



## TRANSCRIPT

# "THE ROUHANI ADMINISTRATION, ONE YEAR ON"

*A Conversation With Hadi Ghaemi*

*Moderator: Anthony Richter*

\* \* \*TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: BACKGROUND NOISE THROUGHOUT; ONLY TRANSCRIBED IF INTRUSIVE. AUDIENCE SPEAKERS ONLY IDENTIFIED WHEN ADDRESSED BY NAME. \* \* \*

## ANNOUNCER:

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## ANTHONY RICHTER:

Iran is-- a country-- that-- we've worked on-- at the Open Society Foundations for something-- like 18 years. And-- so, it's-- it's a country to which-- numerous-- commitments and-- consistent-- dedication over-- a long period of time. And we've seen-- various-- ups and downs-- with the-- the different-- comings and goings of-- the-- administrations in-- in Iran. And (THROAT CLEAR) the election last year of-- President Rouhani seemed-- to usher in-- a period of-- one of the-- the upswings of (DOOR) and possibility, both-- internationally-- where-- as everyone knows-- we're now in the middle of a process P5+1 negotiating with-- the Islamic Republic-- of Iran-- on its-- nuclear program.

But also, with-- potential for-- domestic-- reform, also seemingly-- indicated by the strong measure of support for a candidate, which-- who-- who didn't seem to be the favored one-- in the-- election process as it unfolded last year. The (INAUDIBLE) International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran-- stands out as-- the-- this-- to my-- thinking-- the-- single most probably important-- institutional contribution of

organizations focused exclusively on Iran.

Of course, there are other groups-- which pay attention to Iran-- including, of course, Human Rights Watch. But-- but this-- International Campaign is-- has a unique-- capacity and perspective to reflect on the-- the Rouhani administration one year on. The role-- of-- what's h-- of-- of the human rights-- community-- in-- weighing in on the nuclear negotiations-- whether to support or deal or-- or not.

And-- to-- provide analysis and perspective on domestic developments are critical. So, we're very fortunate to have-- Hadi Ghaemi and his-- his-- couple members of his board and (INAUDIBLE) from-- I.C.H.R.I.-- here with us-- today. So, we're really looking forward to-- hearing your analysis (INAUDIBLE). So, Hadi, over to you.

## HADI GHAEMI:

Thank you, Anthony. And-- let me start by thanking Anthony and Sunai (PH) especially, and Open Society Foundation in general for organizing this talk, giving me the opportunity to share my thoughts on-- what Anthony already referred to, what has been truly a momentous year that brought the surprise election victory of a centrist cleric, Hassan Rouhani, exactly a year ago in Iran. And already, it has ushered in the first significant public engagement between Iran and the West since the inception of the Islamic Republic almost four decades ago.

Now, one year into his administration, an assessment of his record and the general political context in Iran reveals a decidedly mixed picture, a mixed picture that reflects the deep divide within the Iranian society, and particularly between hard-liners and the majority of population who voted for Rouhani. And-- I'm gonna make several key observations that will really-- show this divide-- and fracture within this mixed picture. And-- please, as Anthony said, feel free to interrupt me at any time for any questions or discussions.

Now, as we look at this past year, the most important accomplishment we see by Rouhani's administration is on the foreign policy front. And we see that the majority of people in Iran and the political class have united to support him for the nuclear negotiations and into the country's international isolation.

Now, Rouhani's (UNINTEL) on this front is clear and it has been pretty much the main aspect of the international media coverage of his administration. He has managed to navigate very skillfully a minefield of-- hard-line opposition to his policies, both in Tehran and in Washington D.C., to keep these negotiations and-- proceed with the country's international rehabilitation. Of course, economic necessity has trumped the t-- ideological cleavages within the Iranian regime. And it has provided Rouhani cons-- with considerable support and latitude to proceed on this front.

On the other hand, when we look more carefully at the domestic front, particularly on the human rights-- issues-- it's been some-- fairly disappointing. Since-- even though he got elected on a platform to end the widespread repression that

particularly intensified after the June 2009 election and the subsequent-- protests-- we haven't seen much improvement.

And, indeed, if you look at the specific human rights issues, some of them have even worsened. One of the key human rights issues in Iran is the large number of executions. Iran is the leading exec-- implementer of death penalty. After China, it's the number-two country that carries out most executions. And particularly, there is a lot of concern that these executions result from lack of due process or fair trials. It has been-- very disappointing that since Rouhani came to power, the number of executions have, indeed, spiked and increased.

Freedom of expression is still under attack. We have had newspapers shuttered under-- his administration. B-- peaceful dissent is still prosecuted. And every week, we see people sentenced to prison. Hundreds of political prisoners remind-- remain behind bars, including-- many associated with the Green Movement protests.

And most notably and significantly is the continued house arrest of the Green Movement leaders-- that he had promised to bring an end to those house arrests. But it has not happened. Now, to be fair to him, we must-- note that almost all of these violations are committed by his political rivals, are committed by hard liners whose candidates actually lost in the election a year ago but they remain in firm control of very key institutions of power.

Which is the intelligence, security (UNINTEL) and the judiciary. The judiciary is completely-- in-- forefront of politically motivated prosecutions and carrying out many of these human rights violations. Yet, the very fact that Rouhani has kept fairly silent on many of these issues and has not proactively tried to reverse this trend is troubling. His supporters in the country would say that he is, indeed, working very hard behind the scenes to put an end to these violations.

And they especially point out to his-- supposedly lobbying for the release of the Green Movement leaders. Now, regardless of the voracity of this-- of this claim, the disconnect between the str-- strong electoral mandate that brought Rouhani to power to ease domestic repression and the lack of progress on human rights front tells us that his political opponents are still quite powerful and they control key-- key institutions in Iran and there is a very deep fracture within the political class in Iran.

The fact that he hasn't been able to line them up behind his policies and they are actually using these institutions to undermine him. It's also been noteworthy that-- just to compare him to the previous reformist president who was in power, Mohammad Khatami, from '97 to 2008-- Rouhani c-- has completely stayed away from any discussion or initiation of political or judicial structural reforms.

He has not-- invested any of his-- capital in that direction. However, it's-- we should note that there is one rights issues that he has been very consistent, very vocal, and very public in promoting. And that is the internet, right to access the internet and have freedom of expression online and social networking tools, which are very much restricted and filtered inside Iran.

He has very cleverly tied, and correctly tied, the development of internet in Iran to

economic development of the country, and noting that the global trend and the economic development is very much-- has a direct relationship with how a country uses the internet for its-- within the society. And this is something for us, as human rights advocates, to take note, that when a rights issue is tied to a development issue or economic-- development, then it is-- there is a constituency strong enough for its robust promotion in Iran.

And, actually, it looks like that is one issue he may have success in-- what is also within human rights field is a very fast-growing field of digital rights and-- freedom of expression online. It's also been very interesting the other domestic issue he has-- he has been very willing to stake out a stand is the so-called culture wars in Iran. And-- there was a recent episode just this last month that exploded on the international stage.

Which very much demonstrate what these culture war is on. And what is was, it was-- about a month and a half ago, a video appeared on YouTube-- made by a group of young-- college students in Tehran. It was a dance video to the sound of a popular music called *Happy* by Pharrell Williams, if you're happy with it. And they called it *Happy*--

(ANTHONY RICHTER: INAUDIBLE)

**HADI GHAEMI:**

--in *Tehran*. (LAUGHTER) They called it in-- *Happy in Tehran*. And-- I'm going to show you, actually, a clip of it to just give an idea--

**FEMALE VOICE:**

This is why I came to lunch.

**HADI GHAEMI:**

Yes. (LAUGHTER) This is the-- we're gonna start on a happy note.

**FEMALE VOICE:**

T-- yes.

**HADI GHAEMI:**

So, they called it *Happy in Tehran*. And-- let's watch a sh-- (MUSIC) brief opening of it.

(VIDEO NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## HADI GHAEMI:

Okay. So, it goes on (UNINTEL). But the key observation-- first of all, this video went viral when it was posted on YouTube. There were a couple hundred thousand hits on it within a few weeks. And what it really demonstrated, it demonstrated the-- that part-- the majority of population who voted for Rouhani, it showed their aspirations, their hopes, their happiness that the future looks bright.

Actually, there is a message they put at the end of it saying that, "We hope the outside world realizes that people in Tehran are happy. And here we are and we're, you know." Because Pharrell Williams had called on his fans to make this video everywhere.

They were made in Beirut, in Kuwait, in Europe, everywhere. And this is the Tehran contribution. (LAUGH) But-- this really did-- and remember, these kids are all-- 25 or under. So, they really were first-time voters, in a way, when-- Rouhani's election took place. And it represented their hopes and aspirations. And it turned out later, we found out the director of the video was very active in Rouhani's campaign.

Actually, he is credited for having come up with the campaign color, purple. Purple became last year the main color that all of election-- promotion of Rouhani was used. So, they had a very-- direct tie with him. Then, about a month ago-- our very own colleague-- political satirist, Iranian political satirist who's-- also referred to as Jon Stewart of Iran, he-- works with us and he also has-- a weekly TV show he makes in Brooklyn-- and airs over satellite to Iran.

About a month ago, on a Friday-- in his show, he had a segment about happiness and Iran and showed parts of this clip, along with other footage from inside Iran. By Monday, following Monday, these kids were all arrested. The police had gone after them, arrested them. By Tuesday-- they were on national TV. So, let's watch the same dancers, which here they're referred to as actors.

But they're not really actors. The TV-- Iranian TV called them actors. But they were brought in, humiliated, shamed, and-- forced to-- to apologize, express remorse. And we actually, our organization, documented firsthand through-- contacts in Tehran that they were beaten, they were-- gun was put into their head, they were humiliated, and the interviewer, the TV interviewer, played a very active role in forcing them to (VIDEO NOISE) make these statements. This is part of the cl-- what Iranian TV showed.

(VIDEO NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## HADI GHAEMI:

So, as soon as this news came out of Iran, it-- it caused a huge international and

domestic outcry, actually within Iran, too. And-- Twitter campaigned. You see the hashtag down there, #freehappyiranians was-- launched. And within 24 hours, it was-- just simply not justifiable for the regime and the hard liners to keep them.

And there is a lesson in there, that when there is-- the international scrutiny-- together with domestic awareness of what hard liners are doing, they actually cannot hold down their grounds. And they released them. They released them. By that Friday, they were out of-- prison. And, again, the police chief you saw in there and the interviewer very much represent that minority within Iran's security and intelligence system who are-- who are confronting the majority. And these culture wars are bringing that to the fore.

What has happened since the Happy Incident, we'll call it, is that Rouhani, being very much engaging his hard-line cleric opponents on this cultural war issues. So, the next video I'm going to show you is, indeed, the past ten days, a series of back and forth on the national stage between Rouhani and hard-line clerks. And I think the message in it will be very clear. I

T's focused on the role of state, religion in-- and-- private lives of citizens. And-- what is Rouhani promoting and-- what his hard-line critics are arguing back. So, just watch. You're gonna see Rouhani, then a hard-line cleric, then Rouhani responding back a few days later, and then, again, a hard-line cleric.

(VIDEO NOT TRANSCRIBED)

## HADI GHAEMI:

Okay. So-- (LAUGHTER) this is really very tangible demonstration of what are the culture wars. And really, what Rouhani getting into is-- he is addressing the fundamentalist struggle regarding the role of state and religion in people's daily lives. Because there is really a near schizophrenic-- relationship between what the state and-- how the state is enforcing public certain moral and cultural (UNINTEL) which is in direct contradiction with how the majority of society is actually living their lives and what are their preferences.

And it is coming to the national stage because the hard liners are-- have been forced to seed the nuclear issue to Rouhani. They know that he has the support of a supreme leader and, again, the majority of the country behind him. So, they're trying to confront him on this-- the-- the-- they're trying to really c-- confirm their own continued power and relevancy by engaging in this behavior. And his willingness-- Rouhani's willingness to confront them shows his confidence that he does have the majority of population behind him.

And, actually-- the hope is that the continuation of this debate with lead-- would lead to a less repressive environment for the majority of the people. Now, as I mentioned, when Rouhani got elected-- last June-- he really brought along a wave of hope and optimism to the country. There was a collective fog of depression over the country during the last few years of Ahmadinejad.

First, there was the severe repression and crackdown after 2009, making people feel very helpless against the-- against the powers to be; and then, the intensification of the international sanction had really destroyed their daily livelihood and the country was on a downward spiral. His election brought a lot of hope. And what is impressive a year later, when we talk to most of our interlocutors (PH) inside Iran of all stripes, he has maintained that sense of hope and optimism.

People still believe-- he will succeed in the nuclear negotiations and more, especially on the domestic front. This is remarkable because the other mandate he had and the other reason voted for him was the economy. And if you look at the state of economy today compared to a year ago and ask, "Are you better off today than a year ago?" for most average citizens, the answer is no. He has managed to stop the down-- downward spiral. Of course, he has got some cash flow from the-- P5+1 negotia-- interim negotiation.

But the unemployment remains high. The value of Iranian currency compared to the dollar, the exchange rate, which is a very common way for people to measure how better off they are or not, it actually has not changed at all. It is very much what it was when he-- came to power. The working class is still struggling very much and their grievances on paid wages-- factories closing, that is continuing.

But what Rouhani administration has also made very public is its findings of immense corruption and fraud under Ahmadinejad. And that has given him cover and a bit-- bit of breathing space as he tackles problems that are not of its own making, and people getting-- realizing that-- how bad the situation was. Indeed-- within a month of coming to power, he announced that the treasury is empty. They had looted the treasury. There was not much cash left.

And the hard liners criticized him for announcing that in public. And they said, "That almost is treasonous because now the outside world knows how bad our situation is-- on the cash front." But overall, this has resulted in a more favorable political environment for him. And it is, again, notable that his opponents have not been able to galvanize any major opposition to his policies and he still remains popular.

Now, on the civil society front, even though I mentioned that the human rights violations have continued or increased, but there is some opening. We're seeing very-- because under Ahmadinejad, civil society organizations were completely demolished and uprooted. And they're starting to take root again. Woman's organizations, student groups, environmental activists, actually. The environment is-- coming up as a major-- civil society concern for very serious reasons, too.

They are starting gingerly and slowly to come together and-- become active again. The most tangible sign has been the fact that university students are no longer expelled and banned from ec-- education because of their political views, and indeed the student and faculty who were expelled under Ahmadinejad as a very systematic policy have begun to return to universities. And-- people also are starting to feel the beginning of end of international isolation because there are many foreign



delegations and academics going to Iran.

And people-to-people interactions are increasing. And that is very welcome by most people. So-- in addition, civil society is very mindful of what happened last time you had a reformist president-- Mohammad Khatami. During his second term, he pretty much lost the support of civil society. Because he had raised the expectations and had promised the structural reforms that he could not deliver.

And-- during his second term, people, especially civil society activists, stop-- stopped supporting him. And-- they saw what that brought along was the rise of Ahmadinejad administration. So, this time they are somewhat reluctant to undermine Rouhani, especially after one year, and are giving him-- more benefit of the doubt. And-- finally-- the final point I would make about-- what is-- is significant about Rouhani and his presidency during this one year is his ability to-- work the Iranian political system.

And-- especially get the supreme leader behind him on his foreign policy (UNINTEL) initiative. During the past 25 years, we've had three other presidents since the 1991 presidency of Rafsanjani, Khatami, then Ahmadinejad, each of them eight years, who tried to form their own independent foreign policy (UNINTEL) but was in their own style. And they always ran into problem with the supreme leader.

And eventually, he blocked them from any further progress. Here, within one year, Rouhani has shown his talent to-- to master the intricacies of Iran's political system and keep the supreme leader on his side. And that has-- been-- has meant that his-- has support of the supreme leader for now. And this rapprochement negotiations going on-- could really turn a page in Iran's foreign policy.

So-- let me-- stop and open to discussion. But I just wanna make one key observation as a conclusion of summing up all these things. And that is that Rouhani has demonstrated he has a vision for the country in ending its international isolation. He has been actually saying in Tehran over and over for the past few weeks that the nuclear agreement is just the beginning of ending this isolation.

And that means to us that it opens a very unique window of opportunity, unprecedented over the past decade, for promoting human rights in Iran. Because ending that isolation, we must try-- we must hide to improvement in the domestic situation and the human rights. Iran cannot fully integrate back to the international community if its government and its security apparatus treats its citizens the way it has been. And that's the message that has to be given to Rouhani and Khamenei.

And, indeed, it will empower Rouhani, too. Because as we notice, we is engaged in some of these rights issues. And it was part of his election mandate. So, the more he's capable to fulfill them, the stronger his position is. And, indeed, it would have a positive feedback for the nuclear negotiations, both in getting the deal and implementing and sustaining it. Because the stronger he is at home, the less likely his hard-line opponents can undermine him.

And-- that is very much a reason why Iran's civil society and human rights-- community is very much behind him on reaching an agreement. They wanna see an



agreement. And they want to move forward. And-- yet, we see it also as a very positive opening for us-- to tie this integration and ending isolation with improvements on the human rights situation. And that is unprecedented-- at least over the last (INAUDIBLE).

## ANTHONY RICHTER:

Thank you so much. So, the floor is open. Nikki first, then Sarah.

## NIKKI:

Well, th-- thank you for this-- overview. I-- it's part of why-- I personally support, and I think the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran is so important. Because-- that message that you cannot separate human rights from the nuclear negotiation, for decades we've seen, and not just in Iran, in North Korea and other places, that human rights could be pushed to the side or even over the edge when there was a nuclear discussion or negotiation underway.

So, I-- I think that's an absolutely essential message. And there have been some real high points over the last year, but also some low points. A high point, Nesrin Sotudeh being released after years so she could rejoin her family and young children. Low points, the-- the *Happy* video. I-- that exploded on Twitter and I want to compliment you on getting a retweet for-- from Pharrell (LAUGHTER) himself.

I think getting a retweet from-- for-- you know, getting Pharrell involved in human rights in Iran is a real achievement of the (LAUGHTER) campaign. And I wanna salute that. And my question is, really, this. I-- I know you say this is the mo-- the key moment and there is leverage and there is a chance to incl-- to keep human rights on the agenda.

But, you know, I presume Rouhani will come for the-- U.N.-- you know, U.N. General Assembly, that there'll be another moment where the international community can weigh in. So, what role for the international community and when to really turn up the heat in relation to human rights, without having the opposite of the intended effect and strengthening hard liners.

## HADI GHAEMI:

That's a very good point. Because-- some of the people who wanna see a diplomatic rapprochement with Iran say that, "Well, we can't really put human rights on the table because that would-- weaken Rouhani and--"

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**NIKKI:**

Right. I've heard that a lot.

**HADI GHAEMI:**

"--complicate it and, you know, then he-- he has to be accountable for actions that he has no power or-- decision-making-- role in." But-- as I mentioned-- he himself has taken on several rights issues, whether it's the internet, whether the cultural and social issues.

And-- I believe that we can take the cue from himself and his administration and see what are the struggles he is involved in on the rights front, and echo those back as demands of the international community. And-- that would-- reinforce his position at home and-- make it also much more logical for him to-- to call for those changes inside the country.

I think we can take the cue from him and his own administration. And, of course, the other argument would be that, you know, if Iran wants to full integrate-- and end this isolation-- it-- it has to respect its international commitments, not just on N.P.T., for example, but on the human rights treaties it has signed. And-- our own evaluation from talking to people close to Rouhani is that-- of course, if he had a free hand, he would try to move in that direction.

But he needs a push. He needs to have a reason for going to the table with Khamenei and saying, "We have to take steps in this direction." And-- that international attention, particularly coming at this moment from all the interlocketers involved with Iran, would give him that ability.

**SARAH:**

I have a question about the recent developments in Iraq and the, you know, sort of preliminary discussions with the U.S.-- about security collaboration on that. What are the power dynamics that plays into? And does that help or hurt the human rights question-- especially, you know, generally speaking, I think the U.S. track record and collaboration on security issues with-- foreign countries tends to lead it down-- a bad path. And I'm wondering what you see there for Iran.

**HADI GHAEMI:**

It is really early to say what is the impact of it, given that-- it is a very complicated issue. It has the potential of blowing up to a full-fledged regional-- war between various actors from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and-- and-- Western countries, what position they would take.

I don't-- I-- I think in short term, it's positive in the sense that it may bring Iran and U.S. actors closer to each other, they find common ground, and they see their interest in the region overlaps more than diverges. But I don't see cl-- you-- you mentioned that usually when the U.S. has security agreements or collaboration with-- other governments.

It-- it does not help the internal issues. I don't see that extent of-- cooperation coming up. I don't see American advisors and, you know, Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders working hand in hand. (LAUGHTER) So, hopefully we won't see--

## FEMALE VOICE:

And that's good. And that's good. That's good.

## HADI GHAEMI:

--that tradition. That's good. That's good. (LAUGH) We don't want to start having, you know, black ops or black sites in Iran for ISIS members (LAUGH) or things like that. But I do worry if it really becomes-- a Shiite-Sunni war. It will empower the Revolutionary Guards in Iran more and actually make-- give it popular support, too.

Because-- what ISIS is saying and-- the kind of ideology it's promotion and kind of practices, it's putting-- in place in the territory it has captured, it does really frighten all Iranians that it's coming to their doorsteps. And that would mean that-- there's-- civilian ruling Iran could be weakened if we see basically a full-fledged war that Iran is a party to and-- or has to hold its ground and (UNINTEL). But short term-- the-- we have to really see the-- whether U.S. decides to full engage again in Iraq militarily.

Or it may want to see Iran doing more of its work there. But-- I don't see the two security-- institutions in each country starting to cooperate that closely to have the usual American negative feedback (INAUDIBLE). But it's a very wild card and really came out of nowhere.

## MALE VOICE:

How do you-- what makes you-- think that (THROAT CLEAR) let's say if-- a nuclear deal were reached and it were-- obviously, Iran will only sign if it decides that it's in its interest-- that-- that Rouhani would use the political capital that he earned for domestic reforms, what evidence have you seen in his (NOISE) policies or communications or maybe-- through quieter channels that-- you think that-- that's even a reasonable hope?

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## HADI GHAEMI:

Well, part of it is just the very fact that the-- the nuclear issue as a foreign policy crisis-- has eclipsed the domestic issues. And much of the domestic actors-- who want to test him, for example, what-- whether he will be-- willing to move on these issues or not-- whether it's him, Ahmadinejad, or any of the people-- who have been in power.

It just been such an overwhelming presence of this crisis that has always pushed other issues aside. So, one of the argument is that once there is this agreement, then we can really focus on domestic issues and have a conversation of what the situation is.

He has, again, given enough indication that-- he will move in that direction, whether it's about censorship or personal freedoms-- the thinking is that right now, if he gets the agreement, then he will have-- he will be strong enough in a strong position to start pushing and confronting his domestic opponents more. But I agree with you. He-- he is-- he doesn't have a track record in public before becoming president. So, we can't look at him and say that, well, where was he on-- these various domestic issues throughout his 35 years?

He actually was not a public person. So, there is very little to know what he truly-- feels. But just to give you an example, which for this Iranian clerics is very unusual, when the World Cup began last week, and Iran has a team there and played its first game-- he posted a picture of himself on Facebook-- completely in regular clothes. I don't know how many of you have seen it, without his--

## FEMALE VOICE:

It-- it-- went viral.

## HADI GHAEMI:

--turban. He is wearing-- the jersey of the national--

## FEMALE VOICE:

Just-- just hanging out.

## HADI GHAEMI:

--team, hanging out in front of his TV in his living room. So, he is very much giving the message that "I am one of you" to the general population. And-- I think that-- for his legitimacy and popular support to continue-- he will have to start to address those

issues. But you're-- you're correct. We don't know enough about him or-- he hasn't invested enough of his capital in-- in actual tangible programs and policies.

## MALE VOICE:

Maybe there are people around him. So, in the foreign policy, obviously, when he brought Zarif back to be foreign minister and those people around Zarif, obviously administration-- is not-- one man. And, so, they're-- in the case of the foreign policy circles around him, he's really-- brought in people that have a lot of credibility and a track record internationally.

Domestically, when you look around Rouhani-- and you look at different-- ministerial appointments or lower down or other advisory roles around him, what do you see that encourages you, or what do you-- and your colleagues here-- that encourages you-- that-- that-- that some kind of reform might be the next step?

## HADI GHAEMI:

It is difficult. He has not-- one thing I should make very clear that his policy circle or his advisors, ministers, are not a continuation of Khatami's era. Actually, very few people who were active in the-- political administration of Khatami's era are in (UNINTEL). He's brought a whole new team.

He's brought a whole new team. What is interesting, many of them-- what we used to call hard liners-- ten, 15 years ago and Ahmadinejad's rise has actually moved them to the center. (LAUGH) So, they have become-- vocal critics of the current hard liners. And as you were saying, there was s-- f-- short clips on these hard liners are really off the mark. I mean, they're saying things which are medieval. And-- actually, I didn't get that footage.

Rouhani's last reference to them was that they belong to the Stone Age and they have-- their mentality has not developed. I-- I-- I think-- the reason I think he will engage in domestic reforms, and I agree with you it's a speculation, it's my opinion. I don't have-- enough evidence in his b-- behavior or actions to support it. But one thing I can say for sure is that he's a shrewd politician. And he realizes to hold onto his political power.

He needs popular legitimacy. And he cannot lose the support of the masses who brought him to power. And-- he will begin to move on domestic reforms if-- even if he doesn't believe in it for the sake of holding on his political position and popularity as he goes toward the next election cycle. And a major, major event gonna be in about-- 14 months time, not March of next year, the following March, when we gonna have parliamentary elections.

And how much he will try to have like-minded people enter the parliament. Right now, he's dealing with a parliament that is from Ahmadinejad era, has no popular legitimacy. The election of this group of MPs was completely staged. And just to

look in the horizon, there is another very important development which is-- the-- election for what is called Assembly of Experts. These are group of people who will appoint the next supreme leader if this one, for any reason, were to die or-- or-- become, you know.

But I-- I think his natural death probably is the only scenario. But there is lot of eyes focused on how that el-- who will get onto that Assembly of Experts. And-- again, I think-- Rouhani has very clearly been on the side of people who seem more moderate and-- willing to consider change, for example, of not having a single supreme leader. What has been very hard for majority of-- Iranians to swallow is the fact that they rose up in 1978 to overthrow a monarchy.

And they were very proud to have finally removed 2,500 years of-- tradition of a single man's rule with a republic, only to find out that the concept of supreme leader, religious leader will come in. And this present supreme leader has really put himself back in the form of a king. He's called himself the absolute supreme jurisprudent.

And-- I-- I would say even with much of the political class of the Islamic Republic, they like to see domination of a single man over the entire political system to go away. And Rouhani will probably play a role in bringing about that transition. But-- you're right, I-- I cannot point out to any-- specific minister or people that we would compare to Zarif, for example, and say we know who are this person's fans.

I would say these-- these are people who themselves are in transition and been transformed politically with regard to how they see future of the country. And-- Ahmadinejad's rule helped a lot in bringing about that-- transformation in their thinking and--

## FEMALE VOICE:

That's the only nice thing I've ever heard you say about Ahmadinejad.

## HADI GHAEMI:

No, that he made former hard liners to become (INAUDIBLE) basically.

## FEMALE VOICE:

I have a question (INAUDIBLE). I was interested in your analysis of why-- internet freedom has moved forward. And I'm wondering if you could say a few more words about economic development and how we might use that as a peg to move-- everything's forward, right? I mean, the internet is one form of expr-- you know, it's a platform for express-- expression. But how can we sort of make those links more explicit or, I don't know, get his allies to make those links more ex-- explicit?

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## HADI GHAEMI:

In-- on the other rights issues, I mean, they have basically whatever I think that can be-- the workers' rights, of course, has been the-- something that we can very clearly tie. And there is a large constituency inside the country. Who's working class, or who-- who was middle class during Ahmadinejad's years became working class.

So-- I-- I would say on workers' rights there's opportunity. And on woman's rights, I think-- you know, when it comes to-- the-- and-- and Rouhani himself has also referred to it when it comes to participation of woman in society and employment. Again, that will tie into economic activity, employment, and-- it-- it probably will be much easier for him to sell it to-- a more traditional religions-- oriented-- constituency that he may have to b-- argue with. But I see those two issues some things that can become also tied to development issues.

## FEMALE VOICE:

What is the situation with the cinema and the censorship and-- because I'm-- I-- I select films for a film festival on human rights and we get quite a few films from Iran, surprisingly many, considering what's happening (INAUDIBLE).

## HADI GHAEMI:

Well, that was one of the very first concrete acts of the-- during Ahmadinejad's last year. There was a independent s-- House of Cinema, literally called House of Cinema, which all the cinema directors and professionals were engaged in.

And Ahmadinejad shuttered it and tried to start one that was completely dependent on this state to-- control content and production of films. One of the first things that Rouhani did, which we thought would be beginning of-- opening up on freedom of-- associations, was allowed the original House of Cinema come back.

And when he holds-- meetings, public meetings, he makes sure that a lot of cinema people are around him. That's very interesting. He just had the one-year anniversary of his victory and all the prominent, well-known actors, actresses, directors were invited to sit on the front row. He-- the-- his Ministry of Culture, which is in charge of censorship-- has not yet opened up this space, whether it's for, you know-- literature, publications, or cinema as much.

But what is interesting about Iran is that-- also with music, underground music. People go on anyway and make it product. Of course, they take it (UNINTEL). But there is a huge underground music scene. So, I think with cinema-- that creative energy will continue to demonstrate itself, one way or another. And that's why we're getting so many films made.



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## MALE VOICE:

And there (UNINTEL).

## HADI GHAEMI:

There-- well-- not-- not films that are made without a permit. But they make it to international film festivals and get recognition abroad usually. But honestly, I cannot tell you for sure what is the situation with issuing permits for films. Because I have seen-- culture people, whether it's literature and music or cinema, mostly complain about obstacles that have not been removed yet.

## FEMALE VOICE:

I have another question. Just about what the potential future role of civil society is gonna be-- and what role the expatriate-- Iranian human rights community is gonna play-- how much preparation there is for people maybe trying to venture back-- and what the environment is or how to prepare the ground f-- to have a civil society to absorb some of the new freedoms and to start exercising them.

## HADI GHAEMI:

So-- civil society, I think, is going to be very important. Because we basically have a generation of Iranians who grew up-- with the promise of civil society being a major part of the society. Khatami's era from '97 to 2005 talked a lot about civil society. So-- generally, people recognize that government cannot solve all problems.

And one of the domains where it's become very clear is the environment. Iran is facing environmental disaster on many fronts, whether it's air quality, water, you know-- several serious environmental issues that have led to grassroots environmental organizations forming who are-- and it's similar in China, kind of, too that-- when people start to see impact of-- of developments on their lives, they're not gonna wait for the government. They're gonna try to find solutions.

The expat-- so, there were civil society organizations formed under Khatami. They were uprooted under Ahmadinejad. And then, after 2009, we had a huge exodus. People first went into exile. They are going to play a very important role because they have maintained their networks inside the country and actually tried to empower and provide capacity to their colleagues back in the country. I-- I've been very impressed with people who have left. They're constantly looking to provide, whether it's, you know, and-- because of sanctions, especially people inside the country can't do many basic things.

So, it's-- they're-- (UNINTEL) who are doing it for them. Originally when Rouhani came back to power, a lot of people started packing their bags and thinking they will

be going back. But-- the hard liners made it clear it's too early. But eventually, I think the expat community will play a huge role. Because-- they-- they-- they have gained a lot of experience, also, from the societies they've lived in. And they've kept their networks in Iran. And they will be-- transferring back. But were not quite there yet. Not yet.

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

I just had-- question about the regional-- situation in Syria. I mean, so far, Iran has been pretty hard line in terms of its support for (INAUDIBLE) red line and supplying the bulk of the weapons in-- for-- Syria. Do you think as they negotiate-- the future of Iraq, there might be any more flexibility in terms of that posture on-- Assad and Syria? I mean, is propping Iraq more important to them than Syria at this stage, do you think?

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

Well, I think now they're tied, if anything, with the events in Iraq. They're gonna be more interested to keep Assad's regime in place. It'd be very risky for them to suddenly-- start being flexible on Assad--

(FEMALE VOICE: INAUDIBLE)

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

--I'm afraid.

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

--ask of them?

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

I think, again, Americans gonna look at the situation in Iraq and-- you know-- the-- the-- the question is if Assad goes right now, what will replace it? And now, again, it's not about the-- I think Iran is ready, is not-- is not married-- or the Iranian Revolutionary Guards, that's really the one who has empowered Assad.

It's not married to him-- you know, as-- a personality to keep. But they're interested to keep his infrastructure in place because of the chaos that would ensue. I think, actually, with the events in Iraq and what I really see is the contours of-- claims for a new country in the region approaching. If there-- they solidify their gains, there could be very complicated situation.

Because the Kurds immediately will declare independence and there will be a new Sunni-- or a claim to a new Sunni-- country in northern Syria and Iraq. If you look at the cities that ISIS has taken over, they've been very systemic. And they're really redrawing the map in Syria and Iraq. So, actors like Iran and the U.S. are going to be very wary of further chaos with-- and-- and that's the really sad thing, that despite all the atrocities and tragedies Assad has caused, things are turning to his favor with these new developments, I would say.

## FEMALE VOICE:

(INAUDIBLE) what you're making earlier about election, the nomination of the supreme-- supreme leader and this new council-- or the-- the-- the council being elected--

(HADI GHAEMI: INAUDIBLE)

## FEMALE VOICE:

--so, I-- when-- how does that-- how does that happen? Who-- nominates or elects them?

## HADI GHAEMI:

Well-- that's the thing, even though we have elections in Iran, who becomes a candidate is extremely-- staged and controlled. So, you're going to have-- basically clerics, mostly their clerics-- actually, I think they all are clerics who are elected to this Assembly of Experts.

And-- people will vote for them. But there is not gonna be, you know, that much competition or freedom to become a candidate. And then, these 80 or so clerics will form the council that will decide-- if the supreme leader, for any reason, was to die or become incapable of fulfilling his-- role-- they will decide the next one. But what has become very clear is that there is no single cleric or ayatollah who can fill that space. And the constitution had-- already predicted that, that there could be a council of three of them ruling. And that is the transformation that I think Rouhani going to contribute to.

## FEMALE VOICE:

I have one last question. 'Cause I know Anthony has a hard stop. But-- and that is, you know, I'm-- to talk us through the full range of products that the international campaign produces. Because I'm always astonished at the range of different things. And, you know, we know what you produce for the Western media. Because any-- if

you pick up the *New York Times*, any story-- (CLAP) about Iran always cites the campaign-- and often quotes you. But can you talk us through the range of other things that you're producing in different languages and what you're-- you know, what the resources are that are available are? You mentioned the TV show.

## HADI GHAEMI:

Right. (LAUGH) Right. So-- everything we do is bilingual-- in Persian and English. We really wanted to have-- Arabic, Turkish, Portuguese, and Spanish-- products, too. But it was a little too ambitious. We did have a Portuguese website for a while for Brazil that-- did lead to-- good outcome in-- getting us a footstep inside Brazil that continues to this day.

But beside the regular news and recession documentation which leads to the traditional human rights reporting, we have moved a lot in the direction on multimedia. So, we produce-- videos, whether advocacy videos or even a music video on executions. We had-- a very prominent rap artist--

## FEMALE VOICE:

It sounds like you weren't aware of that.

## MALE VOICE:

No. (LAUGH) It's--

## HADI GHAEMI:

No, I (UNINTEL) to the executions. So, (LAUGHTER) a prominent rap artist, Iranian rap artist, who recently came to exile and is-- sees himself as a s-- agent of social change came to us and said that he wants to produce a video. And when he brought the lyrics, I was very impressed.

It really was right on target. And, you know, for a human rights organization to send its message through rap lyrics was-- sound like a risky business. But-- this poetry is in the blood of Iranians. It really was right on the mark. And you can see it on YouTube. We released it in-- November. It has had about-- our own posting has had (UNINTEL) 25,000 hits. And somebody else reposted it on YouTube, which has had over 80,000 hits.

We do-- actually, I would say the most important product we have right now, we have a direct line of communication with the Iranian people every week on Thursdays, which is today. We-- the-- the political satirist I mentioned out of Brooklyn-- he began before doing his TV show making a podcast for us, half an hour

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weekly human rights podcast-- which originally was online and now is being aired into Iran over short-wave radio. So, we value that immensely. Because now, we have direct line of communication to millions of people--

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

And it's--

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

--in Iran. It is. It is.

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

--news with a human rights lens. Right. And--

(HADI GHAEMI: INAUDIBLE)

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

--and-- and if people are interested to learn more, they can sign up for the update-- the weekly update, yes?

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

Yes. We have a weekly update. If you're interested, visit the website, sign up, and--

## **FEMALE VOICE:**

I'll give you-- give you a card.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

(INAUDIBLE PHRASE) wanting to ask any question. I'm-- I'm interested. I mentioned-- I mentioned-- in-- opening-- that probably both sides, the supporters and the opponents of a deal-- between-- Iran and the P5+1, particular in the United States-- could see the value of having an endorsement for their point of view from a group like the campaign or those-- with who-- who-- who are like-minded concerned about human rights-- defense in Iran.

Because-- being able to appoint to-- that kind of-- of issues-- and it's-- going, you know, with-- with their respective arguments could be-- really helpful-- to them. So,

w-- that-- that puts you-- and y-- your campaign-- in-- influential position. Because the-- the deadline for-- for the-- the process to deliver a result is in about a month-- from now. So, how-- how do you see it?

## HADI GHAEMI:

Yeah. I mean-- with regard to that, we very much follow-- what is the-- you know, m-- main human rights community in Iran, how do they see this agreement hurting or helping them. As-- as I mentioned, they are very much in favor of it. They generally believe that ending the country's isolation is very good for them.

And-- we support the agreement. We actually-- would be very welcoming of it. But we would insist that, again, full integration must be involving improvement of the human rights situation. We absolutely do not want this nuclear crisis come to an end and people forget about Iran and-- you know, business and trade resume just like any other country.

This is a serious leverage we see we have, both to end the nuclear crisis and put the human rights on the map. And-- we definitely also, I-- I think I mentioned at the end-- do not support people who want to undermine the negotiations by highlighting the human rights situation or using it for their agenda. And, again-- it is not an ideological opinion we have formed. It is underground people who are trying to improve the situation are telling us that's the way forward. That's what (INAUDIBLE).

## ANTHONY RICHTER:

Yeah. So, we'll be-- be watching for-- letters, statements, and--

## HADI GHAEMI:

Yes. All right.

## ANTHONY RICHTER:

--positions that you and-- and others--

## HADI GHAEMI:

Right now, in the process of interviewing major-- activists and opinion makers and dissidents inside Iran-- asking them, "What is your take on the negotiations? And-- if an agreement is signed, would you be welcoming it or not? And how would it impact your concerns?"

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We did that two years ago when we were at the height of the fever for military action against Iran. And we found that, you know, unanimously-- all the dissidents inside the country oppose military action. They cannot see that helping their cause at all. And that's somewhat confounding to s-- some people who have worked with dissidents in other countries and usually see dissidents wanna jump in and use any pressure point against the government they're fighting.

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

Right. Those people who would wanna see human rights instrumentalized as a means of-- regime change and so on would be--

(FEMALE VOICE: UNINTEL)

## **ANTHONY RICHTER:**

--that-- that probably-- probably quite disappointed. Well-- I think this is a good place maybe-- to-- to leave it-- today. But-- with the-- the deadline coming up next month-- and-- and the-- general assembly-- this fall, there's a lot of reason for people to be-- following-- what-- the campaign is doing. So, I'm really delighted that you were able to-- present such a insightful presentation to us and-- and to give us the chance to talk with you today, Hadi.

## **HADI GHAEMI:**

Well, thank you all (APPLAUSE) for coming (INAUDIBLE).

\* \* \*END OF TRANSCRIPT\* \* \*