

The new Iranian Government

The second Rohani government

Seventeen, over a total of eighteen total ministers presented by Hassan Rohani to the Parliament to get the vote of confidence, has been elected. In fact, according to the Iranian Constitution, the President proposes the appointment of all ministers with the exception of Justice, which is chosen by the President among a group of candidates selected by the Head of the Judicial Powers.

Hassan Rohani's second executive is characterized by eight re-appointments and ten new appointments, with some interesting innovations.

Mohammad Javad Zarif has been reconfirmed - with Parliament's particular satisfaction - at the head of the Foreign Ministry, demonstrating the will of the President and of the institutions explicitly recognizing the role played by the definition of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), on which Zarif has fully invested his political credibility during the first term.

Another important name among the renewals is that of Bijan Namdar Zanganegh, the Ministry of Petroleum, whose success is due to the recovery of the oil market and the massive increase in production.

The vote also confirmed in their role the Minister of Agriculture, Mahnoud Hojjati, the Minister of Labour, Ali Rabei, the Minister of Health, Hassan Hashemi, Intelligence, Mahmoud Alavi, Interior Minister, Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli and the Transport, Abbas Ahmad Akhondi.

The eight new ministers are Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, as head of the Communications Ministry (whose appointment was contested by some parliamentarians of the reformist area, who accused him of conducting interrogations of political prisoners during his former post as Minister of Intelligence, during the second mandate of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad), Abbas Salehi, at the Ministry of Culture, Masoud Karbasian at the helm of the Ministry of Finance, Mohammad Bathaei at the Ministry of Education (also strongly contested by some Deputies of the reformist area), Mohammad Shariatmadari at the Ministry of Commerce, and Masoud Soltanifar at the Sport Ministry.

The proposed energy minister, Habibollah Bitaraf, has been overwhelmed by the criticism related to the drought that has hit much of Iran and whose crisis management was largely criticized, and has not passed the vote of confidence in the Parliament. The position is then temporarily replaced by Deputy Minister Sattar Mahmoudi, awaiting a new proposal and the resulting vote of confidence in Parliament.

Ali Khali Sediq, proposed by Rohani for the post of Minister of Science, has instead resigned a few hours before the vote, and was therefore temporarily elected Seyed Zia Hashemi, pending a new appointment and a subsequent vote of confidence Parliamentary.

Alireza Avayi was nominated as Minister of Justice (with full satisfaction of the executive, which was able to close the embarrassing period characterized by the presence of Mostafa Pourmohammadi, accused of being among the main advocates of the mass executions of 1988), while Brigadier General Amir Hatami was elected to the Defense with the maximum number of votes cast by Parliament, 261 out of 288 voters (this is the first minister of the Defence coming from Artesh after 28 years of almost absolute rule of those of the IRGC).

Eshaq Jahangiri has been confirmed as First Vice President, while the new Head of Cabinet is Mahmoud Vaezi.

There are also twelve Vice Presidents of this executive, of whom 5 are reconfirmed and the remaining nominees. Ali Akgar Salehi for Atomic Energy, Ali Asghar Monesan at Cultural Heritage and Tourism, Isa Kalantari for Environmental Protection, Mohammad Shariatmadari (with

Delegation) for Executive Affairs, Laya Joneydi for Legal Affairs, Mohammad-Ali Shahidi for Martyrs and Veterans, Hossein Ali Amiri for the National Champion Foundation, Mohammad Bagher Mobakht at Strategic Supervision, Masoumeh Ebtekar (formerly known as spokesman Mary at the time of the US Embassy siege in Tehran) to Women's and Family Affairs, Jamshid Ansari Administrative and Business Affairs, and Mohammad Nahavandian to Economic Affairs.

With the sole exception of the candidate for the Ministry of Energy, the parliamentary vote demonstrated full support for the executive and above all to the foreign and economic policy launched by Hassan Rohani, sanctioning the House's support for the continuation of the normalization process with the international community and the revival of the economy and industry.

Little, if none, it has been the weight of international tensions, especially with the US, in the voting process of the new government, which in this way wanted to send a strong signal to the Trump administration, visibly engaged in the deliberate attempt to cause an obstacle in the management of JCPOA.

The Iranian press has generally commented positively on the appointment of the new Rohani government, although there have been no protests in the ultra-conservative opposition. Among them, perhaps the most powerful one was the one directed against Petroleum Minister Zanganeh, accused of signing an agreement with French Total that did not comply with the terms of national sector legislation, giving advantages and opportunities that penalize the country and its industries. Accusations to which President Rohani responded firmly, accusing the opposition forces of "helping the United States" in penalizing the country and its economic development.

First considerations on the executive

In drawing up an initial report on the outcome of the vote of parliamentary confidence, some considerations can be made about the eight key government ministries, of which seven are nominated directly by President Rohani (Foreign Affairs, Petroleum, Defense, Intelligence, Internal Affairs, Culture and Economy) and one through a pre-selection made by the judiciary (Justice Minister).

It should be noted that the lack of confidence to the proposed candidate for the ministry of energy, Habibollah Bitaraf, has not matured in an opposition to President Rohani, but as part of a different and vast controversy over the last few months in Iran, with regard to the persistence of the drought and the lack of capacity of the minister to propose credible and effective solutions to mitigate its effect on a national scale.

In total terms, the second Rohani government is confirmed in the pragmatic tradition, acting as an ideological bridge between the components of reformism, pragmatism and more moderate conservatism, with a view to a political capacity built on cohesion and the common interest in progressive normalization of the country after decades of isolation, sanctions and negative perception by the international and regional system.

Key government appointments are certainly those of Zarif and Zanganeh, which are not only confirmed but acknowledged in the merit for their role in supporting the Rohani political program, a clear demonstration of what will be the orientation of the government in the second term. Both ministers have been subjected to fierce controversy during the first government mandate, instrumentally fuelled by the ultra-conservative area opposition to demonstrate the inconsistency of the Rohani political program and the dangerous unconditional opening to Western countries. Their appointment therefore represents not only a confirmation of political and program continuity, but also a message to the opposition forces.

Particularly significant was also the appointment of a General of the Artesh to lead the Defense ministry after almost thirty years of monopoly by the Sepah-e Pasdaran, which also obtained the highest number of confidence votes in parliament (261 of 288 present and voting).

The appointment of Brigadier General Amir Hatami, officially welcomed with enthusiasm by the leaders of IRGC, is also part of the normalization of the institutional functions desired and pursued by Rohani. Hatami, Conservative and very close to its predecessor, Deghan, who is part of the IRGC, does not express an ideological fracture in the Defense ministry, but reports under the control of the regular armed forces the security, the military industry and the management of the Armed Forces. General Hatami, in commenting his appointment, confirmed to the press his commitment to continue the development of the national missile program, thus providing not only reassurance to the parallel IRGC military component but also launching a strong and determined message to the US administration, which on the missile program is increasingly seeking to determine the *casus belli*, to boycott the validity of the JCPOA.

It is also in the path of continuity the confirmation of Mahmoud Alavi as Intelligence Ministry, with whom Rohani has shared a first fully satisfactory government mandate. Alavi is expression of a conservative, traditionalist position, very close to the Guide, but at the same time he has no economic interests, so he places himself outside of the most controversial circles.

The parliamentary debate - and the media – has been particularly intense over the appointment of Mohammad-Javad Azari Jahromi, the head of the Communications Ministry. Jahromi was in fact accused by some reformist members of having been involved in managing some interrogation of young people arrested after the protests that occurred after the 2009 presidential election. Jahromi's candidacy was countered by some parliamentarians in the reformist area, who recalled his previous assignment to the Intelligence Minister during the second mandate of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, asking for clarifications about the role played after the protests, attempting to sabotage the appointment.

Equally significant is the appointment to the head of the Justice ministry of Alireza Avayi, chosen as per constitutional provisions within a roster of candidates prepared by the Head of Judiciary. The reformist opposition in Parliament had not spared criticisms at Rohani in the first term for Mostafa Pourmohammadi's presence, accused of being among the main advocates of mass executions in 1988 when several thousand political prisoners were summoned to death by a court which included, in addition to Pourmohammadi, also former presidential candidate Ebrahim Raisi.

The new Rohani cabinet is clearly structured to foster a solid implementation of the economic reform program, through a combination of choices that favour technical skills and on the other hand the management of the ever- complex political balances within the Parliament and more generally of the national political fabric.

A particularly important role is taken by Professor Maosud Nili, a university professor of economics and notoriously favourable to the opening of the Iranian economy towards the global market, to which Rohani has assigned the task of forming a task force of experienced economists whose role will consist in suggesting the best strategies for implementing the powerful economic reform program in place. Nili will not be head of a ministry, but will not limit his role to the sole production of studies, instead steadily and directly contributing to suggest the president the most appropriate economic planning strategies.

The foreign policy of the second Rohani government

There are no substantial changes to Rohani's foreign policy strategy, although the change at the United States presidency has altered the reference framework within which the Iranian administration had built its negotiating process with Washington and more in general with the international community.

The US administration seems to be interested at this stage to maintain a profile of particular rigidity over Tehran, built on ideological positions within the country ranging from the will to exercise

the snap back clause of the JCPOA and those that propose the mere continuation of a policy of ostracism.

Both dangerous strategies for Tehran and, above all, President Rohani, who built the economic planning and development of the program with which he secured the two presidential mandates, on the Western rebate opening program.

In this context, the role of the European Union is of fundamental importance and Iran is increasingly urging the adoption of a more brilliant and incisive economic policy by removing the obstacles placed by the United States on the banking system, as a result of the transformation of the many Memorandum of Understanding signed in the last two years into real trade agreements.

No less articulated the situation on the regional front. The two on-going conflicts in Iraq and Syria seem to turn sharply in favour of Iran and Russia, demonstrating at the same time the ambiguity of regional actors and, above all, their "connections" with jihadism.

The political crisis promoted by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates against Qatar has also reached a turning point in favour of Iran's role, thanks to Doha's resistance to the threats formulated by the respective administrations of Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, and at the contextual role played by Tehran in politically and economically supporting Qatar after the embargo decreed in the Gulf Cooperation Council.

The air bridge deployed from Tehran to Doha to supply Qatar's capital of food and goods, albeit symbolic, has demonstrated a great ability from Iran and an equally fast speed in seizing strategic opportunities at this time vital for the political and military interests of Iran.

By the end of August, Iran and Qatar have definitively restated diplomatic relations after more than twenty months of suspension. The Doha embassy was closed in Tehran in January 2016 following the storming of the Saudi embassy by people protesting for the death sentence in Saudi Arabia of the Shiite cleric Nimr al-Nimr.

The reopening of the diplomatic office not only endorses the dispute between the two countries, but it clearly indicates the consolidation of a strategy to counter the role of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in the region, whose relations with Tehran are characterized by a constant tension built on the perception of an existential threat inherent in the Islamic Republic itself.

This decision strengthens Iran's role on a regional level and partially removes Qatar from the embargoed veto imposed by the Gulf Cooperation Council, while limiting the sphere of political autonomy on which Doha has sought to build its own regional independence policy.