

Raisi's Landslide Victory Could be Turning Point for Islamic Republic

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The landslide election of Ebrahim Raisi as 8th president of Iran could be a turning point for the Islamic Republic. The landslide victory for the ultra-conservative former chief justice and protege of supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei could lead to an overhaul of the framework put in place when the two-tier regime was established in 1979. This structure imposed powerful clerical institutions on elected presidents and parliaments.

The clerical institutions dominated by the valayat-e-faqih, the "guardianship of the Islamic jurist", i.e., the supreme leader, includes the 12-main appointed Guardian Council which vets all candidates for office, and the 88-member elected Assembly of experts which chooses the supreme leader. Vetted candidates of the latter body are popularly elected for eight-year terms.

While this body was originally empowered to debate and even reject candidates for the all-important post of supreme leader, the Assembly now rubber stamps whoever is chosen. Consequently, the rule of the clerics has been exercised by the appointed supreme leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Guardian Council.

Ahead of previous presidential elections, the Guardian Council permitted prominent political figures and moderates to stand, but for last Friday's poll only seven of nearly 600 potential candidates were qualified: Five conservatives and two low profile moderate/reformists. Only Raisi was widely recognised because, at Khamenei's instigation, he ran in the 2017 presidential race and was roundly defeated by Hassan Rouhani who was standing for his second term. He took 57 per cent of the votes in a turn-out of 73 per cent. Raisi only took 38 per cent.

He was guaranteed to win this time around. As many Iranians considered the outcome of the election predetermined, some boycotted while others did not bother to vote. Raisi secured 62 per cent of the vote far ahead of his challengers in a turn-out of 48 per cent, the lowest since the founding of the Islamic Republic. Twelve per cent, the second largest number of ballots were spoiled, twice that in any other previous election. If spoiled ballots are counted, the turn-out would be reduced to 36 per cent.

Iran's clerical establishment is unphased by the lack of competitiveness and low turn-out which reduce the popular legitimacy of this presidential election because electing Raisi could set the stage for implementing a plan he suggested during his campaign when he called for a "fundamental change in the executive management of the country".

With his election, the clerical regime, which now controls all the levers of power in Iran, set in train its plan to achieve this goal. The presidency will groom Raisi to succeed Khamenei, a fragile 82, in the post of supreme leader. He has a compelling personal reason for elevating Raisi, a trusted confidant. Khamenei is determined to protect and provide for his family. Once out of office Iranian politicians and members of their families have been muzzled, marginalised and confined under house arrest.

On the internal level, Iran experts predict Raisi could propose the transformation of the system of governance from a presidential system to a parliamentary system. This would reduce the already waning influence of the "republicans", Iranians who seek to use elections to check the power of the clerics and make it easier for loyalist conservatives to win comfortable majorities in parliament and choose prime ministers favoured by the clerical establishment.

Although an untra-conservative, Raisi is also a pragmatist. He has promised to tackle corruption. In this endeavour he has some experience. As chief justice he has accused and prosecuted a number of individuals for graft but, his detractors, argue that those targeted are critical of the regime. Therefore, if he is serious, he will have to be even handed and cite powerful members and supporters of the regime.

He has also pledged to provide a safety net for the poor and the stressed middle class hit hard by the collapsing economy. If he is to avoid large-scale protests like those of 2019, he will have to deliver on this promise.

In order to prevent protests by young Iranians who have benefitted from relaxations instituted by the moderates, he will have to resist pressure from his conservative base to reinstate social restrictions and limitations on cultural activities.

On the external level, Raisi can be expected to adhere to the political line laid down by his mentor, Khamenei. Unlike many ultra-conservatives, Raisi supports the 2015 nuclear agreement for limiting Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for lifting sanctions and has pledged to carry on with negotiations until the deal is restored. Without Khamenei's backing it would never have been reached or preserved after Donald Trump's 2018 abandonment and imposition of 1,500 punitive sanctions. Until sanctions are lifted or seriously reduced, Iran's economy cannot recover.

Raisi will pursue relations with China and Russia as well as to carry on with reconciliation talks with the Emirates and Saudi Arabia with the aim of regularising relations with regional powers. He will continue to back Iran's allies, Hizbollah in Lebanon, Shia militias in Iraq, and the Syrian government. He will push for a deal to end the war in Yemen which favours the Houthi rebels. Raisi will not pursue ties with the US.

The conservative clerics might not have made their power grab if US President Joe Biden had made good on his promise to return the US to the nuclear deal well before May 25 when the Guardian Council announced the names of the seven candidates it had approved to run for the presidency. If Biden had done this while President Hassan Rouhani was still in charge

of the nuclear file and had begun to ease sanctions, the Council might have included high profile moderates among the candidates and one or other might have defeated Raisi. Biden procrastinated and prevaricated and will now have to face a hard-line Iranian president fronting for the supreme leader.

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Featured image: Raisi speaking at a presidential campaign rally in Tehran's Shahid Shiroudi Stadium (CC BY 4.0)

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