

SOLACE GLOBAL

# IRAN

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

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# Iran

## Presidential Election

### Executive Summary

The 18 June saw Iran hold presidential elections. The election was marred in the eyes of many before they were even held, with the majority of candidates barred from running. This resulted in many believing the election was rigged to give one favoured candidate, Ebrahim Raisi, victory. Raisi, who is currently the country's Chief Justice, won the election with nearly 62 percent of the vote.

Raisi has been accused of large-scale human rights abuses in the past and is nicknamed the "Butcher of Tehran". In addition to now being the president-elect, he is tipped as a potential successor to Supreme Leader Khamenei. He has support among Iran's hard-liners, close links to the clerical establishment and, importantly, the Revolutionary Guard. Thus, the election of Raisi can be viewed as an important step by these groups to realise control over the country after several years of governance by a moderate reformist President.

Under a Raisi presidency, Iranian politics is likely to become more repressive. There will be little change in the country's wider foreign policy under him. Despite this, there is still a moderate likelihood that a new nuclear agreement can be reached with the US and other Western countries, as the lifting of sanctions would be beneficial to the Iranian establishment and wider domestic economy.

### Presidential Profile

Ebrahim Raisi is supported by the hard-line and conservative factions of Iranian politics. He was born to a clerical family in the holy city of Mashhad and is purported to be a descendent of the Prophet Mohammad. He attended the Islamic seminary in Qom and whilst there was one of the pupils of Ali Hosseini Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of Iran.

At the time of the 1979 revolution, Raisi was believed to be involved in some of the events which led to the fleeing of the Shah and the establishment of the Islamic Republic. After the revolution, he became a public prosecutor. As a Deputy Prosecutor, at the age of 28, he took part in the Death Commissions of 1988 that saw thousands of political dissidents and activists "disappear" or executed. Partially as a result of his roles in the Death Commissions, Raisi has been under targeted sanctions since 2019 as part of the US "Maximum Pressure" strategy. There have also been calls by international rights groups for him to be investigated for crimes against humanity. He continued as a prosecutor until the mid-2000s, when he was also elected to the Assembly of Experts, the council which decides who replaces the Supreme Leader when the incumbent dies. He then became Attorney General in 2014.

In 2016 he was appointed as custodian of the Astan Quds Razavi, which is one of Iran's wealthiest and oldest religious institutions. In 2017, he made his first attempt to run for President, but was defeated by the current incumbent, Rouhani, by a two to one margin. Finally, in 2019 he was appointed Chief Justice. During his time in the judiciary, and as its head, he is credited with ushering in several reforms to the Iranian justice system. These include commuted sentences and the reclassification of several crimes that held the death penalty. He also presided over a popular anti-corruption campaign which gave him a wider national profile. However, he has also presided over a period of increasing repression of social media and free speech. For instance, he is behind the ban and the criminalisation of the use of the messaging app Signal.

His long-standing links with the judiciary, his early activity in the revolution and the fact he studied under the Supreme Leader when young, mean he is seen by many as someone closely backed by and allied with the hard-liners and clerics in Iran that make up the country's establishment. Indeed, such is his standing amongst the establishment that he is believed to be a leading contender for the position of next Supreme Leader when Khamenei dies.

### The Election

In essence, it was an election with no contest, designed to allow Raisi to secede to the Presidency with a semblance of democratic legitimacy. As part of this, there was the widespread disqualification of the majority of candidates. It is understood that 600 put their names forward, of those, only seven were approved to stand.

By the day of the election, this had fallen to four. This lack of contest in the election can be seen as a pivotal moment in the evolution of the Islamic Republic. Previously elections in the Islamic Republic have had a diverse and wide-ranging number of candidates and viewpoints thus providing some democratic legitimacy and allowing it to be seen as a competitive authoritarian regime.

Whilst this process removed many of the remaining moderates, reformists, and those who support better ties with the West, it also removed several well-known establishment figures, who could have posed a credible threat to the election of Raisi. These included Ali Larijani, a former speaker of parliament whose brother sits on the Guardian Council, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad himself a former President, and Eshaq Jahangiri who is currently the Vice President. For many Iranians, the power of the Council of Guardians, clerics and the Revolutionary Guard has been exposed. This election could thus be seen as an example of authoritarian overreach which may only serve to further undermine in the long term the Islamic Republic's remaining legitimacy. Indeed, the "electioneering" was so obvious that one of the other allowed candidates stated during a televised election debate that "the regime had aligned sun, moon and the heavens to make one particular person [Raisi] president". With the lack of true choice in the election, it could be seen as the commencement of "one party rule" by the hard-liners.

This electioneering, however, has not arisen out of nowhere. Instead, it can be viewed as the culmination of a long-term project to gain power by the hard-liners, the Revolutionary Guard, and the clerics. Many high-profile reformists are now in prison, exile or dead given the brutal way the 2009 Green Movement, and subsequent movements, have been repressed. Meanwhile, the moderates in the country, who used to represent a strong parliamentary block, and under Rouhani controlled the office of the presidency, have in recent years been pushed to the margins of politics or had much of their policy frustrated. As a result, the only major factions left intact in Iranian politics are the conservatives and hard-liners who are allied to the clerics, the Revolutionary Guard, and also to Raisi, the President-elect.

The consequence of this pre-election manoeuvring was that more than half of the Iranian electorate refused to vote. This meant that the turnout of 48.8 percent was the lowest in the Islamic Republic's history. Alongside this, of those who did cast a ballot, 3.7 million chose to spoil them. Reformists in the country hailed this as a symbolic act of civil disobedience. Of the votes cast, Raisi garnered 17.9 million of them, or around 62 percent. As a result, he can technically claim to have won a convincing victory. Yet the low turnout will be seen as undermining the popular case for the Islamic Republic and for his presidency.

The Iranian establishment has long highlighted that with turnout in the country's elections always above 50 percent, it is a sign of implicit support for the continuation of the system. This being the first election to have less than 50 percent turnout shows that potentially more than half the electorate are now disillusioned enough with the system to no longer take part. The fact that Raisi has been elected on a turnout of less than 50 percent also weakens his mandate when compared to his predecessors. Much of the public believes his victory was pre-arranged, and this added to the low turnout could lead to challenges to his rule from dissidents. Already, the few moderate and reformist activists able to speak out are claiming that the large number of spoiled ballots and low turnout help to showcase that their factions are much larger in scale than the support that Raisi has.

## Iranian Politics

As a result of the election victory for Raisi, the hard-liners have complete control over most areas of Iranian governance. They took control of the Iranian parliament in 2020 and as a result, were able to successfully block much of Rouhani's moderate agenda over the last year. With the election of Raisi they now also control the presidency. The hard-liners in Iran will likely already have a figure in place to nominate to the position of Chief Justice when Raisi leaves that post in August to become President.

The forthcoming Raisi presidency will be seen as a period of power consolidation by the conservative and hard-line factions in the country. They will likely aim to freeze out and further marginalise the reformist and more pro-democracy factions. In terms of how the new President may respond to any large-scale civil unrest against him in the coming months, it is likely that his long time in the judiciary will influence his tactics. Namely the use of repression and threats. Even before the election, there were reports that journalists had been contacted by allies of Raisi in the justice system, and "warned" about expressing views that could be seen as "too critical" against Raisi. Additionally, the Supreme Leader Khamenei is now in his eighties, and even before

his election to President, Raisi who is a close ally of Khamenei was often tipped as being a potential successor. With the prospect of being Supreme Leader in sight, Raisi is unlikely to be seen as weak in the face of any opposition either internal or external. This dynamic in turn makes it likely that Iranian politics is likely to become more repressive than it has been under Rouhani.

The last hard-liner president was Ahmadinejad between 2005 and 2013. Iranian politics with Raisi as president is likely to resemble how it was under Ahmadinejad. Namely more populist, repressive, and authoritarian. Ahmadinejad's time in office was also defined by economic chaos and domestic instability. Raisi will be hoping that he can bring economic order and societal stability to Iran. If he achieves this, it will further cement his position as the next most likely Supreme Leader.

## Western Relations

At the time of writing, Iranian relations with the west are dominated by one subject: The Nuclear Accords. Raisi, like most politicians in Iran, appears to have the desire to reach a new deal with the west on this issue. They realise that this is the only method available to them to try and lift the sanctions that have contributed to the country's recent economic malaise. Raisi even stated during a televised election debate that he will "honour" the nuclear deal and form a "strong" government to steer it in the right direction.

Iran would also not be at the table negotiating if the Supreme Leader and the ruling classes were not seeking to return to a deal on nuclear matters with the west. As the Iranian elections approached the talks stalled. Negotiators believed that they had stalled as the Iranians were unwilling to allow an outgoing President any ability to claim credit for any brokered deal. Talks resumed on 20 June, after the Iranian election, and it was stated that an agreement on restoration of the nuclear deal was not finalised but was close.

Both Iran and the west will now want to conclude the talks and reach a deal swiftly. Currently, Raisi is the only President-elect, in August he will become President. Due to his hard-line stance with regards to the west, negotiations with his government would likely be harder and tenser than they have been with Rouhani. The west then will wish to conclude the talks before the end of the Rouhani government. The Iranian hard-liners are likely to also wish for a speedy conclusion to the talks. Now Raisi is President-elect if a deal is reached which throughout the latter part of the year sees the reduction of sanctions on Iran, the hard-liners will be able to take credit for careful stewardship of the deal and the lessening of sanctions. Meanwhile, if the deal is concluded before Raisi officially takes office and things go wrong, the hard-liners will be able to lay the blame for any defects at the feet of Rouhani.

Another sign that a deal could be imminent is the fact that the US has announced a drawdown of the surge troops that they positioned in the Middle East, as a confrontational move against Iran under the presidency of Donald Trump. This withdrawal marks a moment of de-escalation in the tensions between the US and Iran which peaked in 2020 with the US assassination of Iranian general Qassim Soleimani. It also can be seen as a trust-building move by the US towards Iran as the negotiations on the nuclear accord head towards a conclusion.

Outside of the nuclear deal, Raisi has mentioned little foreign policy in his campaign. Unlike his predecessor Rouhani, Raisi personally also has little personal foreign exposure. He was educated in Iran, whereas Rouhani was educated in America. Furthermore, his long time spent in the judiciary has also left him with less foreign policy experience. As a result of these factors, it is unlikely there will be any sudden changes in Iranian foreign policy, outside of the nuclear accord.

The return of a hard-line president likely means more support or a continuation of support to the constellation of Iranian proxies across the region. Whilst he will abide by any nuclear agreement, outside of that he will likely continue to expand the Iranian arms and weapons programmes. Indeed, Raisi in his first press conference on 21 June, stated that the Iranian ballistic missile programme was "non-negotiable".

Ahmadinejad, the previous hard-line President was well known for his inflammatory rhetoric, and bellicosity. Raisi is seen as less likely to adopt such an approach. Given that Raisi is under several Western sanctions partially due to his role in the "Death Commissions", Anti-Iranian policymakers will find his election useful. It will be easier if so wished to stir up fear and negative media about Iran when it has a leader who is suspected of being involved in mass murder. Under the American educated and moderate Rouhani, such

scaremongering was harder. In this way, it will also be a return to the days of the presidency of Ahmadinejad when the Iranian President themselves was useful in the US and Israeli campaign to initially isolate Iran.

## What Next?

The election of Raisi then marks a return to power for the hard-liners. This comes after seven years of widespread disappointment in the reformists and moderates compounded by the collapse of the nuclear deal, and their continued repression and eradication. As a result of a return to power for the hard-liners, the reformists and moderates left in government will be further squeezed, and civil society will likely be further repressed. For Raisi as an individual actor, his election to the presidency leaves him effectively on the cusp of being elected Supreme Leader in the event the elderly Khamenei passes away. If he is able to get the accolades stemming from sanctions relief, and a new nuclear deal, whilst successfully repressing any challenges to the regime, then this will help smooth his pathway to that title. In turn, the lifting of sanctions and re-entry into the global economy may well help to alleviate some of the economic problems in the country which are believed to be behind recent protest movements in the country. It must be noted however that the lifting of sanctions will generate a revival in Iranian expectations for quality of life. If the government fails to deliver these quickly enough, then this could further add to the disillusionment in the country.

Aside from any adherence to a new nuclear deal, however, there will be little substantive change in Iranian foreign policy. Hardliners such as Raisi are confrontational with the west. Thus, deals will be harder to strike, and there will be less appetite for reigning-in Iranian proxies in the Middle East. Indeed, in a press conference Raisi gave on 21 June, he stated that he was not willing to negotiate on the subject of Iran's support for what he called "regional militias". These include the Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthis to name three major ones. It is even possible that as Saudi and Iran continue negotiations designed to reduce tensions between them, Iran could boost support to the Houthis in Yemen, who are currently winning, to try and put pressure on the Saudi Arabian negotiators. With the hardliners now in control of all major branches of government, it is more likely that any agreement reached between Iran and other countries will last longer than any reached under Rouhani may have done.

Due to the potential that Raisi could replace Khamenei as Supreme Leader, it is likely that his presidency will also be seen as very risk-averse. There may be moves to reduce tensions, and improve quality of life, however, his main aim will be to avoid any unnecessary risk that could dent his chances of succeeding Khamenei as Supreme Leader. However, previous Presidents, even those who were initially supported by the Iranian populace have found the position of President to be a poisoned chalice. As a result, many have left office with their reputation and popularity destroyed. Raisi, elected on a low turnout, could well fall foul of this dynamic, which would likely ruin his chances of becoming the next Supreme Leader.

The fact that the election generated such a low turnout and had such a high number of spoilt ballots can be taken as indicative of widespread discontent with the system. If the guardian council can so blatantly engineer elections, to exclude moderates and reformists, it may spark further disillusionment with the system as it stands today. Any potential increased repression of civil society in the aftermath of such an election will likely only further serve to add to this disillusionment.

The country's largest ever protests occurred between November 2019 and July 2020 over issues ranging from opposition to the regime, corruption, poverty and widespread human rights abuses. These were crushed with over 1,500 dead and the internet shut down for nearly a week. Despite this 2021 has seen numerous protests across the country, which are often violently suppressed. The widespread nature and regularity of the protests currently help to illustrate the febrile atmosphere of the country. These elections are likely to only add to this atmosphere.

If the disillusionment continues to rise, Iranians may decide that they cannot reform their system peacefully through the ballot box. They may once again look to protests and uprisings. These have previously been brutally crushed by the Iranian regime, including by Raisi, and it is likely that such an outcome would occur again. Yet, the gap between the regime and society will remain, and as a result, further repression will be required to keep the system in place. Indeed, the election of Raisi could almost be seen as a warning from the regime to Iranian society about the consequences they will face if they try and protest too much.



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