



Iranian elections: Opportunities and challenges for Pezeshkian's government

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The death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on May 19 triggered snap elections in Iran and brought pro-reform Masoud Pezeshkian to presidency. This article presents an overview of the election outcome and its implication for Iranian politics, economy and society.

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Six candidates were cleared to run on the first round of presidential elections that took place on June 28. Masoud Pezeshkian with 10.4 million and Saeed Jalili with 9.4 million qualified for the run-off on July 5. Pezeshkian won the presidential elections with 16.3 million or 54 percent of the votes over Jalili, who received 13.5 million or 44 percent.¹

Elections in Iran have been plagued by low voter turnout since 2021. Continuing the downward trend, this year, voter turnout was below fifty percent.² Unusually high for Iran, voter abstention reflects deep public discontent with the ruling class and its negative human rights record against the backdrop of the Women, Life, Freedom protests, following the death in custody of Mahsa Amini, in September 2022. It also indicates apathy towards an election process perceived as rigged, with limited voting choices, since the regime barred most reformists from participating at the March parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, high abstention rates cast a shadow of illegitimacy over the Islamic Republic, hence Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has repeatedly urged the public to vote.

Iran, with a complex combination of republic and monarchy, secular and theocratic institutions, has multiple centres of power. The Assembly of Experts elects the supreme leader. The Assembly of Experts, the president and parliament are elected by popular vote, but their candidates must be approved by the Guardian Council over which the supreme leader wields significant influence.³ The supreme leader holds the highest religious and political authority, commanding the armed forces, deciding on foreign policy and overseeing the judiciary.

While the supreme leader wields significant power, the president as the nominal head of state is important. The president promotes foreign relations, advises the supreme leader and chairs key councils on national security, economy and cyberspace.

Moreover, the new Iranian president will likely have influence over succession candidates for the next supreme leader. These elections have been particularly important because the new president and parliament will likely manage the transition to the 3rd generation of leadership in Iran. The succession period can be a significant harbinger of change for the Islamic Republic constitutionally and in terms of its institutional framework, but also of intense political conflict within the conservative factions.

Elections in Iran, therefore, are not mere façades. As shown by the unexpected victory of Masoud Pezeshkian the election outcome was not predetermined. A former deputy and health minister under the government of Khatami, Pezeshkian has served in the parliament five times. Ideologically he is a centrist, standing at the conservative end of the reformist camp, focusing on economy and social justice. Of Azeri and Kurdish descent, he criticises the exclusion of religious and ethnic minorities from government representation. During his 2024 campaign, he pledged his loyalty to Ali Khamenei and the principles of the 1979 revolution, but he criticised previous government policies on women's rights, forceful enforcement of the hijab and harsh dress code punishments, internet and social media censorship and the brutal crackdown of protests.

His government prioritises reconciliation and national unity. To achieve his goals, he will need to compromise. His cabinet of nineteen ministers, approved by parliament, reflects his consensus-based approach and desire to avoid conflict with conservative centres of power.

His ministers come from diverse backgrounds, including pragmatists, conservatives, technocrats, and academics, some without political affiliations. Seven previously served under centrist President Ruhani (2013-2021) and six under hardliner President Raisi (2021-2024). Conservatives hold sensitive portfolios in interior, intelligence and justice, while pragmatists lead key ministries on economy, foreign affairs, labour and social welfare. His cabinet included only one woman as minister of urban planning and no youth, or minorities, to the disappointment of his reformist supporters.⁴ Cabinet nominations, triggered an internal dispute when Javad Zarif, vice president for strategic affairs and architect of the 2015 nuclear agreement, tried to resign, after Pezeshkian failed to deliver a younger and more inclusive government promised in his campaign.⁵

Pezeshkian's choice of ministers reveals a focus on economic recovery over civil rights and liberties. Nonetheless, expectations are equally high in both areas. The Iranian economy faces

significant challenges. Unemployment, though down to 8.1 percent, disproportionately affects women, youth and university graduates. Meanwhile, the brain drain of highly skilled workers has created labour shortages in IT, education and healthcare.⁶ Inflation is among the highest globally, driven primarily by food and housing prices. Iran ranks in the top ten countries for consumer price inflation, with a rate of 37.5 percent.⁷

Since 2017, Iran has faced recurring protests driven by economic woes and demands for political freedoms, particularly for women. These demonstrations, often sparked by price hikes in food and fuel, have exposed deep-rooted discontent with government policies. The government's answer to protests was brutal suppression, with hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries. Leaderless demonstrations, organised and documented through social media, have led to repeated internet shutdowns.

Pezeshkian is taking a two-pronged approach to tackling the economic crisis: economic management and normalisation of foreign relations. Domestically, he has appointed academic experts and experienced technocrats to key economic ministries, reflecting his belief that government mismanagement and corruption fuel the country's economic problems. Internationally, he believes normalising relations with the world is essential for economic growth. His plan focuses on three strategies for diplomatic engagement, also contingent on current geopolitical tensions in the region. First, revive the 2015 nuclear deal and re-engage with the West to lift sanctions, attract foreign investment and provide economic relief. Second, comply with the Financial Action Task Force (FAFT) standards on countering the financing of terrorism and money laundering, to rejoin the international financial system and end economic isolation. And third, reconcile with Iran's neighbours to promote trade and tourism.⁸

Economic and political reforms and reconciliation with foreign countries, are the stakes for Pezeshkian's government. But challenges lay internally. The president lacks a broad public mandate, with sixteen million votes out of sixty-one million eligible voters. The youth largely boycotted the elections. Part of his votes came from conservative voters disillusioned with the internal power struggles within conservative factions. Moreover, any reform agenda must navigate a conservative parliament. The ultra-conservative Paydari Front, which opposes rapprochement with the West and supports harsh punishments for dress code violations, has increased its influence since the last legislative elections. Geopolitically, given Israel's belligerent stance in the Middle East, his foreign policy hinges on regional tensions.

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