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# Iran's Unexpected 2024 Presidential Election

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On July 5, 2024, Iranians went to the ballot box to elect a new president following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on May 19. With one exception, recent presidential elections in Iran have been full of surprises, and the 2024 elections did not disappoint. The one exception occurred in 2021, when the country's hybrid authoritarian system reverted to its authoritarian impulse and ensured the election of Ebrahim Raisi, at the time the head of the judiciary and the establishment's candidate. Following Raisi's death, only three years into his tenure in office, Iranians originally went to the polls on June 28, 2024, to take part in the fourteenth presidential election of the Islamic Republic since the success of the 1978 - 1979 revolution. With none of the four candidates securing the necessary 50 percent of the votes, the elections went to a second round held a week later. In a contest that went to the wire and remained unpredictable to the very end, Masoud Pezeshkian emerged victorious with 53 percent of the votes.

This brief essay examines the candidates running for the Islamic Republic's second highest office, the issues they raised in their respective campaigns, and their efforts to attract voters. The essay starts with a summary of the significance of Raisi's death for the Islamic Republic and the system's efforts at crisis management, followed by a brief history of presidential elections in the Islamic Republic's forty-five-year history. The essay ends with a discussion of the 2024 elections and offers a few thoughts on what might be expected from President Pezeshkian's new administration.

## *The Death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi*

The death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi was not the first time that Iran loses a serving president while in office. Early in the life of the Islamic Republic, in August 1981, President Mohammad Ali Rajai and Prime Minister Mohammad Javad Bahonar were both killed in a terrorist bombing in Tehran. Today, the Islamic Republic has consolidated itself in power and feels far more secure in dealing with the loss of its president during his tenure. In fact, the Iranian state has proven itself quite adept at crisis management, by some accounts better at pulling the country through crises than in running it in normal times.

In the immediate aftermath of Raisi's death, there were no frontrunners in the presidential elections that, according to the constitution, must be held no more than 50 days after the office of the president has been vacated. The government provided a two-week window for candidates to register to run in the elections, scheduled for June 28, 2024. The serving mayor of Tehran, Alireza Zakani, was the first high-profile official to declare his candidacy, and over the coming days a host of other aspiring political insiders soon joined him in the race for the presidency. One of the names that was thrust into the limelight was the current Acting President, Mohammad Mokhber, who was serving as Raisi's First Vice President. With a background in the Revolutionary Guards and other passable revolutionary credentials, Mokhber was assumed to emerge as a frontrunner if were to run. However, presumably due to a series of poor decisions he is alleged to have made while in the IRGC, among them the endorsement of a mechanical contraption that was supposed to detect Covid, he ultimately decided not to run.



Contrary to much speculation in the Western press, Raisi's death is unlikely to complicate the question of succession to the 85-year-old Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. Raisi's lackluster economic performance while in office, coupled with his consistent butchery of the Persian language whenever he gave public speeches, had ruled him out as a potential successor to Khamenei. Just as Khamenei was a surprise pick when he was elected to the position by the Assembly of Experts, the next Supreme Leader is also likely to be someone few observers expect.

On the foreign policy front, the loss of the Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, will no doubt be felt in Iranian diplomacy. A familiar face on the international scene, Amir-Abdollahian oversaw repairs to Iran's relations with Saudi Arabia and Azerbaijan, as well as a reduction of tensions with the Taliban government in Afghanistan. He was well-liked with the country's diplomatic corps. Although relations with the United States or Israel are unlikely to experience greater tensions than has already been the case, Amir-Abdollahian's departure will no doubt be reflected in Iranian diplomacy moving forward.

## *A Brief History of Presidential Elections in Iran*

For the Islamic Republic, parliamentary and presidential elections have historically been an integral part of the system's operation since 1979. The very first four presidential elections were held between 1980 and 1985 under rather extraordinary circumstances that featured revolutionary fervor, terrorist assassinations, and wartime, and therefore featured little or no real electoral competition between the candidates vying for office. In the 1989 and 1993 elections, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, former speaker of the parliament, also eased into office. In 1997, however, the nature of presidential elections unexpectedly changed with the election of a former culture minister named Mohammad Khatami whom few expected to be elected. Khatami handily beat his opponent, who was widely considered to be the "establishment's candidate," and went on to usher what came to be known as the reformist period in the Islamic Republic. Public debate, exchange of ideas, and "dialogue of civilizations" became the central tenets of the government's discourse, and the president excited throngs of urban middle classes in ways unseen since the revolution's earliest days. Not surprisingly, in 2001 Khatami beat his opponent with an even bigger percentage of the votes – 77 percent in 2001 as compared to 68 percent in 1997.

The lessons of Khatami's surprise election were not lost on the Islamic Republic's deep state. This deep state is comprised of the system's expansive security apparatus, the state media, and a series of institutional appendages that over time have been added on to ensure that the revolution evolves in the "right" direction, and is presided over by the state's highest authority, the Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. From that point on, the Guardian Council, which after the very first presidential election had given itself the authority to approve the final list of candidates, started to severely limit the pool of eligible candidates for both the presidency and the parliament.



Because some of those viewed as reformists came with impeccable revolutionary credentials and had been hardliners in the revolution's early years, the Guardian Council had no choice but to approve some of the individuals who were not the choice of the deep state. This happened in 2009, when former prime minister Mir-Hussein Mousavi, by now an ardent reformist, challenged hardline president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and again in 2013, when the long-time head of the Supreme National Security Council, Hassan Rouhani, successfully ran on a platform of “moderation” and inclusive politics. Similar to Khatami, Rouhani garnered more votes when he ran for re-election in 2017 – nearly 51 percent in 2013 and 57 percent in 2017.

Perhaps having been chastened by the experiences of the Khatami and Rouhani presidencies, in 2021 the Guardian Council decided to narrow the field of approved candidates even further in order to ensure that only those approved by the deep state could be elected. As a result, some of the state insiders who had hoped to run for the presidency – including former president Ahmadinejad and the longest-serving parliament speaker, Ali Larijani – were not approved in the Council's final list of candidates.

Despite the opacity and apparent randomness with which the Guardian Council approves or disqualifies candidates, those candidates who have survived the vetting process usually engage in very spirited campaigning for parliamentary office or the presidency. Historically, elections in the Islamic Republic have been bitterly contested, with candidates and their respective supporters going head-to-head in what often turn out to be fiercely fought campaigns. This was particularly the case in the election's second round.

## *The 2024 Elections*

The Guardian Council approved six of the eighty-one candidates who had hoped to become Iran's president. The approved candidates included five individuals generally assumed to belong to the right, commonly referred to as “Principlists” in Iran, and one “reformist”. The Principlist camp included the following individuals:

*Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf*, the speaker of the parliament and former mayor of Tehran;

*Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi*, former minister of interior (2005-2008) and justice minister (2013-2017);

*Saeed Jalili*, a former chief nuclear negotiator, and a close former ally of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad;

*Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh-Hashemi*, one of Raisi's vice presidents and a former long-time parliamentarian;

*Alireza Zakani*, former member of the parliament and current mayor of Tehran; and,

*Masoud Pezeshkian*, former health minister during the tenure of the “reformist” president Mohammad Khatami and himself considered as one of the few reformist parliamentarians.

During the election campaign, Pour-Mohammadi, Zakani, Ghazizadeh-Hashemi, and especially Jalili sought to present themselves as ideologically and politically aligned with the late President Raisi, and therefore promised to implement domestic, economic, and foreign policies that closely replicated those of the late president's administration. The campaign focused almost entirely on the state of the economy and how to address the country's manifold economic ills. As self-declared devotees of Raisi, Ghazizadeh-Hashemi, Jalili, and Zakani proposed a few new economic initiatives and promised a continuation of the previous administration's policies. In one form or another, they each maintained that the fundamentals of Iran's economy were pointing in the right direction and basically needed to be continued unchanged. None offered concrete plans for improving current economic conditions other than promising a continuation of existing trends, which, they maintained, will bear fruit given time.

Throughout the campaign, Ghazizadeh-Hashemi, a surgeon by training, portrayed himself as a devotee of Raisi and promised to follow the late president's policies more closely than any of the other competitors. His campaign slogan of establishing a "Government for the Iranian Family" rang hollow with most voters and failed to propel his candidacy into a serious threat to others. Surprisingly, while Pour-Mohammadi advocated the same line, he also emphasized the importance of professionalism and proper management technique. Without mentioning their names, he criticized candidates who minimized the devastating impact of sanctions on the lives of ordinary Iranians, i.e. essentially all others on the right, and emphasized the importance of re-establishing trust between youth and the political system. In the end, he was able to attract voters neither on the right nor the left, with the former being disenchanted by his fierce attacks on conservative candidates and the left not trusting his embrace of ostensibly reformist policies.

The importance of technocratic expertise was a point that Ghalibaf emphasized the most. When he was the mayor of Tehran, from 2005 to 2017, Ghalibaf presented himself as a capable, largely non-ideological technocrat. The former mayor was always considered a frontrunner. A perennial insider, and a three-time presidential candidate before, Ghalibaf was seen as the closest of all candidates to the Revolutionary Guards. During the Ahmadinejad years, he presented himself as a technocratic alternative to the highly ideological president. Later on, when Rouhani was president, Ghalibaf portrayed himself as an ideological stalwart of the right and a champion of conservatives within the establishment. Despite having been accused of several major financial scandals dating back to his time as Tehran mayor and now as Majlis speaker, Ghalibaf has survived the controversies supporting him and appeared to continue enjoying Khamenei's support.

The other frontrunner was Saeed Jalili, who, like all the other candidates, has been a political insider for decades, having been a veteran of the war with Iraq and later leading Iran's nuclear negotiating team during the Ahmadinejad years. A conservative traditionalist, Jalili's rhetoric and his campaign slogans were reminiscent of the early years of the revolution, highly ideological, and therefore often impractical insofar as the daily lives of average Iranians were concerned. When an interviewer asked



Jalili what his position on mandatory hijab was, for example, he responded with a philosophical non-answer that for a time became a meme on cyberspace. Jalili is considered a hardliner's hardliner, and, at least among many Iranian analysts, was seen as the conservative's choice in whose favor Zakani, Ghazizadeh-Hashemi, and Pour-Mohammadi would drop out at the last minute. Zakani and Ghazizadeh-Hashemi did drop out at the last minute, but Pour-Mohammadi stayed on.

Pezeshkian's campaign seemed nearly flawless, carefully crafted to appeal to the contradictory impulses and both the conservative and reformist factions of the Islamic Republic. An ethnic Azeri, Pezeshkian delivered many campaign speeches in Azeri, therefore exciting throngs of voters in Iran's northwest provinces. The former foreign minister Zarif, the architect of the 2015 nuclear deal and deeply popular with reformists, actively campaigned on Pezeshkian's behalf. Zarif's high-profile endorsement of Pezeshkian, and his speeches in support of the candidate, became important news items on Iranian cyberspace. Both former presidents Rouhani and Khatami also broke their long, meaningful political silence and issued statements in Pezeshkian's support.

On election day, June 28, the results were a surprise:

Pezeshkian:	8,302,577
Jalili:	7,189,756
Ghalibaf:	2,676,512
Pour-Mohammadi:	158,314

Overall, voter participation was reportedly 39.96 percent, lower than the historically low 48 percent of the eligible voters who took part in the 2021 presidential election. Only two provinces recorded higher voter turnout in 2024 as compared to 2021: voter turnout in Tehran province went from 34.4 percent in 2021 to 45 percent in 2024, and from 53.2 percent to 57 percent in Qom province. Significantly, in provinces assumed to go for Pezeshkian – East and West Azerbaijan, Kurdistan, Lorestan, and others – voter turnout was also lower in 2024 as compared to 2021.

The poor showing of Ghalibaf, who was rumored to have the backing of both Khamenei and the Revolutionary Guards, came as a surprise to many, who assumed that his slogans of development and proper management would resonate with the electorate. In the end, it appears as if the many scandals with which the Parliament Speaker has been associated with proved too much for the electorate to forgive.

For only the second time in the history of the Islamic Republic, the election went into the second round, with neither of the top candidates managing to secure more than 50 percent of the vote the first time. On July 5, 2024, Iranians went to the polls to pick one of two very different candidates: Masoud Pezeshkian versus Saeed Jalili. For Jalili, this was his fifth campaign, having run for the Majlis twice before and for the office of the president also on two previous occasions, always unsuccessfully.



Pezeshkian had sought to become a candidate for the presidency in 2021 but, ironically, was not successful in passing through the Guardian Council's vetting process.

As expected, most of the conservatives who had not succeeded in the first round threw their support behind Jalili. Of these, Ghalibaf's endorsement was considered the most important. Nevertheless, some of Ghalibaf's high-profile election workers, including the head of his campaign headquarters in Tehran, openly declared their support for Pezeshkian. Both candidates crisscrossed the country campaigning, giving speeches to throngs of supporters. Tellingly, Ahmadinejad, who earlier had been barred from running by the Guardian Council, did not endorse Jalili. During his presidency, Ahmadinejad appointed Jalili as Iran's chief nuclear negotiator, having also endorsed Jalili's bid for the presidency in 2013. Tehran's mayor Zakani, however, not only endorsed Jalili he was also rumored to have given the candidate access to many of the city's facilities to use in his campaign.

Especially in the second round, Jalili emphasized the importance of self-reliance, shoring up domestic economic production, and continuing to resist US and European pressures on Iran. Although Raisi had not appointed him to any official positions due to his alleged extremism, throughout the campaign Jalili portrayed himself as a close associate and devout follower of the former president. He criticized Pezeshkian for his promise to restart negotiations with the US and the European Union, and argued that Iran must instead focus on deepening diplomatic and commercial relations with its true friends in the East and on standing on its own feet.

While Jalili's campaign revolved around the continued emphasis on self-reliance, Pezeshkian promised to focus his presidency on the removal of sanctions against the country and on dialogue with adversaries. The rightist camp, he argued, had been responsible for having brought on the country ever-tougher sanctions, hostility with much of the world, a stifling domestic social environment, slow internet, and declining popular trust toward the political system. The former health minister promised to repair Iran's relations with the rest of the world, try and get at least some of the more punishing sanctions lifted, remove some of the restrictions on the country's cyberspace, and lift the country out of its current dire economic circumstances.

During the week between the first and second rounds of the elections, public opinion polls put the two candidates almost neck-and-neck, with some showing Jalili ahead by a couple of points while others favoring Pezeshkian. All of the polls also indicated that a sizeable chunk of the electorate, as much as 40 percent, had either decided not to vote or had not yet decided who to vote for. Going into the July 5 balloting, the election's outcome was far from certain.

On voting day, a steady stream of Iranians headed to voting stations set up across the country, and throughout the day long lines were reported in a number of stations. Almost everyone of the country's provinces registered increases in rates of voter participation. Importantly, voter participation across the country increased by 10 percent. As is usually the case, in order to accommodate a "second wave" of late voters, voting hours were extended first from 6:00 pm to 8:00 pm, then to 10:00 pm, and eventually until midnight. In the end, voter participation rate was put at 50 percent, with Pezeshkian securing 53 percent as compared to Jalili's 44 percent.

## *What to Expect*

Raisi's bland presidency had been a predictable continuation of his highly "engineered" election to the office. The former president delivered on only one of his two main campaign promises. One was fixing the country's broken economy, which under his tenure got only worse, and the other was controlling the Covid pandemic, whose decline was as much a product of the virus having run its course as it was due to the policies of the Raisi administration. There were, of course, some notable successes in Raisi's foreign policy pursuits, the most important of which were the good neighborly policy, as evident in the 2023 normalization of ties with Saudi Arabia, and the Look East policy, which, among other things, resulted in Iran's membership in the BRICS and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Other than these "successes," the Raisi presidency actually brought about a further contraction of political space, tougher enforcement of compulsory hijab rules in public spaces, and a far more conservative feel to Iran's body politic.

Pezeshkian's presidency is likely to mark a significant shift in the country's domestic politics. On the foreign policy front, the new president has already promised to nominate Mohammad Javad Zarif as his foreign minister. Zarif, who played a central role in mobilizing votes for Pezeshkian, has already echoed the new president's wish to revive the stalled negotiations with Western powers over the country's nuclear program. Along the same line, Pezeshkian has promised to work to ease some of the sanctions crippling the country's economy. More broadly, whereas Raisi had decoupled the economy from foreign policy, Pezeshkian has promised to intimately link the two once again, employing the country's foreign relations in ways that would best serve the economic needs of the people.

Significantly, two of Raisi's hallmark foreign policy achievements, namely the good neighborly relations and the "Look East" policy, are likely to continue at the same time as renewed attention to the West. For Iran, improved relations with its neighboring states, especially Azerbaijan to the north and Saudi Arabia to the south, are strategically far too important to abandon with a change in administration. How neighboring countries react to a supposedly reformist administration is important to watch. Saudi Arabia in particular often dismisses Iranian reformists as not having the system's full authority, assuming that only the conservatives are close to the Revolutionary Guards. This assumption is not always correct, resulting from an incomplete and inaccurate understanding of decision-making processes and institutions in the Islamic Republic. For now, all indications are that Raisi's foreign policy accomplishments will not be reversed under the new administration.

Domestically, Pezeshkian has to improve the economy by controlling the inflation rate, increasing people's purchasing power, and reversing the slide in the value of the national currency. Without noticeable and relatively quick improvements in the economy, Pezeshkian will have a difficult time gaining popular trust while in office. Almost immediately after the election results were announced, the Tehran Stock Market registered significant gains, more than making up for its steady slide during the election campaign due to the possibility of Jalili's election. This signifies the business community's

guarded optimism that the new president will improve economic conditions and the possibility of trade with the outside world.

The other pressing problem is the issue of mandatory hijab in public, about which the president cannot legally do anything. Nevertheless, Pezeshkian can relax some of the processes and methods of its enforcement, especially by curtailing the seemingly arbitrary powers of the so-called morality police. Along similar lines, the president is likely to lift some of the restrictions on the internet and loosen censorship in cyberspace, which have been among the main demands of the Iranian middle classes. In sum, Iranians are likely to witness a loosening of some of the social restrictions with which the Raisi presidency had become synonymous.

Perhaps the most important political development in contemporary Iran, the passing of the eighty-five-year-old Ayatollah Khamenei and the selection of a new Supreme Leader, will occur during Pezeshkian's presidency. In many respects, the political system has been preparing for its leadership succession at the highest level for some time. As in previous moments of transition and uncertainty, the system is likely to manage such a succession smoothly and without panic, having most likely already made plans, unknown to the public, for such an eventuality. As such, Pezeshkian's tenure in office will have historic significance for Iran.

The self-declared reformist president's election also represents a renewed opportunity for the system to regain some of its lost popular legitimacy. With a turnout of 49.8 percent, fewer voters turned out for the 2024 election than they had in 1997, 2001, 2005, 2009, 2013, or 2017. Nevertheless, by electing Pezeshkian, enough voters demonstrated that they have confidence in the system to reform itself. If the new president is able to deliver on most if not all of his promises – improvements in the economy and in relations with the West in particular – his presidency will mark a reversal in the Islamic Republic's legitimacy and an important period in the system's life, somewhat similar to the "reform era" of former president Khatami. Ultimately, the next four years, and perhaps even the next eight, will probably prove quite significant for the Islamic Republic.