

Unsurprising Election: What Does the Presidential Election in Iran Promise for Its Future?

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Iran's 13th presidential election ended without a surprise. As most observers predicted, the 60-year-old head of the judiciary, Sayyid Ebrahim Raisi, was elected the 8th President of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to Iran's current election procedure, within 45 days, i.e. in early August, he will be sworn in.

In Iran, although the president is not the most powerful person in the country (the supreme head of state is Vilayet-e-Faqih, that is, the supreme religious leader), he is in fact the second most powerful as the head of the government. In this sense, Iran's election was important not only for its future relations with Azerbaijan or the fate of the confrontation with the United States and Israel, but also for the situation of the Iranian Azerbaijani population, for religious and national (minority) rights more generally. Iran is also an extremely sensitive issue for many religious groups in Azerbaijan.

Given the importance of the issue, in this article, I will discuss the results of the 13th presidential election and their possible impact on the future political life of Iran. I will briefly discuss the life of the newly elected president and, as a conservative politician, his future relations with the West as well as Azerbaijan.

Unsurprising but Exciting Election

Most observers predicted that Raisi would be elected. Over the

past eight years, the reformers have been in power and the worsening socio-economic situation has eroded popular confidence in them and Hassan Rouhani. An example of this was the election held on February 21, 2020. In this election, the conservatives gained a major advantage (223 seats in the 290-seat parliament) and took control of the Parliament. Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, former commander of the Revolutionary Guards' Air Force and former mayor of Tehran, was elected the speaker of the parliament. In this sense, in the June 18, 2021 election, it seemed highly probable that Raisi, the main candidate of the conservative faction, would be elected. Thus, there were no surprises in the presidential election, and Raisi won with 61.9%.

This election was also another example of voter passivity in Iran in recent years. For example, in the previous 2017 presidential election, turnout was 70%. In the last election, it was only 48.8%, despite direct calls to vote from the religious leader, who has significant influence among the population. Interestingly, despite low turnout, the voting process took a long time. Although voting, which began at 7:00 am, was to end at 7:00 pm, due to the high number of people coming to the polling stations, the voting time was significantly extended. As a result, voting lasted until 2:00 pm. Local observers attributed this to the fact that people went to the polls only in the evening due to the heat as a result of which the polling stations were overcrowded.

Another interesting aspect of this election is that for the first time in more than 20 years, all branches of government in Iran are concentrated in one faction. Until now, power in Iran had been divided between conservatives and reformers. But now all three branches of government – parliament, the presidency, and the judiciary – are in the hands of the conservatives.

The election of Raisi is also explained by the possible upcoming election of a religious leader. That is, the

religious leader in Iran might be replaced in the next 4-8 years. The installation of Raisi, who is very close to the supreme religious leader, in the second most powerful position in the country, may be intended to allow this transition to take place safely and painlessly. One of the candidates for this position is Raisi himself. The current religious leader was also elected to this position while he was president in 1989. In other words, even if Raisi does not become the next religious leader of Iran, he will be a key figure who could have a decisive influence on the process of electing the new religious leader.

Who Is the New President Raisi?

Raisi was born on December 14, 1960 in Mashhad. His father was a sayyid and a cleric, but he died when Raisi was five years old. Raisi received his first education in Mashhad and went to Qom at the age of 15 to continue his religious education. During this period, Qom was not only a center of religious studies, but also a major center of ideological opposition to the Shah's rule in Iran. At a young age, Raisi was close to the clergy who opposed the Shah.

After the Islamic Revolution, Raisi began working in the judiciary. He previously worked as a prosecutor and deputy prosecutor in various parts of Iran, and he was appointed Tehran city prosecutor in 1989. He headed the state oversight body from 1994 to 2004 and in 2004 was appointed Deputy Chairman of the Supreme Court. At the same time, in 2012, he was elected a judge in a religious court (a position he still holds), which operates in Qom and only hears cases involving clergy. Raisi, who was appointed Iran's attorney general in 2014, was promoted to a higher post two years later – he became the head of the Astan Quds Razavi Foundation, which is Iran's largest religious foundation. Although he ran for president in 2017, he lost to Rouhani, but was promoted to head of the Iranian judiciary two years later.

In November 2019, the US government added Raisi to the sanctions list. He is known to be close to the religious leader, a conservative and hardliner against the West. International human rights groups have accused him of involvement in mass executions of the opposition since 1988 and of taking a tough stance on the suppression of protests after the 2009 presidential election. Raisi was part of a four-member group (the others were Murtaza Eshraqi, Hussein Ali Nayeri, Mostafa Pourmohammadi) which ruled on the cases of imprisoned oppositionists in 1988. The group allegedly tried the dissidents and sentenced about 4,000 of them to death.

Raisi is also currently the deputy chairman of the body (Assembly of Experts – Majlese Khobregan) that represents the clergy and is responsible for electing a religious leader.

The Election and Iranian Azerbaijanis

Although overall turnout was 48.8%, it was even lower in some places. One of the lowest turnout rates was recorded in Tehran: 32%. Voter turnout was 44% in the East Azerbaijan province, where the city of Tabriz is located. Although several candidates spoke in the local Turkic language (Azerbaijani) and asked Azerbaijanis to support them, the Azerbaijani population was not offered any particular promises in these elections.

For example, during the 2013 presidential election campaign, Rouhani promised Azerbaijanis that if elected, he would make sure that Article 15 of the Iranian Constitution would be observed, i.e. Azerbaijanis would be able to get an education in their mother tongue. However, Rouhani did not fulfill this promise. This may be one of the reasons for the low turnout in the last elections in Tabriz. From the beginning, the people of Tabriz were not expected to vote for the reformist faction even though the main candidate of the reformers was Abdunnasir Himmati, a Turk from Hamadan.

Expectations from Raisi's Iran

Unlike his predecessor, Raisi did not make any particular promises for socio-economic development or for any group. Aside from election promises such as new jobs and increased state support for low-income families, Raisi promised to be tough on corruption and transparent. During his election campaign, Raisi visited Tabriz but did not make any specific promises to minorities, as his predecessor, Rouhani, had done.

Raisi is less of a politician who won an election and more of a leader approved by the political system for its own future plans. Out of 590 candidates in the election, only 34 were able to pass in the first round. The rest could not pass the filter of the Guardian Council (Shūrā-ye Negahbān). At the end of May, the Council confirmed only seven candidates. Ultimately, the seven-member list included two reformers, both originally from Azerbaijani provinces, and five conservative candidates.

In his first statement to the press a few days after the election, Raisi expressed his strong conservative position. When asked whether he would meet with the president of the United States, he answered “no” and by doing so he demonstrated his commitment to the religious leader’s political course. Iran will clearly continue negotiations with the United States. However, Raisi said that the US president should return to the agreement signed in 2015 and lift sanctions against Iran. At the same time, Raisi has an important task to change the socio-economic situation in the country in the next two years. If the socio-economic situation does not improve in the near future, it could lead to a loss of prestige not only for the president, but the entire conservative faction.

The improvement of the socio-economic situation depends to some extent on reaching an agreement with the United States. Therefore, the new Iranian government is expected to continue nuclear negotiations with the United States. The ongoing negotiations in Vienna, as well as the US’s removal of the

Iranian-backed Yemeni Houthi movement from the list of terrorist organizations, the start of negotiations between the Saudi government and Iran, and the rapid advance of the Taliban in Afghanistan could affect US-Iranian rapprochement. In this regard, although Raisi is a supporter of a tough political course, he is expected to take into account the existing realities, which dictate negotiations and international cooperation.

Azerbaijan-Iran Relations

In recent years, Azerbaijan has become more interested in the elections in Iran. This interest is observed not only at the level of experts and the media, but also in groups with a special interest in Iran. If this election is another victory for the Iranian regime in the eyes of Azerbaijani groups that see the current Iranian system as enemies of Turkic peoples, for others, such as many Shiites, it is another victory for democratic elections and the Vilayet-e-Faqih. Azerbaijani Shiite believers generally support the conservative faction in Iran, and the religious leader has a powerful influence not only among Iranian Azerbaijanis, but also among believers in Azerbaijan.

Although President Ilham Aliyev has already congratulated the newly elected Raisi, the Azerbaijani government is cautious about what is happening in the south. For comparison, note that until 2013 relations between the two countries were extremely cold and tense, but during Rouhani's presidency, this situation changed. He visited Baku several times, and Aliyev visited Tehran as well. As a result, there has been a relative softening in relations. The Azerbaijani government is interested in maintaining normal relations with Iran. However, there are groups in Iran that are clearly concerned about Azerbaijan's relations with Israel and the new geopolitical situation after the 44-day war. Iranian politics is not monolithic and there are different approaches to Azerbaijan.

Azerbaijan-Iran relations have always been defined by the current situation rather than the political forces in power in Iran. For example, in the 1990s, under Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, relations were normal. But in 1997, under the reformer Mohammad Khatami, relations cooled. Despite mutual visits, tensions and border problems remained from time to time. The conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president in 2005, and although relations remained apparently normal during his first term, they deteriorated further after his second term. Tensions eased again during reformer Rouhani's presidency in 2013.

Overall, during the presidency of Raisi, several positive and negative trends will be clearly visible in Iran-Azerbaijan relations. Naturally, the strengthening of NATO in the South Caucasus (Azerbaijan) through Turkey and Azerbaijan-Israel relations will remain a source of concern for Iran. But at the same time, if joint transport projects and the six-party cooperation format (Turkey, Russia, Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Armenia) initiated by Turkey are realized, and if Iranian companies take part in the construction projects in Azerbaijan's liberated territories, even though they will not solve fundamental problems, they will have positive effects on the relative improvement of relations between the two countries. In Iran, the conservative faction has declared the expansion of domestic production and access to the markets of neighboring countries as an economic target. Azerbaijan is one of the main markets and a transit country for Iran. All this indicates that Iran is interested in improving relations in the coming years. In a difficult geopolitical region, Azerbaijan is also trying not to damage its relations with Iran.

Conclusion

Raisi, who will be the President of Iran for the next four years, will be loyal to the supreme religious leader. For sure, whoever the president is, it is the religious leader who

determines the main course of foreign policy and governance overall. Nevertheless, we have seen earlier that during Khatami and Rouhani's presidencies, reformist presidents have deviated somewhat from the religious leader's political course, and this led to internal political tensions from time to time. But unlike previous presidents, Raisi is personally close to and trusted by the religious leader. In this sense, it can be assumed that there will be no internal political differences during his presidency. However, the biggest risk for Iran now is not political groups, but the population, whose socio-economic situation is deteriorating year by year. The most difficult task for Raisi will be to improve the economic situation. His advantage in resolving these issues is that he can get support from all branches of the government and, most importantly, he is close to the Revolutionary Guard Corps (Sepah). At his first press conference, Raisi expressed his position on relations with the West. The current situation is pushing Iran's new leadership to negotiate with the West. But these negotiations will also depend on Raisi's actions (his regional foreign policy), as a representative of the conservative faction of Iranian policy, in terms of implementing the 'export of revolution' doctrine, the ideological backbone of this faction.