



ELECTIONS IN IRAN AND PROSPECTS FOR PAKISTAN

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



Seyyed Ebrahim Ra'isi has been elected as the President of Iran on June 18, 2021. Despite building years-long political discourse upon anti-corruption, accountability and transparency in economic affairs of the country,¹ the turn-out rate remained 48.8%,² which is 25% lower than the previous elections (2017) and the lowest since the first ever presidential elections held in Iran in 1980. Analysts observed that growing economic crisis, curbing political freedoms and rejecting the progressive, moderate and pragmatist presidential candidates by the Guardian Council played a major role in discouraging almost half of the population of Iran to boycott the election.³ Very surprisingly, the Guardian Council approved only seven applications out of almost 600 candidates. No female candidate out of 40 candidates who applied was approved at least symbolically. Among the approved candidates, two conservatives and one of the two progressive candidates withdrew their candidature before elections.⁴ The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei

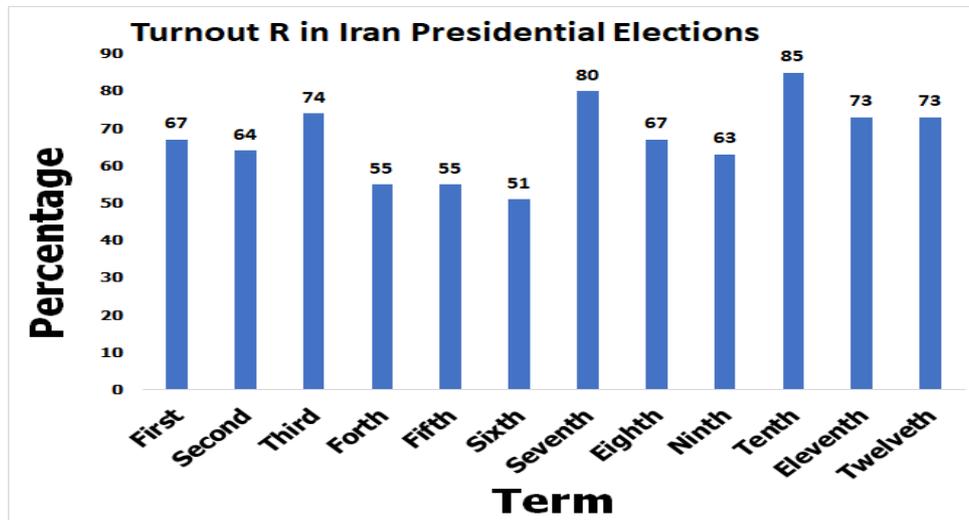
¹ Bureau, Syndication. "How Raisi will drive shifts in Iran's policymaking", *MENAFN*, June 21, 2021. <https://menafn.com/1102314987/How-Raisi-will-drive-shifts-in-Irans-policymaking>

² "2021 Presidential Election", *Iran Data Portal*, June 19, 2021. <https://irandataportal.syr.edu/2021-presidential-election>

³ Hafezi, Parisa. "Khamenei protege wins Iran election amid low turnout", *Reuters*, June 20, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/>

⁴ Rasmussen, Sune Engel. "Who Is Ebrahim Raisi? Hard-Line Judge Wins Iran's 2021 Presidential Election", *Tasnim News*, June 19, 2021. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-election-2021-11623934263>

appreciated the people of Iran and called the Election Day as a victory day over defeating the ill-wishes and propaganda of enemies by just casting their votes.⁵



The graph has been taken from the official website of Middle East Institute.⁶

The administrative and political history of President-elect Ra'isi shows that he never held the public office by elections, but mostly served in judiciary and/or relevant departments. Prior to this political success, he participated first time in presidential elections in 2017, but failed.⁷ Regarding his international image, he is facing US sanctions, because of human rights abuses by making decisions for capital punishment to the political prisoners in 1988 trials and taking strict actions for tackling the unrests in Iran time to time.⁸

On the domestic front, Ra'isi carries the reputation of being staunch Iranian nationalist, ideologically conservative Shiite and faithful to the Supreme Leader as compared to the out-going pragmatist and progressive President Hassan Rouhani. Therefore, it is likely that executive, legislature and judiciary will be taken over by similar thinking i.e. conservative. Despite holding power at key institutions, the government will likely face a continuous crisis of legitimacy, because it gained first ever lowest turnout rate (48.8%). The international commentators relate this development with the perception

⁵ "Iranian Nation Big Winner of Election: Ayatollah Khamenei", *Tasnim News*, June 19, 2021. <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2021/06/19/2524169/iranian-nation-big-winner-of-election-ayatollah-khamenei>

⁶ Afshari, Ali. "Low election turnout points to larger changes in Iranian politics", *Middle East Institute*, June 16, 2021. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/low-election-turnout-points-larger-changes-iranian-politics>

⁷ Kamat, Dnyanesh. "How Raisi will drive shifts in Iran's policymaking", *Asia Times*, June 21, 2021. <https://asiatimes.com/2021/06/how-raisi-will-drive-shifts-in-irans-policymaking/>

⁸ Rafizadeh, Dr. Majid. "Raisi's win means more Iranian aggression, repression and defiance", *Arab News*, June 21, 2021. https://www.arabnews.jp/en/opinion/article_49005/

that more than half population of the country does not find stakes and fair representation in the current political structure.⁹

On the economic front, the President-elect is expected to introduce some structural economic reforms (most probably adopting redistributive welfare and poverty alleviation strategies),¹⁰ but the strict control over state institutions and taking hard-lines on foreign policy issues will not encourage investor confidence. In addition, despite possible revival of JCPOA, Iran looks towards China and Russia for high level economic, defence and diplomatic bailout. This will further distance Iran from the West. Hence, Ra'isi's government will continuously face economic sanctions and embargoes from the West.¹¹ Reciprocally, the coming administration is not afraid of pressure anymore from any side. Therefore, Mr. Ra'isi is expected to be more adventurist regarding exporting revolutionary ideals, equipping pro-Iran proxies and militias, giving free hand to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps and applying strategies for destabilizing rival countries in the region.¹²

Although, the President-elect spoke that his government will try its best to improve relations with neighbouring and regional countries particularly in the Middle East,¹³ the international commentators and observers guess drastic changes in the leadership of almost all strategically important state institutions, adoption of hawkish stance over some international issues and proactive regional and international engagements led by conservative leadership in Iran, whose vision does not match with this statement in spirit. On the Middle Eastern front, Ra'isi would like to consolidate achievements in Iraq, Syria and Yemen, which include; containing and manipulating the domestic political forces in Iraq and controlling the Iranian backed militias for having effective grip on the country; supporting Bashar's regime for consolidating his government, and building clandestine military infrastructure for creating deterrence against Israel; and enhancing presence in Yemen for containing the Saudi interest there.¹⁴

⁹ Rafizadeh, Dr. Majid. "Raisi's win means more Iranian aggression, repression and defiance", *Arab News*, June 21, 2021. https://www.arabnews.jp/en/opinion/article_49005/

¹⁰ Kamat, Dnyanesh. "How Raisi will drive shifts in Iran's policymaking", *Asia Times*, June 21, 2021. <https://asiatimes.com/2021/06/how-raisi-will-drive-shifts-in-irans-policymaking/>

¹¹ Hafezi, Parisa. "Khamenei protege wins Iran election amid low turnout", *Reuters*, June 20, 2021. <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/irans-sole-moderate-presidential-candidate-congratulates-raisi-his-victory-state-2021-06-19/>

¹² Rafizadeh, Dr. Majid. "Raisi's win means more Iranian aggression, repression and defiance", *Arab News*, June 21, 2021. https://www.arabnews.jp/en/opinion/article_49005/

¹³ "President-elect Raisi: Iran's priority is improving ties with regional neighbours", *Express Tribune*, June 21, 2021. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2306462/president-elect-raisi-irans-priority-is-improving-ties-with-regional-neighbours>

¹⁴ Kamat, Dnyanesh. "How Raisi will drive shifts in Iran's policymaking", *Asia Times*, June 21, 2021. <https://asiatimes.com/2021/06/how-raisi-will-drive-shifts-in-irans-policymaking/>

The Prime Minister of Pakistan Mr. Imran Khan congratulated the President-elect and expressed wishes for working together to promote regional peace, progress and prosperity.¹⁵ Both Iran and Pakistan have many common areas of interest, which include; enhancing bilateral trade volume, increasing border security, facilitating peace in Afghanistan and tackling the issue of Islamophobia globally. At the same time, both countries face common challenges, such as; US pressure against Iran-Pakistan bilateral trade, connectivity and building cross border energy infrastructure; general negative impact of US-China rivalry on bilateral economic partnership with China etc.¹⁶

Pakistan needs to engage the new leadership of Iran carefully, because it will remain under observation of many. In the light of the above scenario, some of the prospects for Pakistan are mentioned below.

Prospects for Pakistan

- Leadership of both countries may take initiatives for addressing the global issue of Islamophobia, climate change, and corona pandemic. The clear vision, statements and stance of Prime Minister Mr. Imran Khan on these issues, may comfortably bring both countries closer for having further bilateral relations of mutual concern.
- Both Iran and Pakistan are not only immediate neighbours of Afghanistan, but the peace, progress and prosperity is also associated with the presence of these elements in Afghanistan. So, quick US-withdrawal, deadlock in intra-Afghan dialogue and finding a political solution for bringing peace in Afghanistan, are primary desires of both countries. Further, both countries are not only at the same page at regional level, but also welcome the great powers like China and Russia to get involve for filling the great power vacuum through engaging them in a multilateral framework for bringing enduring peace not only in Afghanistan, but also in the region.
- Massive Chinese investment in both countries further opens the doors of connectivity, gives opportunities for enhancing bilateral trade, and stresses upon progress over gas pipeline and oil supply for meeting energy needs. Further, the progress of CPEC projects, materialization of recently signed China-Iran deal, and more translation of BRI vision of China in the region, will ultimately push these countries to have meaningful trilateral

¹⁵ "PM Imran felicitates newly elected Iran president Ebrahim Raisi", *Express Tribune*, June 19, 2021.

<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2306096/pm-imran-felicitates-newly-elected-iran-president-ebrahim-raisi>

¹⁶ Ullah, Barkat. "Pakistan's foreign policy and the changing regional dynamics", *Global Village Space*, June 21, 2021. <https://www.globalvillagespace.com/pakistans-foreign-policy-and-the-changing-regional-dynamics/>

economic framework for prosperity. The existing economic situations in both countries and uniformed target realization of the leadership are waiting for multiple relevant engagements.

- Increasing needs of addressing the border security and border management, and Indian involvement for spoiling brotherly relations through terror financing of insurgents in Baluchistan province, will rightly get attention of leadership in both countries to tackle these issues on priority basis by strengthening bilateral relations. In this vein, Pakistan must educate its perspective to the Iranian establishment and engage the Iranian leadership proactively.
- Pakistan and Iran must activate intergovernmental organizations of Muslim countries such as; Organization of Islamic Cooperation, Economic Cooperation Organization, Developing-8 etc. for not only protecting their own national interests, but for serving the long term interest of Muslim Ummah.
- Pakistan must distance itself from Iran for adopting anti-West and anti-Saudi stance (including against other Iranian rival states such as; UAE, Bahrain and Azerbaijan), because Pakistan has deeper stakes in these regions. Further, Pakistan has no reason to go against them. Even, these actions may further hurt strategic interests of Pakistan in long term. So, a balanced approach is the best option for Pakistan.

Conclusion

The President-elect is encountering significant political opposition at home and facing international sanctions abroad. Likewise, Iran as a country is also facing similar challenges of economic sanctions, arms embargoes, and territorial blockades. So, it will take time to have a concrete understanding upon different issues of/about Iran and its new conservative leadership, but it seems that the country and the leadership is not coming out of some protracted crises in near future. Hence, Pakistan needs to observe the situation carefully, so that both countries develop their stakes in those areas of mutual interests, which are less controversial internationally, but this does not rule out the option of being proactive for tackling the baseless propaganda and international pressure, and adopt peaceful means to eliminate the hurdles. Further, both countries can never protect their national interests alone, but by creating the stakes of regional and great powers in relevant economic, diplomatic and defence affairs, which must not hurt the sovereignty of each state.