

Russia Welcomes Winner of Iran's Presidential Elections

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June 16, 2013

The  Moscow Times

President Vladimir Putin reached out to congratulate Hassan Rouhani on his victory in Iran's presidential election on Sunday, voicing his readiness for bilateral cooperation in various spheres to "ensure international stability."

As Iranians took to the streets to celebrate the victory of the election's most moderate candidate after two terms of hard-line rhetoric from President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, some experts said the result of Friday's vote could bring Iran closer to the West and push Russia into the background.

"The more conservative Iranian leadership is, the more important Russia is to Iran," Alexei Malashenko, scholar in residence at Carnegie Moscow Center, told Ekho Moskvy radio on Sunday.

Rouhani, whose career as Iran's top nuclear negotiator earned him the nickname of

“diplomat Sheikh,” garnered 50.7 percent of the votes and is widely expected to redress a widening gap between Iran and the West by doing away with Ahmadinejad’s hard-line style.

“I have come forward to save Iran’s economy and forge constructive interaction with the world through a government of wisdom and hope,” Rouhani said in one of his campaign speeches.

More than 50 million eligible voters took part in the elections on Friday to vote for one of the six candidates filtered by the conservative Guardian Council of the Constitution, historically known to vet all reform-minded candidates.

Regardless of his official title, however, Rouhani will not enjoy complete power over the country’s government, as Iran’s foreign and security policies remain in the hands of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

With that in mind, even if Iran re-establishes a constructive relationship with the West, it seems likely that its strong relations with Russia will linger.

Iran has an observer status and has already applied for full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, which is dominated by Russia and China. In addition, Iran and Russia co-founded the Gas Exporting Countries Forum, along with Qatar.

Over the last two decades, Russia was a top arms supplier to Iran, which often raised concerns with the U.S. In 2010, Russia banned the delivery of S-300 air defense systems to Iran following a UN Security Council resolution.

Now, Russia finds itself in a similar position as it delays S-300 deliveries to civil-war-torn Syria under international pressure.

Russia and Iran have been the staunchest supporters of Syrian President Bashar Assad, which, according to Geydar Dzhemal, chairman of the Islamic Committee of Russia, could be more important to Russia-Iran relations than the election of a reformist leader.

“There is a massive crisis around Iran, most of all in the Middle East. This makes it the leading regional superpower. Iran is the beneficiary of this process,” he said.

Russian politicians seemed optimistic about the new Iranian president, and rather than predicting a subsequent rift between Russia and Iran, many said the election would keep things peaceful.

Federation Council Senator Mikhail Margelov, head of the council’s international committee, called Rouhani a “moderate liberal by Iranian standards,” and said his election as president would make the West look for peaceful methods to solve the problem of Iran’s nuclear ambitions, RIA Novosti reported Sunday.

Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the State Duma’s International Affairs Committee, said on Twitter that the new Iranian president’s reputation as a reformer would “make any military scenario in relation to Iran very difficult for the U.S.”

“How could you bomb a country with a reformer president?” he said.

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