

# BUSINESS

[In the News](#) | [SpaceX](#) | [Greece](#) | [Gay pride events](#) | [Grateful Dead](#) | [World's Ugliest Dog](#) | [BET Awards](#)

## Make-or-Break Moment for Rouhani as Iran Talks Enter Final Lap

Golnar Motevalli, Ladane Nasserri and Kambiz Foroohar Jun 28, 2015 4:11 pm ET

(Bloomberg) -- With two years of painstaking diplomacy at risk as the clock ran down on a deal to end Iran's global isolation, Hassan Rouhani abandoned his usual caution to take a swipe at critics at home and abroad.

Domestic opponents were indifferent to the damage sanctions had done to the "pockets of the people," Iran's president said in a June 14 speech, at times having to shout above the crowd. With little more than two weeks before the end-of-month deadline for a nuclear accord, his message for the international community was similarly blunt. Iran would "combat sanctions" and "abolish them," he said.

It was a rousing speech for the 66-year-old cleric as his presidency nears its pivotal moment. If a nuclear agreement is signed in the coming days, offering Iranians a brighter future and silencing Rouhani's anti-Western adversaries, it could herald a more ambitious push to relax the state's grip on the economy and society. Failure would leave him weakened and struggling to win a second term in two years' time.

"The overall understanding of his presidency is that everything has been invested in these nuclear talks," said Ali Herischi, president of Information and Public Opinion Solutions, a Virginia-based research firm that surveys Iranian public opinion.

"Whenever the negotiations fail or succeed, that will be a turning point," Herischi said by phone. If there's a deal, "he's going to be a hero, if not he will be really down in the polls," he said.

### Deadline Deal

Envoys led by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Iran's foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, are leading efforts in Vienna to end the standoff over Iran's nuclear program. A deal around the June 30 self-imposed deadline would limit Iranian enrichment in return for greater monitoring of atomic sites and relief from sanctions. The threat of military conflict that has overshadowed the dispute for years may recede.

Despite a conservative-led campaign to discredit the diplomacy as undermining the tenets of Iran's revolution, it's a trade off most Iranians are happy with.

A poll released on Tuesday by the University of Tehran's Center for Public Opinion Research and IranPoll.com, an independent survey organization based in Toronto, put support for an accord at 57 percent.

In a separate study, 28 prominent Iranians told the New York-based International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran that a breakdown in talks would reverse Iran's fragile economic recovery and boost Rouhani's hardline opponents, who dominate parliament. Those questioned included former lawmakers, journalists, lawyers, economists and filmmakers.

### Biggest Failure

That's an unappealing prospect for many, especially young voters who helped elect Rouhani in 2013 and who have watched as talks on the nuclear accord dragged on.

"Iran has managed to flee a little from the dark days of a few years back, but I was still expecting to see more," said Hamed Haghighat, a 30-year-old mechanical engineer and resident of Shiraz. "One of the biggest issues for me has been finding permanent, reliable work," said Haghighat, who survives on short-term building contracts. "That's where Rouhani has failed the most."

The currency has steadied and growth has resumed under Rouhani. Yet he has made little progress in lowering youth unemployment of around 25 percent, or delivering on repeated vows to reduce state interference in people's lives.

### 'Not Real Reformer'

"Rouhani is a crisis president," said Scott Lucas, an Iran analyst and professor of international relations at Birmingham University in the U.K. "He was elected to fix the dual crisis of nuclear sanctions and the economy."

Only then can he try to find "the space to deal with the political and social issues," Lucas said.

The reputation sometimes attached to Rouhani overseas -- a leader in a hurry, intent on radical change -- is off the mark, said Alireza Nader, a senior analyst at the Rand Corp.

"Rouhani wants to work within the system to make changes," he said. "He is not a real reformer, or if he is, he's hiding it very well."

He doesn't control powerful, conservative institutions such as the judiciary, the legislation-vetting Guardian Council, the intelligence ministry and the Revolutionary Guards, Nader said. Parliament is a constant thorn in his side, last year impeaching a science minister who sought to introduce greater freedoms on university campuses. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is Iran's ultimate authority.

"Rouhani is extremely cautious in picking his fights," said Alex Vatanka, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "He has been around the centers of power since the beginning of the Islamic Republic. He's not a novice who has just walked into the presidency."

The next few days could determine whether that caution pays off.

As some of those listening the speech in Bojnourd, capital of Northern Khorasan province, chanted his name, Rouhani signaled changes he would, if given the chance, champion inside Iran, where authorities regulate from the wardrobe to the dance floor.

"In this stadium, where you are now, right now if a piece of music is played and makes people joyful and happy, is there something wrong with that? We want joyful people," he said.