

At G8, Obama and Putin Express Optimism on Iran After Election

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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ENNISKILLEN, Northern Ireland — U.S. Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin expressed "cautious" optimism that the election of a moderate cleric in Iran's presidential poll would open up dialogue with Tehran over its disputed nuclear program.

In an additional sign that Tehran could be ready to compromise on the program, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Iran was willing to halt its 20 percent enrichment of uranium, which has been a key concession sought in international negotiations.

Washington and its Western allies accuse Tehran of pursuing nuclear weapons and have imposed sanctions on Iran that have damaged its economy and triggered a rise in inflation and unemployment. Tehran says its nuclear program is peaceful and aimed at generating power.

"In Iran, we both ... expressed cautious optimism that with a new election there, we may be

able to move forward on a dialogue that allows us to resolve the problems with Iran's nuclear program," Obama told reporters Monday during a meeting with Putin at the Group of Eight summit in Northern Ireland.

The comments were his first in public about the Iranian election.

"I hope that after the elections in Iran there will be new opportunities to solve the Iranian nuclear problem," Putin said. "And we'll be trying to do that bilaterally and in the international negotiations process."

Iranians voted Friday to elect moderate cleric Hassan Rouhani to be their next president.

The president runs the economy and wields important influence in day-to-day decision-making, but Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has the final say on major issues including national security and Iran's nuclear program.

In an interview released by the Foreign Ministry on Tuesday, a day after Rouhani promised a "path of moderation" that includes greater openness on Tehran's nuclear program and overtures to Washington, Lavrov said "for the first time in many years" there were encouraging signs in international efforts to resolve the Iranian nuclear dispute.

He said Iran had confirmed that it was ready to halt production of uranium enriched to 20 percent. He did not give details, but said the sextet of international negotiators should make "substantial reciprocal steps."

Twenty percent is the highest level of enrichment acknowledged by Iran and one that experts say could be turned into warhead grade in a matter of months.

In the interview, Lavrov did not say which Iranian officials had expressed the willingness to pull back on enrichment or when the position was made known.

Rouhani has said Iran will not halt uranium enrichment. That could indicate that Iran would be satisfied with continuing the relatively low-level enrichment needed for fuel rods in the reactor at its atomic energy plant in Bushehr.

"The international community should respond appropriately to the constructive moves by the Iranian side, including step-by-step halting and cancellation of sanctions — unilateral ones and those enacted by the UN Security Council," Lavrov said.

Any halt in 20 percent enrichment would be a significant concession by Iran, but it would not necessarily mean any drawdown in enrichment capabilities; the labs could concentrate on lower-grade fuel. The 20-percent enriched material is used in Iran's research reactor and is many steps closer to warhead-grade uranium than the type used in energy reactors.

Material from The Associated Press is included in this report.

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