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Back to the Future in Iran: Political and Policy Implications of the 2021 Presidential Elections

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The election of Ebrahim Raisi will likely herald a change in the style of Iranian politics but not its substance. The consummate insider, more than anything else Raisi's election signals a continuation of the Islamic Republic's core ideals. Neither the overall nature of Iranian politics nor the policy objectives of the Islamic Republic are likely to change in the near future. Moreover, Raisi's election portends a strengthening of Khamenei's legacy for Iran. The new president comes to office amid a wave of voter apathy and general disenchantment with the political system. Unless conditions improve, especially in the economy and in Iran's foreign relations, Raisi, and Khamenei along with him, will find himself governing over a population that is not just detached from the political process but in fact resents, and could perhaps even resist, those in power.

What the Election Means

The impulse of hybrid authoritarian systems leans toward a further constraining of whatever political space is available, and in the lead up to the election, the Guardian Council, whose job is to filter candidates for election, ensured that Raisi would be the only electable candidate. The election brought a level of uniformity to the institutional domination of the system not seen since the end of the 1980s. Theoretically at least, most, if not all, of the factions were represented in the elections.

At the broadest level, factional alignments in Iran can be divided into the three general groupings of reformists, centrists, and the right. The reformists, who enjoyed considerable popular support from the mid-1990s to the late 2000s, have now been effectively purged from all key institutions of the state and reformist candidates have consistently been barred by the Guardian Council from competing in parliamentary and presidential elections. But to blame the reformists' political misfortunes entirely on the Guardian Council or on the entrenched orthodoxy of the Islamic Republic is to overlook their own lack of internal ideological and organizational cohesion.

As their designation implies, Iran's "reformists" are just that – a loose collection of political activists, intellectuals, and technocrats who endorse the broader ideals of the revolution but believe the current political system needs to be reformed. Within this loose collection there is little or no consensus on precisely what needs to be changed and reformed, in what direction and how, or toward what end. In specific political junctions, charismatic individuals have galvanized the electorate and have managed to give credence of vaguely reformist ideals, as was done by President Mohammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005 and in the 2009 presidential campaign by former Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi. But the reformists have consistently failed to articulate a comprehensive political platform or party organizations that would articulate, advance, and explain those platforms to intended audiences.

The center of the Iranian political spectrum is occupied by developmentalist technocrats who were inspired by the ideas of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and from whose ranks President Rouhani and much of his cabinet were drawn. Represented by the Kargozaran-e Sazandegi (Executives of Construction) Party, this group advocates the pursuit of "moderate" policies in the domestic and



international arenas, market economics, and a greater opening of the social and political arenas. The Kargozaran were able to get one of their candidates for the presidency through the Guardian Council, the former governor of the Central Bank, Abdolnaser Hemmati. Hemmati, however, proved to be an extremely uninspiring candidate and a poor campaigner, and in the end was unable to get more than eight percent of the popular vote.

Groups on the right of the political spectrum, collectively called “principlists” for their firm belief in the original principles of the revolution, are divided into a “new right” and a “traditional right.” The new right is made of second and third generation revolutionaries, many with backgrounds in the Revolutionary Guards, who often call for direct cash transfers and other similarly populist initiatives. Perhaps the most well-known representative of the new right is former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose protégé in the 2021 elections, Saeed Jalili, did very poorly in the polls and therefore withdrew before the election in favor of Raisi. Raisi, and most notably Khamenei, represent the traditional right. The traditional right is defined by its unquestioning loyalty to the notion of *velayat-e faqih*, its advocacy of free market, and its animosity toward and mistrust of the United States. The ideals of the traditional right are anchored in the views and perspectives of the state’s founder, Ayatollah Khomeini, and, after Khomeini, those of his successor, Ali Khamenei. Today, Khamenei and the political-ideological current that follows him represent the Islamic Republic’s orthodoxy. Khamenei is literally one of the last individuals still around that grew out of Khomeini’s inner circle. And of all the possible candidates, Raisi is politically and ideologically closest to Khamenei. The Guardian Council’s engineering of the elections to ensure a Raisi’s presidency is an attempt to preserve Khamenei’s legacy and to protect the political and ideological orthodoxy of the Islamic Republic.

Policy Changes and Continuities

Viewed in this light, Raisi’s election is unlikely to result in dramatic shifts in Iranian politics or, for that matter, in government policies. This likely continuity in Iranian politics and policies can be attributed to three main factors. First, not only are Khamenei and Raisi ideologically and politically on the same page, Raisi appears to be Khamenei’s protégé and of the individuals whom Khamenei has been promoting to positions of power in order to safeguard his own legacy. In 2019, on the fortieth anniversary of the revolution, Khamenei announced what he called the revolution’s “second step,” meant to protect the revolution’s ideals and to facilitate their continued attainment in the years to come. As part of this “second step,” Khamenei started appointing younger and ideologically more committed Friday Prayer Imams as his provincial representatives, and also ensuring that individuals like Raisi continued to advance within the system. After Raisi lost to Rouhani in the 2017 presidential elections, Khamenei appointed him as the head of the judiciary. Raisi went on to duly purge the judiciary of judges alleged to have been corrupt. The replacement judges, no doubt, were ideologically vetted to ensure the “correctness” of their views.



A second factor ensuring continuity is the steady rise in Khamenei's personal involvement in state politics, something that shows no signs of a reversal. After the contested presidential elections of 2009 and especially during Ahmadinejad's tumultuous second term in office, Khamenei became increasingly more involved in the overall operations of the government and in shaping many of the foreign and domestic policies coming out of Tehran. Significantly, Raisi's election represents the first time in post-Khomeini Iran when the president's ideological dispositions and priorities are perfectly aligned with those of the *velayat-e faqih*. Rafsanjani, to whom Khamenei owed his elevation to the position of *velayat-e faqih*, was a political heavyweight in his own right and later in life seen as the polar opposite of Khamenei. Khatami personified a reform movement whose goals included limiting the absolute powers of the *velayat-e faqih*. Ahmadinejad, representing the new right, was a populist loose cannon whose unabashed advocacy of Mahdism Khamenei found distasteful and unsettling. Rouhani, always careful not to alienate Khamenei, still managed to retain a level of institutional independence and autonomy for the presidency.

Although Raisi has yet to assume office, all indications are that his presidential agendas will be most closely aligned with those of Khamenei than any of the other presidential agendas have been. At the very least, for the first time in the post-Khomeini era, both individuals belong firmly to the traditional right, and neither their general outlooks nor their views on the future direction of the system are likely to differ.

A third and final reason for the likely continuity of the Islamic Republic's policies under a Raisi presidency has to do with the institutions through which foreign and security policies are made in the Islamic Republic. Practically all major domestic, security, and foreign policy decisions are extensively deliberated, debated, and formulated within the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). The membership of the SNSC includes heads of the three government branches, senior IRGC commanders, and, significantly, representatives from Khamenei's office, along with a number of cabinet ministers. Over the years, despite changes to personalities and governing styles, the SNSC has been a source of consistency and continuity insofar as major state decisions – such as the nuclear negotiations or posture toward the United States – are concerned. The president and his foreign policy team may change, but the basic functions and policy outputs of the SNSC have remained largely consistent.

In the domestic arena, Raisi will most likely continue with his anti-corruption drive that he started as head of the judiciary. Common assumptions about a contraction of social and political space may not all prove true, as Iranian society is far too complex and multilayered to be easily molded into the ideological constrictions of the traditional right. There are also unlikely to be major changes in the economy, although any reductions in sanctions will quickly translate into greater capital being available in the markets. Rhetorical homage to “social justice” notwithstanding, any potential poverty alleviation programs are likely to take a backseat to the state's aggressive privatization policies of recent decades.

In foreign policy, Raisi has already indicated his support for the nuclear negotiations and the JCPOA. He has also gone out of his way to express his eagerness to improve Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia.



This signals a continuation of an outreach campaign started by the Rouhani administration through which Iran sought to reduce tensions with Saudi Arabia and the UAE. At the same time, again reflecting the broader policy of the Islamic Republic, Raisi has indicated that Iran's missile program and its relationships with regional non-state actors in places such as Iraq and Syria are non-negotiable.

Importantly, Iran's relations with its Arab neighbors are conditions as much by the actions of the United States in the region as they are a product of domestic policy priorities. The precise nature of some of Iran's more strategic relationships – for example with its militia proxies in Iraq and Syria, with Saudi Arabia, with the rest of the GCC, and the Houthis – is therefore contingent on what the United States also does in relation to each of these actors. Under Raisi or anyone else, Iran will respond to threats and opportunities much the same way as it has done in the past: meeting threats with threats rather than with retreat; playing the long game and refusing to be drawn into no-win situations; and capitalizing on opportunities when and if they arise. These strategies are unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

The Main Takeaways

Recording the lowest voter turnout of any presidential elections, the 2021 elections clearly demonstrated that the Islamic Republic has a legitimacy problem. In each of the two previous presidential elections, in 2013 and 2017, some 73 percent of eligible voters participated. In 2009, voter turnout was higher than 85 percent. In 2021, by contrast, official figures put voter turnout at less than 49 percent, with the actual percentage assumed to be much lower. The geographic distribution of the vote is also quite revealing. As in previous elections, voter turnout was highest in the less developed, more rural provinces (65 percent in Sistan and Baluchistan, 63 percent in Ilam, 62 percent in Kohgiluyeh and Boyer-Ahmad), and lowest in more urbanized areas (24 percent in Greater Tehran). Given that these elections were both for the presidency and for municipal councils, the higher turnout in less developed regions can be explained by the greater importance attached in these areas to local elections, where clan and kinship ties are mobilized to secure access to local resources. Significantly, while Raisi received nearly 62 percent of all the votes cast, the second highest percentage of the votes, close to 13 percent, were blank or invalid. One explanation is that people voted for municipal councils but not for the presidential candidates. Another explanation, put forward by reformists, is that the system as a whole is still considered legitimate by a sizeable segment of the electorate but its presidential elections are not.

With the legitimacy of the political system at such a low point, now the principlists, who are in control of all the key institutions of the state, have no option but to improve the lives of ordinary Iranians. The Iranian economy is far from being in a state of collapse, but it is also far from being healthy. If the sanctions are not removed soon and the economy does not begin to show signs of improvement – inflation curbed, rising unemployment and underemployment reversed, the currency strengthened, industrial output increased – whatever vestige of legitimacy the Islamic Republic still has left will



soon evaporate. For the Islamic Republic to retain whatever is left of its republican nature and not to become a complete dictatorship, improving the economy is an urgent necessity.

In Iran's relations with the rest of the world and especially with its neighbors, perhaps the biggest takeaway is that now Iran speaks with one voice. The Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, often dismissed overtures by President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif because, they argued, the moderates did not speak for Khamenei and his praetorians, the Revolutionary Guards. With Raisi as president, this apparent dichotomy, which was false to begin with, can no longer be assumed. Ironically, the rightist ideological uniformity of the Iranian system may now very well result in positive outcomes for regional peace and stability.