



**INSTITUTE OF
STRATEGIC STUDIES**

web: www.issi.org.pk
phone: +92-920-4423, 24
fax: +92-920-4658

Issue Brief

Iranian Presidential Candidates: The Final Six

Fatima Raza, Research Assistant, ISSI

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The Guardian Council in Iran cleared six candidates for the presidential elections 2017 from the 1,361 candidates that registered themselves for the presidential race. According to the Iranian constitution, the Council reserves the right to discretion regarding the reasons for cancelling or approving the bids of different candidates. By far, the most talked about disqualification was that of the headstrong former President of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad who registered against the advice of the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. The religious leader had expressed his concerns about the severe polarization of the election in case of Ahmadinejad's participation. However, polarization is still a major concern in the elections due to the identity and 'religio-political' affiliation of the candidates running this year. With the registration of a widely known religious figure like Ebrahim Raisi who is revered immensely in the Iranian society, as well as by the higher leadership, the schism between the religious conservatives and moderates shall widen. Raisi's advent in politics has also dimmed Rouhani's inevitability to some extent as the former enjoys popular support from the public, as well as the supreme leadership of the country. To make more sense of the upcoming elections which will not only impact the domestic politics of Iran but also its regional and global standing, let us quickly glance at the 'chosen' ones:



Hassan Rouhani

The current Iranian President is one of the most promising candidates in the upcoming elections given his rapport with the Iranian youth, his moderate diplomatic disposition and his role in securing the Iran nuclear deal in 2015. Convention favors him, as almost all former Presidents in Iran have always served two consecutive terms. Rouhani's massive public support combined with his political acumen puts him at the top of this list.



Ebrahim Raisi

The religious zealot with unparalleled experience in holding key offices of the country is Ebrahim Raisi who could perturb the otherwise smooth sailing of Rouhani's presidential vessel. The Principlists have chosen their candidate wisely. His stellar experience as the custodian of the 'Astana Quds Rizvi', as Prosecutor General and the head of the General Inspection Office has made him prudently and explicable suitable for the office of the President. Most importantly, he enjoys unwavering support of the Supreme Leader himself.



Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf

Tehran's mayor Mohammed Bagher Ghalibaf is a third time runner in the Presidential race. He has vehemently criticized the economic policies of Rouhani's government stressing that Iran has plenty of natural energy resources. He has time and again lamented administrative corruption and unemployment in the country. Ghalibaf was formerly Iran's Chief of police from 2000 to 2005 and commander of Revolutionary Guards' Air Force from 1997 to 2000.



Mostafa Hashemi-Taba

Mostafa Hashemi-Taba previously served as head of Iran's National Olympic Committee from 1996–2004, as vice president and head of Iran's Physical Education Organization under President Rafsanjani and Khatami and as Minister of Heavy Industries in the early 1980s. He is also expected to play a role similar to that of Jahangiri in backing Rouhani's bid for presidency.



Eshaq Jahangiri

The current Vice President to Rouhani, the former Minister for mining and the former governor of Isfahan, Eshaq Jahangiri is the other reformist presidential candidate apart from Rouhani himself. Many are calling him a "shadow candidate" as he is expected to withdraw in favor of Rouhani at the last minute.



Mostafa Mir-Salim

The former Minister for Culture and Islamic Guidance is the fourth candidate to have been approved by the Guardian Council. Mir-Salim is also a member of the Expediency Council and from 1981–1989, he also served as the advisor to the then President Ayatollah Syed Ali Khamanei. His experience in politics exceeds that of Raisi which does make this an interesting competition, but Raisi's stature outshines Mir-Salim's prowess. Both enjoy support from the conservative political circles.

The first presidential debate between all candidates was televised on April 28, 2017. The Iranian media intently covered the heated debate that focused mainly on issues of economy, political promises and harsh mutual criticism. Iranian presidential debates play an important in the narrative building of the masses that listen to this discourse quite keenly and judge the candidates on the basis of their preparation. Ghalibaf as a politically experienced candidate proved to be a tougher rival to Rouhani and his fellow men as compared to Raisi. His deliberations on the issues of unemployment and the sorry state of economic affairs were aimed at Rouhani, but he was engaged by Jahangiri who tackled these questions quite aptly. Owing to all musings about the nature of Jahangiri's participation in the elections, the presupposed notion was that his candidacy is a ploy to ensure a safety net for Rouhani. However, his quick responses and preparation increased his ratings among the general public. Another important aspect was that of Raisi's underperformance in the debate that only reinforced the claims of his

opponents about his political inexperience. He chose silence over a flamboyant display of his skills, unlike Ghalibaf who used all cards in the deck against Rouhani and his supporters.

More debates are to follow, but this one made for an interesting start to an important election that tends to not only predict the national pulse of Iran, but also impact the region and the world, collectively. Iran being a significant country in a turbulent neighborhood is sure to cause reverberations through these elections. The head of the Iranian state, though not a sole decision maker, is a very important person in terms of his interaction with the outside world. Perhaps apart from the minister for foreign affairs, the president of Iran is the only individual in the Iranian establishment to have such a wide range of contact with other countries. Therefore, the selection of a conservative candidate will not merely be the reflection of the domestic public sentiment in Iran, but it will also greatly impact the image that Rouhani had helped build during his first term.

In the end, the decision seemingly rests in the hands of the Iranian public that is usually given a lot more freedom of social expression during elections than any other time of the year by the state. While most reformist and anti-state journalists have been banned until after the elections, the masses are actively using the social media as a narrative builder to further their quest for modern reformative change and economic prosperity. However, no matter how meticulously these candidates debate the complex issues of strategic and national importance, for average Iranian citizen, the most important factor is and always will be; economy. Whoever is able to guilelessly convince the masses that they can provide better financial opportunities shall bring it home.