



## Consequences of the Presidential Elections in Iran

Marcin Andrzej Piotrowski

The presidential elections in Iran on 18 June were won by ultra-conservative Ebrahim Raisi, who has the clear support of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. The president-elect of Iran has declared disassociation from the policies of his “centrist” predecessor, Hassan Rowhani. Raisi’s previous career and worldview do not herald positive changes within Iran and its regional policy. However, it is likely that Iran will return—with the U.S.—to the original arrangements of the July 2015 nuclear deal from which [President Donald Trump withdrew the U.S.](#)

### What is the role of the president in Iran’s theocracy?

The president is elected every four years in a general election—the latest is the 13<sup>th</sup> in the history of the Islamic Republic of Iran. According to the constitution, the president is chief of government, designating ministries in the cabinet and a few vice presidents. In practice and constitutionally, the president’s role in policy and administration is limited by the office of the Supreme Leader (head of state) and Khamenei’s representatives in the ministries and local administration. Regardless of who is elected president or into parliament (Majelis), a powerful role in Iran is executed by many advisory and control bodies composed of high-ranking Shia clergy. The scope of real autonomy of the president is also determined by an informal group with influence and family ties within the elite, as well as by the state security apparatus.

### What were the official results and turnout?

Seven candidates were admitted to the elections, although three resigned just one day before the voting. The formula of television debates did not follow the presentation of plans by candidates, rather the campaign was universally perceived as contested between Raisi and Abdolnasser Hemmati, the chief of the Central Bank in Rowhani’s cabinet. The official results were 62% for Raisi, 11% for retired Gen. Mohsen Rezaee, and only 8% for Hemmati. According to the government of Iran, turnout was 48.8% of eligible Iranians, down from previous elections when it was at 60-70%. Real participation likely might be lower given the popularity of “boycott” on social media and images of

empty polling stations. [Similar to the Majelis elections in 2020](#), these signals suggest a weakening of the social legitimacy of the ruling elite, which lacks attractive ideas for the future of Iranians.

### Who is Raisi, the new president of Iran?

Raisi is a 60-year-old clergyman who as a young politician and prosecutor was engaged in post-revolutionary show trials and waves of repression. Since the early stages of his career, he has been tied to conservative factions of the Iranian elite, including the Revolutionary Guards and Khamenei. Raisi in 2014-2016 was prosecutor general, and since 2019 head of the judiciary of Iran. He was also heading one of the biggest—and state budget subsidized—religious foundations. In 2017, Raisi participated in the elections as an opponent of Rowhani, gaining support then of 38% of the votes. Since 2019, he has been under U.S. sanctions due to his role during the pacification of the “Green Revolution” in 2009 and recurring protests in recent years. Raisi has claimed that he has reached a high rank of Shia clergyman—Ayatollah. This claim is questioned by his rivals and he is now officially presented with a lower rank—Hojatoleslam—which might become a complicating factor for the speculated succession of Ayatollah Khamenei (who is 82) by Raisi.

### What key internal problems does the Iranian government face?

Raisi has the support of conservatives, who dominate the Majelis, which might make it difficult for any positive solutions to Iran’s main social and economic problems. The

## PISM SPOTLIGHT

[most pressing challenge is management of the COVID-19 pandemic](#), which officially has resulted in 83,000 deaths and slow progress in vaccination—920,000 Iranians are fully vaccinated of the 82 million population. Raisi's cabinet likely will not be able to end the high inflation (50% in one year), corruption in the administration, and high structural unemployment among younger Iranians. It is highly likely that new government will focus instead on stabilisation of support from the poorer strata of society, Shia clergy, and huge security apparatus. Contrary to speculation about an easy succession of Khamenei by Raisi, this process may become unpredictable or disrupted by strong protests in Iran's main cities.

### **How will the new president influence Iranian foreign policy?**

The general direction and strategic goals of Iran in the Middle East will be maintained. It should be assumed that the new president will remain anti-Western, given his rhetoric is much harsher than the outgoing Rowhani. Raisi has rejected a direct meeting with U.S. President Joe Biden and is against the economic opening of Iran. There is also a lack of any credible information about his foreign visits and contacts. Implementation of Iran's regional policy will likely stay in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards, with a limited role for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and [continued tensions with Saudi Arabia](#) and [Israel](#). As long as Khamenei is alive, Raisi will not question [the original terms of the 2015 nuclear deal](#). Nuclear negotiations in Vienna likely will be successfully finished by the current Iranian negotiation team. This would allow a renewal of the agreement just before the swearing-in of the new government of Iran or at least by the end of autumn 2021.