



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات
ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Reports

Raisi's victory: Outstanding issues and questions at home and abroad

** Fatima Alsmadi*





Young Iranian woman celebrates Raisi's victory in Tehran [Reuters]

Following the contention over the Guardian Council's policies and calls to both boycott and [mobilise](#) for elections, cleric and Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi was elected as the Islamic Republic's eighth president. He succeeds President Hassan Rouhani, whose major political legacy was the 5+1 nuclear deal in 2015. Under President Trump, the United States withdrew from the agreement in 2018, imposing additional sanctions on Iran as part of its policy of "maximum pressure." The Rouhani government's failed gamble on the West and its inability to fulfil its economic promises was coupled with a deteriorating economy and declining living standards. The Guardian Council subsequently scaled down Iran's commitments under the nuclear deal, most importantly by bumping up the production of enriched uranium to 60% purity levels.

Calling the elections "a blow to the expectations of enemies," [Vahid Haghani](#), the executive director of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's office, said that with them the country had successfully navigated a "sensitive phase" in its history. "Given the conditions for candidacy, the disqualification of several candidates, and the boycott of the elections by figures like former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the presence of the three other candidates in the presidential race was a support for Raisi," he said. "The withdrawal of these three from the election would have been a major challenge to the regime."

The domestic front: Restoring trust

In his [first statement](#) after his election, Raisi said, “In the new government, we will do our utmost to resolve the predicament of people’s living conditions.” After a meeting with President Rouhani, who visited him to offer his congratulations, Raisi spoke about striving to live up to the trust placed in him by the people to accomplish the weighty task.

Affirming that he ran as an independent, Raisi said that in his 2017 and most recent presidential campaigns he had stressed that his government would not be partial to any particular faction. But the reformist [Sharq](#) newspaper wondered if he could indeed form a government that crossed factional lines and whether the coming government would include reformist and moderate ministers. How realistic is his talk about independence, the newspaper asked, in light of his clear hard-line leanings and the fact that he won the support of the overwhelming majority of hard-line figures and parties?

After winning the presidency in an election that saw the lowest turnout in the history of the Islamic Republic (49%), Ebrahim Raisi will need to perform politically in a way that shows he is the president of all Iranians and not simply hard-line Iran. This will require him to make accommodations on the domestic front and include figures with other outlooks in the political administration. But the scope for such compromises will remain limited by his primary interest in maintaining political harmony within his government and in its relationship with other decision-making institutions.

Thus far, there has been no clear indication of the composition of his cabinet, although leaks have suggested the possibility of an economic position for Saeed Mohammad, the former chair of the Khatam-al Anbiya Construction Headquarters (GHORB) run by the Revolutionary Guard. After being rejected for presidential candidacy, Mohammad declared his “unconditional support” for Raisi during the campaign. Commenting on the possibility of a cabinet position, he said, “If he believes it is appropriate, I will serve him as a soldier in the regime.” In the realm of foreign policy, the name of Saeed Jalili stands out. The chief negotiator on the nuclear deal and Khamenei’s representative on the National Security Council, Jalili would not be a favourite of Western parties. Another possibility is Ali Bagheri Kani, who served as Raisi’s top deputy in the judiciary. Figures from the Revolutionary Guard are being floated for the intelligence ministry, while [Brigadier General Amir Ali Hajizadeh](#),

currently the commander of the Revolutionary Guard's air force, is a strong contender for the defence portfolio. Known largely in connection with Iran's missile capabilities, he apologised to the public when the Revolutionary Guard's defence system downed a Ukrainian plane in the wake of Qassem Soleimani's assassination in 2020 and visited the victims' families. He is widely popular in Iran and has repeatedly affirmed that Iran will not negotiate on its missile programme and that no Iranian official has permission to do so. The missile programme is one of the issues the West is seeking to put on the table in its negotiations with Iran.

On the domestic front, Raisi's government must make some headway on the following issues:

- Continuing the anti-corruption campaign Raisi launched and earnestly pursued as chief justice
- Alleviating the public's living conditions, provide jobs and reduce unemployment, particularly among youth
- Strengthening the mechanisms Raisi discussed to contain the impact of sanctions by boosting domestic production and building an economy that is not dependent on the West and the nuclear agreement to function
- Restoring the public's trust in politics is first and foremost about economic achievements, but will also require initiatives for domestic reconciliation. Although he made no promises in this regard, Raisi may manage to end the house arrest of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, leaders of the Green Movement since the 2009 protests—something that Hassan Rouhani promised, but failed to do.

The foreign front: What about the nuclear deal?

Although Raisi's stance on relations with the United States is clear, he has nevertheless shown political pragmatism when discussing the nuclear agreement. He has said that his government would honour the agreement, but added that enforcement requires "a strong government." This suggests that whereas Rouhani sought to avoid escalation to preserve the deal, Raisi will pursue escalation when it comes to implementation of the agreement.

The West, and especially the United States, seems more anxious than ever to conclude an agreement during Hassan Rouhani's remaining time in office, until early August 2021. If an agreement is reached, this means that when Raisi takes the reins from Rouhani, he will enjoy [the fruits](#) of the new deal, most importantly the lifting of sanctions. On the other hand, others think such negotiations should be postponed until the new government is inaugurated,

among them Rafael Grossi, the Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Grossi recently [said](#) that attempts to revive the 2015 nuclear agreement should wait for the incoming Iranian government, emphasising that a new deal needs the political will of all parties. If negotiations are delayed until Rouhani vacates the presidency, Raisi would therefore form a new negotiating team and a new negotiating framework may even be formed. In any case, the process will be difficult with a president whom Washington has targeted directly for [sanctions](#).

[Hassan Ahmadian](#), a professor at Tehran University, believes that Iran's priorities in its dealings with the West will change under Ebrahim Raisi. He explains that President Rouhani and President-elect Raisi have two very different visions and personalities, which will naturally be reflected in Iran's foreign policy.

It is also clear that regional and international conditions will help Raisi's term get off to a good start. Despite sanctions, Iran has returned to the oil market. The latest reports indicate that it has stepped up [oil production](#), reaching 2.413 million barrels per day in April 2021, up from 2.328 million in March. This means that Iran is returning to the oil market despite sanctions, following declining production in recent years. Meanwhile, if sanctions are lifted, the [Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries \(OPEC\)](#) expects Iran to pump another 1.4 million barrels per day into the oil market within a relatively short period.

In the region: Resolution or complication of outstanding issues?

In his analysis, [Ahmadian](#) highlights the difference in foreign policy outlook between Rouhani and Raisi. Whereas the former "devoted most of his attention during his presidency to resolving problems with the international community, specifically the West, to pave the way for the resolution of domestic problems, the result being the conclusion of the nuclear agreement, Raisi believes the priority should be resolving issues with Iran's neighbours before moving to the international level." Raisi believes that Iran has levers to pressure the United States when it comes to the nuclear issue.

There are many indications, including his previous statements and stances, that Raisi is committed to supporting and protecting Iran's regional influence, and he has strong ties with the leadership of Hezbollah and other movements in the "Axis of Resistance." On one hand, this could mean stronger support for the role of the Quds Force and Revolutionary Guard. On

the other, consideration must be given to Iran's neighbours, including its Arab neighbours. During the presidential debates, Raisi spoke of the need for initiatives and compromises in the region. Yemen might be the entryway to such a political settlement, reducing tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The idea has been floated of talks to reach a political solution in the near future, to be held in Doha with the participation of Ansar Allah.

Conclusion

Pressing demands await Ebrahim Raisi on various fronts. Domestically, he must quickly prove that he is the president of all Iranians, not just the hard-line current. This means bringing people with different outlooks into his government as ministers and officials. He will need to make concrete gains in combating corruption, particularly since this was a campaign pledge, and alleviate severe economic pressures. This may require a politically pragmatic openness to negotiation. Indeed, experts believe that bringing Iran out of its economic recession depends to a large extent on the outcome of negotiations between Iran and the United States, as well as the policies of the incoming government.

Domestic politics may be more crucial for Raisi and his future, as well as for the hard-line current. According to Iranian sociologist Aman-Allah Gharaei, this depends on "[social capital](#)" and, more importantly, on social trust, which is built and polished and changes with time. It flows from the bottom to the top and vice-versa. Unlike natural and technological capital, which becomes more frayed the more it is consumed, with time, social capital becomes more fertile, effective and sustained, and it has more long-lasting returns." It is incumbent on Raisi to come to this realisation sooner rather than later.