

Actions Speak Louder

Earlier this summer the people of Iran went to the polls to choose a new president. Well, maybe “choose” is too strong a word. In the lead up to this election, the unelected Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has been in power for 24 years, cleared each candidate for the presidency, including the eventual winner Hassan Rouhani.

Out of 700 contenders, Khamenei rejected nearly 99 percent of those who filed to run in the election. He left only eight candidates, each considered loyal to the regime and its interpretation of Islam. Out of the limited field the Iranian people elected Rouhani, who has often been called a moderate because he campaigned on a platform of improved relations with the West.

Yet, despite the moderate label and desire for improved relations, there is no indication that Iran’s pursuit of nuclear weapons will end. For starters, there is no evidence that Supreme Leader Khamenei will limit his absolute control over Iran’s nuclear policy. That means that even if Rouhani wished to change the country’s policy he may not have the ability to do so.

Moreover, in his first opportunity to address the Iranian people and the world as the future president of the Islamic Republic, Rouhani made crystal clear that he had no intention of pressing for a suspension of Iran’s uranium enrichment program.

The West has ample experience with Rouhani’s dedication to Iran’s nuclear efforts. From 2003 to 2005, Rouhani served as Iran’s chief nuclear negotiator. During that period, Tehran promised to suspend its nuclear enrichment. But Iran stepped up efforts in other key technical areas. In a March 2006 speech Rouhani boasted about Iran’s progress in its nuclear program while the West thought it was engaged in negotiations with an Iran that had frozen its nuclear activities.

Ultimately, Iran cannot be allowed to advance its nuclear program while using negotiations as a delaying tactic. The international community has already spent the last 10 years negotiating with Iran with nothing to show for the effort. Some examples of failure: talks in Almaty in April 2013 that yielded no progress; Iran’s refusal to discuss its nuclear program during talks with the P5+1 in 2011; Iran’s rejection of the international community’s offer to reprocess a portion of its low-enriched uranium for use in its Tehran Research Reactor in 2009; and the rejection of a major package of economic and security incentives that the P5+1 offered Iran in 2006.

In the wake of Rouhani’s election America cannot veer from its course. We must be steadfast in increasing the economic pressure on Iran to halt its nuclear program. Congress and the Obama administration must continue to send a strong message that all options are on the table, and that the United States is prepared to use all of the instruments of its power to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon capability. In the end, while Hassan Rouhani may talk like a moderate, he walks like a regime loyalist—and we know that actions speak louder than words.