

Managing Expectations from Iran's Upcoming Presidential Vote

by Sara Zanotta

Iran will hold its thirteenth presidential election on Friday, 18 June 2021. Much attention is devoted to this event, due to the broad expectation that Iran's next president will herald from the conservative camp, replacing the current administration led by moderate-pragmatist President Hassan Rouhani.

The election is taking place against the backdrop of ongoing international talks in Vienna on the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), and a severe economic crisis within Iran, worsened by US sanctions and the covid-19 pandemic. Deeply entrenched tensions with the US, as well as Washington's regional allies in Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, add to the importance of this appointment, with many watching the vote in an effort to understand its impact on Iranian domestic and foreign policies.

Upon closer scrutiny, recent developments seem to indicate that significant changes in Iranian policy should not be expected. This does not detract from the importance of the vote nor of the relevance of Iranian domestic politics more broadly. Rather, it underscores the need to appreciate how the past years have diminished differences between conservative and moderate factions in Iran's political establishment.

This is particularly the case vis-à-vis the JCPOA and the US-backed sanction regime re-imposed on Iran and also extends to other important issues of Iranian policy. Having staked much of their political fortunes on the benefits of engaging the US and Europe in negotiations, the moderate camp has suffered significant setbacks. Many of its leading figures, including President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, have consequently hardened their rhetoric as of late, understanding the fraying popularity of their efforts

Sara Zanotta is research intern within the Mediterranean, Middle East and Africa programme at the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI).

to mend fences with the West in the face of US sanctions and Europe's inability to make true on its economic commitments to Iran in the JCPOA.

Beginning from the domestic level, two main issues are worth considering. First, due to the expected low turnout, the election will likely testify to a growing disillusionment of a large part of the population. Second, the results will be important to shed light on upcoming succession challenges, as Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is 82 years old and in relatively poor health.

According to a recent poll, less than 42 per cent of voters will likely take part in the election.¹ If this were to happen, it will be the lowest turnout since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, even lower than the 42.6 per cent turnout registered during Iran's last parliamentary elections in February 2020, which saw conservatives secure a landslide victory.²

There is little doubt that low turnout would compromise the legitimacy of the vote. Many Iranians share growing disillusionment and frustration, largely connected to the economic impact of the US sanctions regime and the covid-19 pandemic, as well as the mismanagement and corruption that remains pervasive in the Islamic Republic.

¹ Andrew Hanna, "Poll on 2021 Presidential Election", in *The Iran Primer*, 9 June 2021, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/9211>.

² Garrett Nada, "2020 Parliamentary Election Result", in *The Iran Primer*, 24 February 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/7211>.

Since President Trump's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, the Iranian economy has suffered considerably. Iran's GDP has contracted by 11 per cent and average living standards declined by 13 per cent since 2018.³

Sanctions have severely hampered Iranian trade and oil exports, reducing foreign exchange reserves and leading to a 49 per cent depreciation of the Iranian currency against the US dollar in 2020.⁴ Inflation has continued to increase, severely impacting the purchasing power of ordinary Iranians. According to the International Monetary Fund, inflation increased by 36.5 per cent in 2020 and will grow higher to 39 per cent this year.⁵

While predominantly concerned with the economy, the population is also sceptical that their vote will make any difference.⁶ Indeed, the recent vetting of presidential candidates by the Iranian Guardian Council has added to popular frustration. On 25 May, the Iranian Ministry of Interior announced

³ Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, "Iran: The Double Jeopardy of Sanctions and COVID-19", in *Pandemic Discourses*, 19 September 2020, <https://www.indiachinainstitute.org/?p=110043>.

⁴ Henry Rome, "Sanctions 3: Iran's Economy in 2020", in *The Iran Primer*, 16 December 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/node/8551>.

⁵ Davide Barbuscia, "IMF Sees Iran Economy Recovering this Year but Inflation Still on the Up", in *Reuters*, 11 April 2021, <http://reut.rs/2Rt5Cr1>.

⁶ Esfandyar Batmanghelidj, "Economic Distress and Voter Turnout in the Iranian Elections", in *FES Blog on the Iranian Presidential Elections of 2021*, 26 May 2021, <https://www.fes.de/en/referat-naheer-mittlerer-osten-und-nordafrika/iran-elections/artikelseite-iranelections/wirtschaftskrise-und-wahlbeteiligung-in-iran>.

the names of seven candidates, mostly hard-liners, approved by the Council out of 592 personalities that had registered to run.⁷

This is not new in Iranian presidential races. However, the vetting procedure this year was based on more restrictive criteria – also criticised by Rouhani⁸ –, that excluded most reformist and moderate politicians, leading to accusations that the regime was fixing the election.⁹

Only two of the vetted candidates belong to the moderate camp, while the expected winner is hard-liner Ebrahim Raisi, the only prominent figure allowed to run after the exclusion of his main rivals, particularly former speaker of parliament Ali Larijani.¹⁰ Significantly, Larjani, by no means a traditional moderate, had tentatively emerged as a sort of consensus candidate, also benefitting from some support from Iranian moderates before he was disqualified.¹¹

Raisi, aged 60, ran as a conservative candidate in the 2017 presidential election when he was defeated by Rouhani. He was then appointed by Khamenei as head of the judiciary. Previously known for his leading role in the mass execution of political prisoners in 1988, as head of the judiciary Raisi sought to present himself as a judicial reformer and promoter of good governance.¹² He also launched a so-called “war on corruption”,¹³ supported by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), with whom he maintains close ties.

These factors contribute to make Raisi the favourite to win the election. A recent poll conducted by the Iranian Student Polling Agency, gave Raisi 48.6 per cent of the votes, while support for each of the other candidates did not exceed 3 per cent.¹⁴ Meanwhile, 41 per cent of voters stated that they had yet to decide who they would vote for.

Turning to Iran's succession challenges, it is worth reflecting on the possibility that Khamenei's decision to disqualify so many other candidates may in fact be driven by his efforts to tap Raisi as a potential successor.

The next Supreme Leader will be formally chosen by the Assembly of Experts, an 88-member body elected by the Iranian population after the

⁷ “Iran's Electoral Body Announces Approved Nominees”, in *IRNA*, 25 May 2021, <https://en.irna.ir/news/84342800>.

⁸ Patrick Wintour, “Iran President Criticises New Rules for Candidates As Election Begins”, in *The Guardian*, 11 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/hck2g>.

⁹ Patrick Wintour, “Iran's Leadership Accused of Fixing Presidential Election”, in *The Guardian*, 25 May 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/p/hh8hd>.

¹⁰ Ali Reza Eshraghi, “Council of Despair: Iran's Uncompetitive Presidential Election”, in *ECFR Commentaries*, 3 June 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=73205>.

¹¹ Ehsan Mehrabi, “Chasing the Centrist Dream: Ali Larijani Registers for Presidential Race”, in *IranWire*, 16 May 2021, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/9547>.

¹² Sanam Vakil, “Ebrahim Raisi: Will He Stay or Will He Go”, in *IranSource*, 6 April 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=373793>.

¹³ “Who is Ebrahim Raisi, the Front-Runner in Iran's Presidential Race?”, in *Al-Monitor*, 11 June 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/43137>.

¹⁴ Andrew Hanna, “Poll on 2021 Presidential Election”, cit.

vetting of candidates by the Guardian Council. Khamenei obviously has much influence over this body and an electoral victory by Raisi would further boost his credentials as a possible successor.¹⁵

Yet, should voter turnout be below expectations, the exclusion of Raisi's main rivals may turn out to be a double-edged sword, harming both the legitimacy of the election and Khamenei's efforts to prepare the ground for a possible Raisi succession. Voter turnout therefore represents one important variable to assess as Iran approaches its presidential vote.

When it comes to foreign policy, changes can be expected at the rhetorical level but less so on the concrete objectives and challenges facing Iranian external relations. This is particularly true with regards to the JCPOA and negotiations with the other signatory parties in Vienna, not least since the nuclear file has long been the remit of the Supreme Leader rather than elected Iranian officials or the presidency.¹⁶

In the event of a Raisi victory, a 180-degree shift in the Iranian approach to the JCPOA and the lifting of sanctions is unlikely. The establishment and the population are united in their insistence on the illegality of US

extraterritorial sanctions. Raisi has himself stated that he aims to fix the economy and push for a lifting of US sanctions, and as presidential candidate in 2017 he had specifically claimed that any incoming Iranian administration should be committed to the JCPOA.¹⁷

Other issues affect relations with Western and regional countries, such as Iranian support to regional proxies and its ballistic missile programme.¹⁸ On such matters Iran's stance does not reflect the political orientation of the presidency, be it conservative or moderate, but the assessment of Iran's foreign and security policy elites that the ballistic programme and the alliance with armed groups across the region make up a formidable dual layer of protection from the Islamic Republic's enemies. The Iranian establishment is in general agreement on not negotiating on these issues as long as reciprocal concessions are put on the table by the US and its regional allies in the Middle East.

Nevertheless, a conservative president may impact negotiations with Europe and the US. Should the new president adopt harsher rhetoric vis-à-vis the West, decisionmakers in Europe and the US will have a harder time domestically in making the case for continued engagement with Iran. Such developments would also no

¹⁵ Rana Rahimpour, "Iran's Supreme Leader: Who Might Succeed Ali Khamenei?", in *BBC News*, 11 December 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55257059>.

¹⁶ Kasra Naji, "Iran's Zarif Criticises Revolutionary Guards' Influence in Leaked Tape", in *BBC News*, 26 April 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56889412>.

¹⁷ Raz Zimmt, "With a Raisi Presidency, Would the Iran Nuclear Deal Remain on the Table?", in *IranSource*, 10 June 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=401360>.

¹⁸ Anahita Motazed Rad, "Can Negotiations and Diplomacy Break the US-Iran Impasse?", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|23 (April 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/13173>.

doubt carry over into the region, further emboldening Israeli opposition to the JCPOA and Iran while likely undermining the nascent talks underway between Iran and Saudi Arabia.¹⁹ All of this will make any effort to negotiate a follow-up agreement to a revived JCPOA even harder to achieve.

In conclusion, the upcoming vote in Iran will not alter the conflictual relationship between Tehran and its neighbours or with Europe and the US. The diminishing differences between moderates and conservatives within Iran moreover shows the lasting damage caused by former president Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran. This is true not only in terms of the diminished political manoeuvrability enjoyed by moderate factions within Iran, but also with regards to the avowed objective of Washington and Brussels to revive the JCPOA and utilise this for broader negotiations and engagements with Tehran and the region.

15 June 2021

¹⁹ Ghaida Ghantous, "Resigned to a Nuclear Deal Revival, Gulf Engages with Foe Iran", in *Reuters*, 9 June 2021, <http://reut.rs/3xbs7jA>.

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17

I-00186 Rome, Italy

Tel. +39 066976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI COMMENTARIES

Director: Andrea Dessì (a.dessi@iai.it)

- 21 | 30 Sara Zanotta, *Managing Expectations from Iran's Upcoming Presidential Vote*
- 21 | 29 Menachem Klein, *Back from the Brink: An Israeli-Palestinian Proposal for Jerusalem*
- 21 | 28 Michelle Pace, *The EU Must Change Vocabulary on Israel-Palestine*
- 21 | 27 Andrea Dessì, *Ending Impunity in the Holy Land*
- 21 | 26 Silvia Colombo and Dario Cristiani, *Libya as a Transatlantic Litmus Test for European Strategic Autonomy*
- 21 | 25 Nicolas J.A. Buchoud, *Re-synchronising Infrastructure Investment and Sustainable Development: Priorities for Italy's G20 Presidency*
- 21 | 24 Fabrizio Lobasso, *Italy and Africa: "Value Oriented Diplomacy" in Action*
- 21 | 23 Anahita Motazed Rad, *Can Negotiations and Diplomacy Break the US-Iran Impasse?*
- 21 | 22 Alice Politi, *How Green is China's Belt and Road Initiative?*
- 21 | 21 Nicoletta Pirozzi, *The Conference on the Future of Europe: Tackling Differentiated Integration*