ally in the fray, May's elections are set to be interesting, if not a foregone conclusion.

Mahan Abedin, director of the research group Dysart Consulting, is an analyst of Iranian politics.



Labyrinthine politics. Iranians vote in the parliamentary and Experts Assembly elections in Qom, in February 2016.

(AP)