

# Iran Under Raisi's Presidency

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**ABSTRACT** *Following the Islamic Revolution, a number of leaders have served as the highest elected official of Iran, with the winner of the last presidential election being Ebrahim Raisi, who does not have much experience in the political area, but received the support of all influential groups in the country, particularly the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the ulama. The attitude of the Guardian Council, which has the primary responsibility for the survival of the system, in determining the presidential candidates affects the voter turnout and enables the forecast of election results to some degree, as in this election. In this context, the rejection of the candidacy of some names is essential in terms of showing the rivalry between the various power groups in the system and giving clues about the new era, which is characterized as the second phase of the Revolution. Raisi, who has been seen as the Supreme Leader's possible successor, is expected to make an impression as an embracing leader. However, he also faces significant challenges in domestic policy such as the economy, aridification, power and water crises, and ethnic problems, to which there are no simple and short-term solutions. In foreign policy, although it is expected that Raisi would prioritize the relations with neighboring countries instead of the great powers, the relations of Tehran with these countries will, to a great extent, depend on its policies towards the U.S. in the new era.*

**Keywords:** Ebrahim Raisi, Presidential Elections, Iran

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## Background

**T**he Iranian voters cast their votes in the 13<sup>th</sup> presidential election on June 18, 2021, and elected Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi as the new president of Iran. A number of leaders have served as the highest elected official in Iran subsequent to Abolhasan Banisadr, who was elected as the first president following the Islamic Revolution of 1979 which overthrew the Pahlavi monarchy. After Banisadr, who had to flee abroad following a disagreement with the Islamic Republican Party and then Ayatollah Khomeini, Mohammad Ali Rajaei served as the second president of the Islamic Republic for a brief period, and following his assassination; Ali Khamenei, Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and Hassan Rouhani were respectively elected as the ‘second-highest-ranking official’ in Iran.

In fact, although the concept of ‘Islamic Republic’ was used by some countries such as Pakistan, it was a newly-emerged concept. The relevant definition sprung up, to a great extent, in reaction to the secular-monarchical character of the Pahlavi regime. Therefore, this concept did not get a reaction from the nationalist, leftist, or various Islamist groups that united against the Pahlavi regime and few people raised concerns about the issue. Similarly, there was no consensus even among the top authorities on how to define the *Velayat-e Faqih* (Guardianship of the Jurist), which is the pivotal concept of the post-revolutionary constitution of Iran. That

was the case not only among the various political movements such as the Freedom Movement of Iran, led by the first Prime Minister of Iran Mehdi Bazargan, or the People’s Mujahedin Organization of Iran which was under the leadership of Massoud Rajavi and later turned into a ‘terrorist organization,’ but also even for Khomeini, the unquestionable leader and the theorist of the Revolution. For instance, Khomeini, while in exile in Paris, stated that the Islamic Republic of Iran would be similar to the French model of state or that he would settle in Qom, leaving the governance to the politicians. However, as is seen in many post-revolutionary countries, the practice soon overshadowed the theory and built its own political reality.

## The Islam/Republic Dilemma

The political consciousness and experience of the *ulama* (clergies) who succeeded in winning the post-revolutionary internal power struggle in a couple of years was largely related to the constitutional movement during the Qajar period. It has been narrated that the Shia *ulama*, who were not in favor of such concepts as parliament, republic, and election under the influence of the experience of modern Turkey, promised to support the Pahlavi dynasty in exchange for Reza Pahlavi’s renouncement of the proclamation of the Republic. Therefore, this feeling of insecurity impelled the religious revolutionaries to take all kinds of measures at the constitutional level so as not to fall into the

trap of a new constitutional attempt, as frequently stressed by Ayatollah Mahdavi Kani, one of the key figures of the new regime. In particular, the conflict between Banisadr and Khomeini set the alarm bells ringing among these circles and caused some important institutions which were affiliated with the Presidency to pass over to the control of *Vali-e Faqih*.

The rapid militaristic characterization of post-revolutionary domestic and foreign policy, and the above-mentioned disagreements both proved Khomeini's dream of a supervisory *Vali-e Faqih* to be naïve and incompetent. The factors such as the disputes over the governance between Khomeini and Banisadr first and then to a lesser extent Khamenei, as well as the undeniable influence of Khomeini's son Ahmad on him, led to serious problems not only between the presidents and Khomeini but also with Ayatollah Montazeri, who was expected to be the successor of Khomeini. Each of these debates and disputes led the authority of *Vali-e Faqih*, who is known as the Supreme Leader, to expand and even to gain a supra-constitutional and institutional power with the amendment of 'absolute *velayat*' to the constitution.

Ali Khamenei, successor to Khomeini, also experienced similar disagreements which Khomeini had with the elected presidents and came out stronger, in the end, thanks to his influential charisma. Khamenei had serious disagreements at first, with his close friend of fifty years Hashemi Rafsanjani and then, with

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the reformist President Mohammad Khatami and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Hassan Rouhani also suffered the same fate as the former presidents. As the former Secretary-General of the National Security High Council, Rouhani, who had a role both in the memorandum of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Commanders and in the severe suppression of student protests during the Khatami era, began to give 'moderate' messages following his presidential candidacy. The great support of the Iranian people for the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the Nuclear Deal) signed with the U.S., raised Rouhani's hopes considerably and he began to openly oppose Khamenei's statements in public. Trump's election and his withdrawal from the JCPOA not only challenged the Iranian foreign policy but also undermined Rouhani's ambitions in domestic policy. The worsening economy and the accusation that he trusted the U.S. brought discredit on Rouhani and he became 'the most unsuccessful president in the history

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of Iran' along with the devastating effects of the global pandemic.

## Towards the Elections

In the light of the aforementioned issues, it can be claimed that a certain amount of electoral engineering was carried out as part of the macro policies set out by the Supreme Leader and his office in all of the presidential elections held in the Islamic Republic of Iran over the past forty years. Considering the current legal proceedings and practices in Iran, it is seen that the mechanisms regarding the presidential or parliamentary elections provide important clues as to the final results of the elections, and even allow the outcome to be predicted. Simply put, the attitude of the Guardian Council, which is composed of 12 members including cler-

gymen and lawyers, in the determination of the presidential candidates affects the voter turnout, and this also enables the forecast of election results to some degree. As the former Minister of Intelligence Mahmud Alevi underlined, if need be, the Guardian Council, which has the primary responsibility for the survival of the system, can even disqualify a figure like Hashemi Rafsanjani who left his mark on the first thirty years of the Revolution. If the Council gives free rein for any reason, the turnout rate can seriously increase, as in the 2009 presidential election, or it could dramatically decrease, as in the last elections on June 18. In this regard, one of the significant indicators of this election was the rejection of the candidacy of such figures as Ali Larijani who served as the Speaker of the Parliament for many years, the former President Mahmoud Ah-

madinejad, who captured the hearts of the suburban and rural segments with his populist policies and rhetoric, or Mostafa Tajzadeh who is considered one of the leading theorists from the urban reformist segments. Although the rejection of the candidacy of the last two figures was not surprising, the disqualification of Larijani, who is from an *ulama* family and has served at the head of the most critical institutions in Iran for the last forty years, and his suffering of various affronts regarding his family members, have been important indicators of the rivalry between the various power groups in the system. The allegations that even the members of the Guardian Council differed on Larijani's nomination and that his candidacy was rejected by just one vote also confirm this situation. Even though Khamenei's statement to conciliate Larijani did not bear any legal consequences, it has prevented him from being further worn away.

Although the reformists have been wiped off the political stage long since, the elimination of Rafsanjani, Rouhani, and Larijani from the Iranian political system has some different connotations and poses the question of what the difference between this election and the previous five elections is. In this regard, we need to speak of the debate of the Islamic Republic-Islamic State in Iran. According to those who argue that the republic has no place in Islamic tradition, that it is a temporary method adopted as a matter of course, and that the choice of the majority of the people is criticized in the Quran,

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the elections which are held, even if only for show, must be set aside and an Islamic State which is directly led by the *ulama* must be established. It should be kept in mind that even though this point of view has lost one of its significant defenders with the death of Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi, it still has supporters among conservative politicians.

However, there are some indications that the disqualification of most of the presidential candidates and thus the decrease in voter turnout to the lowest level in history is based on concrete reasons rather than theoretical and theological discussions. Foremost among these is the projection of the transition to the period defined as the 'second phase of the Revolution.' It has been said for a long time in Iran that the former Judiciary Chief Ebrahim Raisi, who won the elections, will not be just a president, on the contrary, he is preparing for the supreme leadership after Khamenei. Both the calls from the Assembly of Experts and the members of the Par-

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liament for his nomination, as well as the statements by some conservative candidates that they will waive their candidacy if he is planning to be a candidate are supporting these rumors. However, the fact that Raisi did not announce his candidacy until the very last moment led to the rumors that he could not receive the green light from Khamenei. According to another scenario, Khamenei does not want Raisi to get exhausted in the presidency even if he considers Raisi appropriate for the supreme leadership after himself. Thus, both the extremely difficult socio-economic conditions Iran is going through, and the weaknesses of Raisi as a politician with the many blunders he made in public even in a few days support this view.

### What Do the Election Results Mean?

In view of the process and mechanisms outlined above, there were no surprises in the elections. Ebrahim

Raisi was elected Iran's new president, receiving about 18 million votes, more than 60 percent of the valid votes. The voter turnout was 48.8 percent across the country while it was about 26 percent in the capital Tehran. The invalid votes come second with a count of nearly four million. Abdul Nasser Hemmati, the Governor of the Central Bank, who has been promoted on social media by the efforts of the reformists as a final move, could get only 2.5 million votes and came after Mohsen Rezai who is the perpetual candidate in almost every election. Nevertheless, the reformists' 'capacity for agenda-setting' has surprised even some observers. For instance, even the former Speaker of Parliament Karroubi, who was placed under house arrest following the 2009 election and has been recently allowed to have limited contact with the outside world, called for participation in the elections at the last moment and asked for support for Hemmati. Hossein Mousavi, on the other hand, seemed to be better at reading the domestic balance of politics and the reactions of the public by taking a different stance and calling for a boycott of the elections.

### Domestic Policy

The domestic politics of Iran has been generally shaped by two groups since the Islamic Revolution. The balance between these fractions, which were formerly known as 'right-left' and now 'conservative-reformist' respectively, has its origins in the pre-revolutionary era and changed decisively

on the behalf of the 'rightists' after the death of Khomeini in 1989. The loss of Khomeini's guard led the significant figures of the 'leftist' fraction to be wiped off the political stage or placed in passive missions. However, these groups made a spectacular comeback in the 1997 elections by reorganizing under the leadership of such figures as Mousavi Khomeiniha or Mohammad Khatami, transforming in line with the conditions at that time. Even though the conservatives took a lesson from this defeat and took necessary measures to prevent a similar outcome in the future, Ahmadinejad, the representative of the neoconservative line, offended some figures like Rafsanjani or Nateq-Nouri, who are among the fathers of the traditional conservatives. This caused these figures to approach the 'reformist' fraction, resulting in major intra-system devastation in 2009. Even though the conservatives have survived these crises, they could not prevent the election victory of Hassan Rouhani in the 2013 election. The reformist-moderate conservative alliance once again scored a historic victory and took the most crucial political position in the country, elected by the popular vote.

The influential fractions within the system realized that it was not sufficient to prevent the reformist candidates alone and that the moderate conservatives with which they could form alliances should also be blocked, and thus they took action not to allow a new Rouhani model. The unfortunate end of Rouhani's presidency, which initially raised the

public's expectations, has also had an impact on this process. Following the signing of the Nuclear Deal with the world powers led by the U.S., Rouhani began to use assertive rhetoric in both domestic and foreign policy, targeting even Khamenei in domestic policy and China in foreign policy. However, Trump's inauguration in 2016 and his withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal after two years, along with the heavy sanctions, weakened Rouhani's influence. About 20 percent shrinkage in the Iranian economy and the devastating effects of the global pandemic in the last two years have made Rouhani the most unfortunate president in the history of Iran. This also explains why the public did not react against the veto of those close to him. Furthermore, the current economic conditions of the country and the average economic growth rate of around zero percent for the last ten years constituted the main subject of the election debates. Thus, Raisi and the other candidates supporting him argued that the 'Western-Liberal' circles, including Hemmati, were behind the collapse of the country's economy.

The fact that the turnout rate in the elections fell to the lowest level in 40 years and remained even below 50 percent according to the official data have ripped the heart out of the claim of 'a popular, if not democratic, government,' which is constantly stressed by the Iranian system. For instance, the dissident groups have made serious accusations by sharing Khamenei's statements in a *khutbah* a few years ago. In the relevant speech,



Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian (2<sup>nd</sup> R), Iranian Intelligence Minister Ismail Hatib (3<sup>rd</sup> L), and Justice Minister Emin Hussein Rahimi (R) attend vote of confidence in the parliament for the new cabinet proposed by Ebrahim Raisi, Tehran, Iran on August 25, 2021.  
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Khamenei argues that the turnout rate remains at about 30-40 percent in some countries despite all the promotion and propaganda and that this is dishonoring and delegitimizes a government. Therefore, the deliberate vetoes of the Guardian Council in addition to the difficult socio-economic conditions of the country caused the turnout rate in cities such as Tehran, Tabriz, and Shiraz to fall to around 20 percent. The Iranian regime is aware of the fact that it has to immediately tackle this crisis of confidence regarding its dual system which has to date performed successfully. In this regard, the greatest responsibility undoubtedly falls on Ebrahim Raisi, for whom significant sacrifices have been made. Otherwise, if the political system continues to be reserved, the despair, and alienation from domestic politics will spread among the reformist fractions, and the structure of

foreign-based dissident groups may change.

Within the framework outlined above, Raisi will first try to make an impression of an embracing leader. He will take the necessary steps to demonstrate that he is the president of all the people in the whole country, not just the 30 percent who voted for him. To this end, if not the reformist figures, he could give room for the moderate conservatives, who have been offended recently, albeit symbolically. Still, in the event that he postpones the demands of neo-conservative figures, especially the demands of the youth, he may face heavy criticism in the medium term. The economy constitutes one of the most challenging areas for Raisi. Time will tell how they will carry out the 'resistance economy' concept frequently voiced by Raisi himself and

the figures around him, and whether the incentives in manufacturing and construction industries will meet the expectations of the public. If Raisi fails to achieve significant progress regarding the economy in the short term, it would not only make the already weakened social legitimacy of the government more fragile, but it could also seriously affect his plans for the post-Khamenei era. Therefore, it can be argued that the next one or two years will be a very critical period for Raisi.

In this context, the protests regarding the water crisis, which started in Khuzestan province in recent weeks and spread to the different regions such as Azerbaijan and Tehran, constitute symbolically the most significant challenges facing Raisi. The problems in power generation caused by the multiplied economic problems, the aridification, and desertification affecting almost the entire country, along with the rise of nationalist emotions among the ethnic Arabs, Kurds, and Turks who claim that they are subjected to serious discrimination and even assimilation in Iran will be the main challenges facing Raisi who does not have much experience in the political arena but received the support of all influential groups in the country, particularly the IRGC and the *ulama*. Regarding the ethnic conflicts, it should be noted that the Secretary-General of the National Security High Council Ali Shamkhani, who is also of Arab origin, said that what is more dangerous than water scarcity is that people think they are being consciously

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discriminated against, referring to the protests in Khuzestan. To conclude, as we have underlined in our previous articles, there is no simple and short-term solution to the internal problems that Iran is facing, many of which are not unique to this country. Therefore, it seems that Iran will occupy the agenda not only with foreign policy issues but also with developments in its domestic politics in the upcoming period. If Raisi could take steps regarding the controversial issues in domestic policy, particularly returning to the Nuclear Deal or signing of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) agreement, he will be able to develop economic relations with western and global powers, which will also relieve him to some extent.

### **Foreign Policy**

Since Ebrahim Raisi has pursued his career in judiciary for more than forty years, little has been known about his

views on foreign policy. Although he stated in the presidential debates that he would prioritize the relations with the neighboring countries instead of the great powers, it is still uncertain how he will do it. Although Raisi made some statements isolating the U.S. and the West during the electoral period, the relations of Tehran with the regional countries such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Turkey will to a great extent depend on its policies towards the U.S. in the new era.

First of all, it is not expected that the new president will take a personal initiative and oppose the revival of the JCPOA which is the most important foreign policy agenda of Iran. As can be understood from the statements of the Foreign Minister Javad Zarif at the Antalya Diplomacy Forum, the Vienna talks seem to have come to an end. In addition, it is known that the main framework of Iran's foreign policy is not determined by the elected president. However, the possibility that the negotiations may drag on for a while and even that no consensus could be reached should not be disregarded.

The decisions are taken by the U.S. Congress and the Iranian Parliament which makes it difficult to reach an agreement and the groups which are against the Nuclear Deal now being part of the government in Iran increase the pessimism in this aspect. While it is so painful for Biden to return to the JCPOA, after Trump unilaterally withdrew from it in May 2018, as he is under the pressure of both influential figures from his own

party and the notorious anti-Iran Republicans, it is considered very unlikely that any agreement will be reached between the two countries on regional policies or ballistic missiles, which the U.S. insistently brought out. In fact, the Supreme Leader Khamenei, who hosted the Rouhani cabinet on July 28, due to the end of Rouhani's tenure, made very clear statements on this point. Khamenei stressed that he does not personally expect the sanctions to be lifted, arguing that the misplaced trust of the Rouhani government in the U.S. is a lesson for the new government. This also makes us think that the ongoing low-intensity conflicts between the proxy forces of the U.S. and Iran will continue in Iraq and Syria. It is not expected that the U.S., which is moving its biggest base in Qatar to Jordan and is reported to withdraw from Iraq, will directly go into military combat with Iran. Reduction of U.S. military presence in the region could also be considered as an attempt to get out of Iran's missile and drone range. However, if Iran takes its already advanced nuclear activities to a military dimension in the near future, the possibility of military conflict with Israel or the U.S. will significantly increase.

Iran's 'Look to the East Policy' which is frequently voiced in Iran will occupy the agenda more during the Raisi era. Contrary to Rouhani, who was criticized for not giving due importance to the relations with the eastern countries, it can be argued that Raisi will try to forge closer ties with Russia and China. In this regard,

it is likely that some provisions of the 25-year cooperation agreement, which was signed between China and Iran in the past few months and whose details were not shared, could be implemented. As the leaked audio recording of Zarif clearly reveals, it is predicted that pro-Russian military groups will begin to be more active in the new era, and thus the conflict between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the IRGC will decrease in favor of the latter. However, the statement underlined by Raisi in his first press conference: “We will not allow anyone to gain advantage through Iran,” can be considered as a sign that Raisi is beginning to see the limits of cooperation with the East.

The relations with the neighboring countries will constitute another foreign policy priority for the Raisi government. Although he said that he was ready for mutual assigning of ambassadors with Saudi Arabia, emphasizing that he intended to develop relations with Saudi Arabia in his first press conference after his election, the superiority in his speech drew attention. While Saudi Arabia, whose relations with Iran have been in crisis since 2016, is expecting Iran to take a step regarding Yemen and the attacks of Houthis, it has been trying to balance Iran through Iraq. A relative *détente* decision that would result from the ongoing negotiations between the two countries with the mediation of Baghdad will relieve both countries. The fact that Saudi Arabia includes Iran in its normalization attempts which it initiated with Qatar will be a dissolution

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of the Saudi-UAE-Israeli block for Iran which has been under the great pressure of the said block, especially during the Trump era. Normalization between the two countries can positively contribute to the stability of the region, particularly in Iraq and Syria.

It is predicted that Iran intends to improve its economic relations with Turkey in the new era. Contrary to Rouhani, the Raisi government, which does not have great expectations from the JCPOA, could take steps to meet the demands of Turkey, which is one of the few windows of Iran to the world, regarding the economic and commercial relations and it may reduce the obstacles facing Turkish companies. However, the tensions over Iraq and Syria will continue to exist. Military tensions centered on Idlib or Sinjar may pose a new challenge for relations between the two countries. The striking increase in the number of Afghan refugees entering Turkey via Iran and the broadcasts in the Turkish media accusing Iran of the refugee crisis point out that the issue of refugees and climate will gain currency in bilateral relations. Nevertheless, in the last analysis, the longtime mutual relations, various communication channels between

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them, and the existence of many areas of common interest will help to keep the mentioned areas of tension under control.

### Conclusion

Although it is difficult to make a precise prediction, Raisi must overcome his shortcomings in the event that he is to hold the office of Supreme Leadership for decades due to his relatively young age. Compared to the charismatic leader of the Revolution Khomeini, or Khamenei who won the approval of even his biggest opponents thanks to his eloquence and political understanding, it is important for Raisi to be elected to the presidency in order to gain the necessary experience. In this regard, as implied by Vahid Haqqanian who is the *éminence grise* of Khamenei's office, the presidential candidates who could cause problems were disqualified through sophisticated political engineering, and four other candidates serving as a shield were nominated against the remaining weak candidates, which prevented an accident in the debates.

Administrative disputes, the rivalry between many top officials, the difficulties faced by the country in foreign policy and the economy with Trump's inauguration, and his withdrawal from the Nuclear Deal represent the main difficulties faced by Iran in the process leading up to Raisi's presidency. Raisi, who took over the portfolio of Rouhani, who was described as 'the most unsuccessful president in the history of Iran,' is faced with burning issues in many areas of the country. With the crisis of confidence regarding its dual system, the tough socio-economic conditions of the country, and the new President's shortcomings, such as his weaknesses as a politician, may cause further fragility in the social legitimacy. It will also directly affect his plans for the post-Khamenei era. Accordingly, it is expected that the new president will respond to the requests of the society in the short term. However, there is no simple and short-term solution to the internal problems such as the economy, climate, water, and power crisis, and ethnic issues that Iran is facing. Therefore, it seems that Iran will occupy the agenda not only with foreign policy issues but also with developments in its domestic policy in the upcoming period. While the JCPOA and the sanctions remain on the agenda, it is supposed that Raisi will focus on relations with the neighboring countries and economic acquisitions. At the same time, if Raisi could take steps regarding the controversial issues in domestic policy, he will be able to develop economic relations with the western and global powers, which will also relieve him

to some extent. The relations of Iran with the regional countries will, to a great extent, depend on its policies towards the U.S.. As long as Iran does not take its already advanced nuclear activities to a military dimension in the near future, it is not expected that the U.S. will directly go into military combat with Iran. On the other hand, Iran's 'Look to the East Policy,' which is frequently voiced in Iran, will occupy the agenda more. While possible normalization steps with Saudi Arabia and strengthening economic and commercial ties with Turkey are expected to be on the foreign policy

agenda, problems such as military tensions centered on Idlib or Sinjar, and refugee and climate crises may pose new challenges on the bilateral relations with Turkey in the new era. To summarize, although there are many challenges for the new President, who assumed the position with sophisticated electoral engineering, it can be argued that the next one or two years will be highly critical for Raisi setting the tone for the country, and in this process, the greatest responsibility will belong to Ebrahim Raisi, for whom significant sacrifices have been made. ■

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