

**Position Paper**

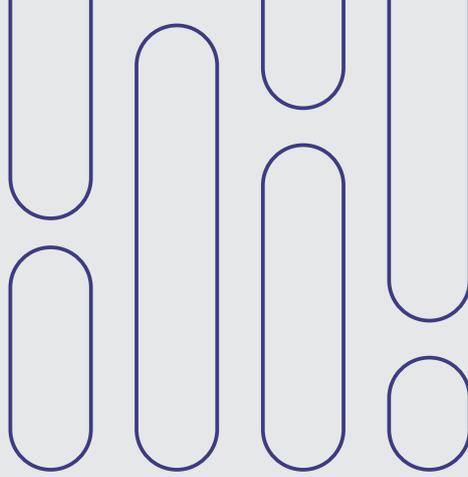
# Iran's Presidential Elections: Results and Implications

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**RASANAHA**  
المعهد الدولي للدراسات الإيرانية  
International Institute for Iranian Studies



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## **Introduction:**

Under internal and external pressures, Iran's political system held its presidential elections on June 18, 2021. The seemingly already determined result showed that "hardline" cleric Ebrahim Raisi won the election. This election was of particular importance due to the developments taking place inside and outside Iran. Therefore, its result will have an important impact on the overall situation whether on Iranians at home or on Iran's foreign relations. This report will highlight the most important developments regarding the election, its results and its implications inside and outside Iran.

## **I- Iran's Presidential Election and Crisis Dimensions**

The presidential election took place under critical internal conditions as the country continues to suffer from isolation and siege in the aftermath of US sanctions and the Rouhani government's failure to fulfill its promises. These critical conditions have led to competition intensifying between the two political "currents" of Iran's political system: the "hardliners" and "reformists." The "hardliners" sharply criticized President Hassan Rouhani and the "reformists" and held them responsible for the negative impact of the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal as well as for the failure of the deal. They also exploited the external pressure facing Iran to thwart his policies and his government's goals, notably his attempt to reduce the dominant role of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in the country's economic sector. However, the IRGC's role expanded in managing the economic crisis after the reimposition of the sanctions on Iran. The country's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei along with parallel institutions used their authority to criticize Rouhani and his government, to force changes in the government's personnel, to amend some "resistance economy" policies and to adopt a policy of confrontation and mu-

tual escalation in dealing with external pressure. Examples of this policy of provocation include reducing Iran's nuclear commitments, enriching uranium to 60 percent purity and hindering International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspection missions. The "reformists" on the other hand leveled criticism at the "hard-liner" current, sometimes including the supreme leader and parallel institutions, over policies that negatively impacted public expenditure, hence leading to economic conditions deteriorating. This ultimately led to the weakening of Rouhani and the "reformists" and the strengthening of the supreme leader and the IRGC. The crisis culminated after the Rouhani government intensified its criticism of the supreme leader and Iran's parallel institutions because they had prevented the government from implementing its programs and plans. This was evident in Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif's leaked audio in which he criticized the IRGC and the marginal role assigned to the Foreign Ministry regarding making decisions in relation to foreign issues. The "conservatives" also blamed Rouhani and his government, attributing the home front's deterioration in Iran to Rouhani's confidence in the West and his dependence on the nuclear deal to address the country's crises. Iran's economic and social situation is worsening due to the reimposition of US sanctions and the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic and the government's mismanagement of this health crisis. Outside Iran, the sanctions on Iran have not been lifted, however, former US President Donald Trump's departure and President Joe Biden's arrival has provided an important opportunity for the sanctions to be lifted on Iran. This is against the backdrop of Russian and Chinese support for Tehran, and the European desire to revive the nuclear deal. Furthermore, diplomacy is once again playing an important role. The Rouhani government has shown

openness to indirect talks with Washington to return to the nuclear deal and to save its face by improving its internal position against the “conservatives.” The latter has sought to derail the nuclear talks to deprive the “reformists” of any popular benefits which would boost their position ahead of the presidential election.

The election took place amid the Vienna negotiations but their future is ambiguous. The current talks are experiencing a gap between the two sides (Iran and the United States). Iran looks forward to the US sanctions being lifted before it returns to its nuclear obligations and wants guarantees that it will not be subject to sanctions once again; this is unacceptable for the United States. There was a desire to resolve the nuclear issue with Iran prior to the presidential election so that its outcome does not impact the course of the negotiations, particularly as the Rouhani government was flexible and open towards the negotiations. This, however, did not happen.

The election also took place during heightened tensions with neighboring countries, particularly the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. These tensions were very costly for Iran as they led to further deterioration on the home front in light of Iran’s regional interventions.

In the meantime, all countries are hoping that Tehran genuinely reverses its policies to defuse tensions and restore regional stability, thereby benefiting all regional countries and peoples.

## **II- Iran’s Authoritarian “Engineered” Presidential Election and Priorities of Electoral Participation**

The clerical political system in Iran concentrates power in the hands of the supreme leader and its unelected institutions or the so-called parallel institutions. Iran’s Guardian Council is the supreme leader’s effective tool to control the election and to ensure

that its outcome does not change his revolutionary aims and orientations.

Iran's "hardliners" have recently dominated all decision-making institutions as all the "reformists" were disqualified from the parliamentary election in February 2020 by the Guardian Council, empowering the "conservatives" to take over the Parliament. The same scenario was repeated in the presidential election in which most prominent "reformist" figures were excluded. "Reformist" candidate Eshaq Jahangiri along with eight other "reformists" were disqualified from contesting the election. To ensure that the "hardliners'" preferred candidate would win the presidential race, two of the most prominent "hardliners" were also disqualified; former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the former Parliament speaker Ali Larijani.

This paved the way for Khamenei's preferred candidate, Ebrahim Raisi, to run against unpopular candidates who do not have a substantial electoral base. Raisi's engineered victory aims to preserve the political and economic interests of the "hardliners," notably the supreme leader and the IRGC. It also aims to uphold the country's political system in the face of internal and external pressure and to renew the revolutionary zeal which has recently declined.

On the other side, as the presidential elections were looming, the "reformists" were unable to agree on a specific candidate perhaps because of their disappointment with Rouhani who failed to fulfill his reform promises, and their frustration with the Guardian Council's decision as it disqualified the most prominent "reformist" candidates.

The lack of a specific candidate led to divisions among the "reformists" while the "conservatives" rallied round Raisi. 210 Parliament members in a statement called on Alireza Zakani,

AmirHossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, Mohsen Rezaee and Saeed Jalili to quit the race in favor of Raisi.

Alireza Zakani and Saeed Jalili dropped out of the race while other figures called on voters to boycott the election and promoted the “I will not vote” slogan, expressing their opposition to the election which they described as a political charade which was neither free nor fair.

Ahead of the election, Iran’s political elite was more keen to ensure a high voter turnout than to hold an impartial and competitive election. This is because elections have been important to the ruling political system in Iran ever since the 1979 revolution. Elections are tools to strengthen political legitimacy for the ruling class and maintain its interests. Therefore, even though the election was engineered for a particular candidate, all the disqualified candidates, whether by the Guardian Council or through other means, called on the public to participate in the elections. “Despite all the grievances, one should think about the future of Iran, the country and the system and go to the ballot boxes to protect the republic,” said Eshaq Jahangiri in a tweet on June 16. Similarly, Larijani, Zarif and Rouhani encouraged voters to cast their votes. Rouhani believes that participation in the election is a way to defend the republic, the Constitution and Khomeini’s legacy. Former President Mohammad Khatami also called on the Iranian people to vote in the election. Even Mehdi Karroubi, who has been under house arrest since 2009, voted in favor of Abdolnasser Hemmati while only Ahmadinejad tweeted that he was boycotting the election.

### **III- The Results and Implications of the Election**

The results of the already-engineered uncompetitive election showed that Ebrahim Raisi won the presidential race with 17.9 million votes equaling 61.95 percent of the votes. The votes indi-

cated that Raisi was far ahead of his competitors. These results were largely expected.

**Table 1: The Number of Votes Won by Iran’s Presidential Candidates and the Invalid Blank Votes**

No	Candidates	Total number of votes	Percentage
1	Ebrahim Raisi	17926345	61,95%
2	Mohsen Rezaee	3412712	11,79%
3	Abdolnasser Hemmati	2427201	8,38%
4	Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi	999718	3,45%
5	The invalid and blank votes	3726870	12,88%

**Source:** <https://bit.ly/3qfLc10>

Voter turnout reached 48.8 percent. Of 59,310,307 eligible Iranian voters, only 28.8 million voters headed to the polls — the lowest turnout in the history of Iran’s presidential election since the 1979 revolution. The last lowest voter turnout was seen in the 1993 elections when the turnout reached 50.6 percent. And if we compare the results with the previous presidential election held in 2017 — when Hassan Rouhani won—with a voter turnout of over 73 percent, we find that the voter turnout declined by 25 percent.

In fact, holding local elections to coincide with the presidential election was supposed to draw people to the ballot box, especially in the rural areas and regions that have overlapping ethnic and sectarian makeup. This was expected to significantly increase voter turnout. But the low voter turnout reveals the significant decline in the political system’s legitimacy and the state of popular indifference — and perhaps the frustration with the political and economic circumstances — especially if we take into account that the political system in Iran considered this election to be a

referendum regarding its popularity.

However, the results indicated an unprecedented surge in the number of blank votes, with voters leaving the ballot papers blank without voting for any of the designated candidates.

According to the Ministry of Interior, the number of blank votes — let alone the invalid ballots — reached 3.7 million votes, making up about 13 percent of the total votes. This means that the total number of blank votes surpassed the votes won by Mohsen Rezaei who came in second behind Ebrahim Raisi — which sparked irony across Iranian society as the blank and invalid votes were considered to have won second place behind Raisi.

What explains this phenomenon is that some voters decided to partake in the election, but favored none of the four candidates. So, they decided to leave the ballots blank in protest at the disqualification of their preferred candidates. Some also said that voters cast blank papers inside the ballot boxes — which means they elected none of the candidates — to avoid a crackdown or face accusations of abstaining from voting or hostility towards the political system. Some institutions even forced their workers to cast their votes.

Some also feared that they would be dismissed, deprived of privileges offered by their institutions of employment or deprived of job opportunities. Finally, there is another factor behind the low voter turnout which is that Iran's presidential election coincided with the local elections. Some sources said that many had no intention to cast their votes in the presidential election, instead they headed to the local polls to cast their votes — on a totally local services-centered agenda. However, the authorities forced them to vote in the presidential election as well. Therefore, many of them deliberately left the ballot papers blank in protest at the authorities forcing them to vote.

In fact, deducting the percentage of these blank votes — which amounted to 13 percent of the total voter turnout of 48.8 percent — reveals the scope of dissatisfaction with the designated candidates on the ballot paper and the dissatisfaction with the political system in its entirety.

These blank votes also reveal the failure of the political system to rally and mobilize the Iranian people despite utilizing all its capacity and tools to push voters to partake in the election.

Given that elections in Iran are a popular referendum on the political system —not a real competitive process—and that Parliament is not effective in policymaking, this voter turnout percentage indicates that the political system's support base is declining. It is the lowest turnout since the revolution broke out in 1979. This low turnout is related to the preceding social mobilization and widespread protests — most recently the protests against fuel price hikes in November 2019 and the protests that followed the downing of the Ukrainian commercial airliner in January 2020.

#### **IV- The Consequences of Electing Raisi**

There is no doubt that one of the main functions of any election is to quell social tensions and contain the anger of the masses. But given the authoritarian engineering of the election and its objective to empower the ruling class in Iran, the political system's legitimacy will continue to be questioned, especially since the president-elect represents the Iranian political system's repressive apparatuses which continue to oppress and silence the Iranian people.

Raisi's human rights record clearly indicates there will be no reforms at home, rather more crackdowns will be witnessed.

He is accused of participating in the so-called "Death Committee" which ordered the mass execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. He was also among the supporters — during the

2009 disputed presidential election — of the brutal crackdowns following the election.

His campaign managers suggested “limiting access to the internet.”

He is also depended on to limit the waves of change and Westernization, especially among young men — as the political system considers these two processes to be threatening to the Iranian revolution’s foundations and pillars.

At the economic level, it is expected that Raisi will not make substantial economic reforms. He reflects the viewpoint of Iran’s dominating economic powers, especially the IRGC and parallel economic institutions. He was previously appointed by Khamenei to head Astan Quds Razavi — a charitable foundation with assets amounting to billions of US dollars. From 2016, he held this position for three years. Raisi believes that the home front’s situation has nothing to do with the sanctions but is related to domestic mismanagement.

Raisi is likely to adhere to the supreme leader’s line and will be his shadow in the presidency, especially as he is considered as a potential successor to Khamenei. He has recently been elevated to the rank of ayatollah, which means he will avoid the crisis experienced by Khamenei when the political system’s institutions selected him for the supreme leader’s position even though his religious credentials were not suitable for this position.

Hence, Raisi’s efforts will be focused on making Iran more “Islamic” and less “republican” through solidifying Velayat-e Faqih and following in the footsteps of the country’s two supreme leaders to cement his position. He will also be close to the “hard-line” factions such as the clerics and the IRGC, both of which have tremendous influence in selecting Khamenei’s successor.

By selecting Raisi, the supreme leader has managed to avoid crit-

icism such as the criticism leveled at him by former presidents — whether “conservatives” or “reformists.” Many former presidents had serious disagreements with him during their tenures in office. They protested against the interference of the supreme leader’s foundation in their affairs. Others also complained — such as the outgoing President Hassan Rouhani — of the little powers granted to them.

As for the outside world, Raisi will adhere to the well-established principles of the political system when it comes to foreign policy. Perhaps he will take a hard line in relation to the negotiations and Iran’s relationship with the United States as he embodies Iran’s revolutionary zeal and its uncompromising foreign policy stance. This could prompt the United States and Europe to quicken the pace of the negotiations to craft a deal before Rouhani leaves office. This would surely be a reckless misadventure that will give Raisi and the “hardliners” justification to uphold their hostile positions without making any substantial concessions.

This scenario could see Raisi have a prepared agreement — for which he will bear no consequences but will reap the benefits — to improve the image of the conservative movement. But should the negotiations be postponed, Raisi might be compelled to keep the door open for dialogue with the West as well as the negotiations over returning to the nuclear deal. However, he will be more reserved than Rouhani and will — in the end — fulfill the desires of the supreme leader and the IRGC. Hence, his government will pursue a harsh position regarding Iranian demands such as lifting US sanctions first and verifying that sanctions will not be imposed again. This is added to asking for guarantees that the United States will not pull out of the nuclear deal again. These demands are likely to prolong the negotiations.

Raisi needs to urgently address the economic crisis to maintain

the legitimacy of the religious ruling class. Hence, he may display some degree of flexibility, especially since a return to the nuclear deal will boost his legitimacy and allow the political system to regain some of its declining popularity — especially if the sanctions are lifted and there is an inflow of tens of billions of dollars resulting from Iran’s overseas assets being unblocked and the ability to resume the export of oil, petrochemicals, minerals and other Iranian items.

But there is a fear that his positions could be an obstacle to foreign investors flocking to Iran in case the country returns to the nuclear deal as there is much uncertainty surrounding his foreign policy as he did not discuss his positions during his electoral campaign.

Even with Iran returning to the nuclear deal, there will be red lines imposed by the Raisi government that hinder the United States from making important economic gains. Iran under his government will depend more on China and Russia and have less desire to be open to the West and the United States. This is in line with his ideological orientations which are sponsored by the supreme leader and the IRGC. His orientations are driven by the principles of the revolution and he was elected to ensure their continuity. Moreover, given the policy of “turning towards the East” which the government has recently pursued, Raisi will continue Iran’s movement towards Russia and China.

Iran’s position towards the regional powers will continue to hinge on developments related to the nuclear deal as well as international and regional pressure aimed at curbing its behavior. Without this pressure, Raisi will be inclined towards the IRGC and the “hardliners” in adopting a regional policy driven by sectarian tendencies to achieve Iran’s ambition of becoming an influential regional power. This will be met with a harsher regional stance.

Anyway, the ball is now in the court of the “hardliners” who are dominating the scene and upholding their control over the three branches of power.

The blame placed on Rouhani for his failed economic plans and his bad bet on the nuclear deal is now thrown to the coffers of the “hardliners.” Will their policy succeed in stopping the decline in the political system’s legitimacy? Can they lay out an approach to counter external pressure and reconsider their regional policies and relationship with the United States, ridding Iran of the decline in the legitimacy which is an unprecedented threat to the political system? Or will they continue to adopt the ideological principles derived from Velayat-e Faqih?

