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Iran

# Lessons of the presidential election in Iran

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**Iran's recent presidential election was called earlier than expected following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on May 19. It seems that the clique of Supreme Guide Khamenei, the dominant faction within the regime, seized this opportunity to make a tactical shift: to present a more acceptable face to Western countries in the hope of ending their heavy sanctions.**

The masquerade of the presidential election has been repeated every four years for more than forty years. It is reminiscent of the Woody Allen film "Take the Money and Run". In that comedy, a bank robbery is foiled when a second gang also robs the bank, and the customers vote that they would prefer the second gang to rob the bank and steal the money.

Talking about a "presidential election" in Iran is not a simple matter, and cannot be limited to a journalistic enumeration of events. In Iran, some words do not have the same meaning as elsewhere. Before entering into the analysis of the recent elections, the answers to the questions "who?", "how?" and "for what purpose?" are of paramount importance. For this reason, a minimum familiarization with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic is essential, and especially the role and power of the president in this unique system in the world whose name of "republic", with which it adorns itself, is misleading.

## The structural paradox of the political system

The Islamic Republic of Iran is today one of the most repressive and brutal dictatorships in the world. Following its rise to power after the 1979 revolution, the capitalist-theocratic regime immediately set about stifling the just democratic aspirations of the people of Iran. When it comes to the most basic rights, the situation in Iran is certainly much worse than it has ever been in its recent history.

Today in Iran there are many more political prisoners, arbitrary arrests and executions, physical and psychological torture than in the past. Respect for political freedoms and human rights is much less. Censorship and repression of artistic and intellectual freedoms are much more blatant than ever.

The working class is deprived of the most basic rights, such as the right to association, collective bargaining and the right to strike. Women are facing unprecedented oppression. The reactionary medieval laws of the religious regime officially reduce them to the status of second-class citizens. They are increasingly subjected to acts of violence, and are generally considered by the authorities as the "main source of evil" on Earth. The rights of national and religious minorities are under attack; the regime is pursuing a policy of military occupation of certain regions and is using the most brutal methods of repression to crush their resistance, for example in the Kurdistan region since the 1979 revolution and in Baluchistan recently.

Sociologically, Iran is one of the best-educated societies in the region: the illiteracy rate is less than 10 per cent, there are more than 2.5 million students in higher education (51 per cent of whom are female). Out of a total population of about 70 million, more than 60 per cent are under 30 years old. More than 70 per cent of the population is urbanized.

The country is dominated by a dictatorial and medieval political-legal system. In order to regulate the private and public lives of citizens, the Constitution and various laws are governed by a rigid interpretation of Islam that leaves

no room for democracy in general, and makes very few concessions to women and young people.

Politically, it is a unique dichotomous system that can be summed up by the formula: 90 per cent theocracy, 10 per cent republican mask.

## 90 per cent theocracy

The Shiite religious leaders are not elected by the population, but they nevertheless hold the real power in all areas. They are the backbone of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

- The Supreme Guide (God's representative on earth), is appointed by an assembly of clerics called the Assembly of Experts (see below). Ali Khamenei, Ayatollah Khomeini 's successor , has held this position since 1989 and rules despotically.
- The Council of Guardians of the Constitution is composed of six religious officials appointed by the Supreme Guide and six members appointed by the Islamic Parliament: it is the watchdog of the regime ,which supervises the conformity with Islam of the laws voted by the Parliament, as well as the list of candidates authorized to stand for election to the parliament and the presidency of the Republic.
- The Assembly of Experts appoints the Supreme Guide (see above); it is composed of 86 religious figures, elected for eight years according to a complex procedure leaving little choice to voters . Candidates are previously hand-picked by the Council of Guardians of the Constitution.
- The Discernment Council governs disputes between the Islamic Parliament and the Guardian Council of the Constitution, its members are appointed by the Supreme Guide.
- The judicial system ensures that Islamic laws are applied, it is controlled by ultra-conservative clerics. Its head is appointed by the Supreme Guide, to whom he reports personally.
- The armed forces include the regular army and the regime's ideological army (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), hereafter referred to by its Iranian name, Pasdaran). The main leaders of the regular army and the Pasdaran are appointed by the Supreme Guide and report only to him. The Pasdaran are tasked with fighting people considered opponents of the Islamic Revolution. They control the paramilitary militias (Basji) that operate in different localities.

## 10 per cent republican mask

At the forefront of elected officials are the President of the Republic and the members of the Islamic Parliament (Majles). All laws adopted by the Parliament must be deemed compatible with the Constitution and especially with Islam by the very conservative Guardian Council of the Constitution. The members of the government are appointed by the President. The Supreme Guide is largely involved in the management of affairs related to defence, security and foreign policy. In reality, in these areas, he has a monopoly on power. Let us give an example: a few years ago, Bashar al-Assad, the dictator of Syria, was invited by the regime. He was received by the Supreme Guide and the head of the Pasdaran. But the Minister of Foreign Affairs was not even informed, and he resigned as a result. It is clear that this system does not resemble a Republic at all. Over the last forty years, all the political efforts of the so-called "moderate" or "reformist" faction of the regime have consisted in trying to increase the weight of the republican aspects. In vain.

What the regime calls a "presidential election" has nothing to do with what takes place in most other countries. It is a real masquerade that can only lead to the election of the candidate previously chosen by the regime.

The relations between the executive, legislative and judicial branches are governed by Articles 113 and 110 of the Constitution. These articles stipulate in particular that the will of the Supreme Guide is binding on these three

branches.

# Who can run for president of the republic?

According to the Constitution, women (that is, half of the population!) are deprived of this right. The same applies to all people who are not Shiites. Candidates must also have accepted the principle of the absolute power of the Supreme Guide (this principle is the *velayat-e faqih*), and commit to obeying him. Candidates who meet all these criteria are then selected by the Council of Guardians of the Constitution. In the end, only people who are very close to the Supreme Guide can be candidates.

After the presidential elections, it is the Guide who appoints the new president (Article 110 of the Constitution). He also has the right to dismiss him. In important matters, the Supreme Guide is responsible for the actions of the head of the executive branch (Article 60 of the Constitution). Between 1997 and 2005, a "reformist" president like Khatami could not, for example, take a single step on the terrains that the Supreme Guide considered his "preserve". The same was true for anything affecting the Constitution and all institutions that have real power.

It is significant to note that during the 45 years of the Islamic Republic's existence, only one ministerial mandate was granted to a woman, following a vote of confidence in Parliament (this was the Ministry of Health).

# What is the function of a president in Iran?

The elected positions in Iran are comparable to those held by senior civil servants in the United States or France. In Iran, the most important decisions are made by officials who are not elected and who form the permanent backbone of the state. Those who implement the decisions, on the other hand, are elected. Khatami, the most reformist of past presidents, once described his position as being "the footman of the Supreme Guide." Elected officials can, however, cause headaches for policymakers through incompetence or ambition. Presidents can use their power to advance a particular goal. In Ahmadinejad's case, that goal was his personal power. A situation that the Guide Khamenei says must not be repeated.

The resolution of the Iranian economic crisis requires, in particular, the lifting of sanctions imposed by the major Western powers.

Khamenei also needs economists to direct the state's economic policy. In economics, he primarily ensures that wealth is distributed among the regime's important agencies, especially the Pasdaran and "Foundations" with considerable resources. For the rest, he leaves it to the state apparatus.

More than ever, Khamenei needs a president for whom the economy is one of the main priorities. This was not the case with the late President Raisi.

# The peculiarity of the 2024 election

This is the first time since constitutional reforms in 1988 that abolished the post of prime minister and strengthened presidential power that the Islamic Republic has held elections earlier than scheduled.

In Iran, elections are marked by a form of alternation every eight years between the two major tendencies of the

regime. One is called "conservative", the other "reformist" or "pragmatic". In Iranian popular jargon, they are called chol kon, seft kon (loosen, tighten).

During the eight years that a "conservative" presided over the government, oppression accelerated in Iran, as well as hostility towards Western countries, in an attempt to rally the regime's conservative base.

During the next eight years of "reformist" rule, some marginal freedoms were granted, usually raising hopes of a gradual reform of the regime. At the same time, the idea was developed that a rhetorical relaxation of foreign policy would relieve foreign pressure with an easing of sanctions. Until recently, this "reformist" policy recovered the political capital that the regime had lost, at home and abroad, during the previous eight years of "conservative" rule.

This pendulum swing has been the norm since Ayatollah Ali Khamenei became Supreme Guide in 1989. The presidency of the "conservative" Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989-1997), was followed by that of the "reformer" Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). Then came the turn of the "conservative" Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013), then the "pragmatist" Hassan Rohani (2013-2021), followed by the "conservative" Ebrahim Raisi (2021-2024).

In the background of this seesaw, there is a clan of the regime, called "Principalists", who consider that the Parliament and the presidency are useless and disturbing. This faction wants to dissolve them and replace them with a Council whose members would be appointed by the Supreme Guide, himself considered "representative of God". The Principalists openly speak of an Islamic government free from any element of republicanism. The nation in which the Principalists recognize themselves is that of the Ummah. This has simultaneously a human content (the faithful), political (the Islamic nation) and spiritual (the community of Muslims). The Supreme Guide of an Islamic government draws his legitimacy not from the people, but from God. We can read in a founding text of the Principalists: "The criterion of validity of the Constitution and the decisions of the Experts is the consent of the Supreme Guide. He cannot install the choice of the people. We do not have a republic alongside Islam, that would be a form of polytheism". The sudden death of President Raisi less than three years after taking office disorganized this Principalist clan.

The regime has felt less need to play this seesaw between "conservatives" and "reformers." Domestically, the "reformists" can no longer rally the people behind them. On the international stage, it is well known that the presidency is not a decision-making body. Moreover, American Democratic administrations usually allow the Islamic Republic some room for manoeuvre even if a "conservative" is in power. It should be noted that nuclear negotiations began under Barack Obama (an American "democrat") and Ahmadinejad (an Iranian "conservative") in March 2013. On the other hand, Donald Trump increased the pressure on Iran even though a "moderate" (Rohani) was governing the country.

## The handicap of famous people

Another characteristic of the regime is that well-known personalities never obtain the presidential post.

The last president widely known inside and outside Iran before becoming president was Rafsanjani, in power between 1989 and 1997. He was a companion of Khomeini, the founder of the regime. Rafsanjani had been commander-in-chief of the armed forces during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988).

On the contrary, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, Rohani and Raisi only became known to everyone after they ran for president.

The number of consecutive presidential terms is limited to two. Rafsanjani subsequently made two further attempts to become president again, but both failed: he lost the 2005 election, probably due to electoral fraud organized by the

government, and was then disqualified during his 2013 campaign.

The "reformer" Mir Hossein Mousavi, former prime minister in the 1980s, failed to be elected in 2009, again due to government fraud. This sparked the post-election protests known as the "Green Movement".

Khamenei fears that well-known figures who know how the system works will weaken the structure of the regime, which could call it into question. This is why he has preferred unknown and uncharismatic figures, especially when it comes to "reformists". The latest example is Pezeshkian who was elected president on July 6, and who was previously unknown to the vast majority of the population.

## The failure of President Raisi

Raisi's policy of bloodily suppressing the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement was not able to fully achieve its goals. The impasse of repressive policies regarding the veil and the continuation of women's resistance are clear examples of the regime's relative failure in this area. If we add to this the terrible economic situation in the country, we can speak of a complete failure.

Indeed, no one has any illusions about the country's real economic situation, with in particular rampant inflation and salaries well below the poverty line defined by the government authorities themselves. The housing crisis has become explosive, with astronomical property prices and ever more expensive rents. Housing has become increasingly out of reach for the majority of employees and retirees. Non-payment of pensions, unemployment, especially among young people and educated people, the spread of drugs and suicide among young people, etc., are the disastrous results of successive "reformist" and "fundamentalist" governments.

Added to this is the regime's impasse over lifting and reducing sanctions, as well as the abyss of its Middle East policy. In addition, all the regime's clans are afraid of the possible rise to power of Trump and the post-Khamenei era.

## A massive "fed up" feeling

Many Iranians, especially workers, women and youth, have been able to free themselves from the seesaw between "conservatives" and "reformists". They have relied on a long experience of trial and error, especially during the 2018 uprising. The slogan "Reformists, Principlists, the game is over" was a turning point that should be recorded as a great achievement on the path of the Iranian revolutionary movement. The protest movement of 2019 and then the "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement of 2022 have confirmed this.

The government is not in a position to carry out reforms that would improve the living conditions of the population. At the same time, it considers any retreat in the face of demands as dangerous for the continuation of the regime.

Many no longer want this corrupt regime, which during its 45-year rule has brought more than 70 per cent of the Iranian people below the poverty line. The only goals it has achieved are the deprivation of freedom and basic human rights, torture, terror and death.

## Calls for boycott

The social base of the regime has shrunk significantly. Now, a growing number of people not only boycott the

elections, but also condemn participation in this ridiculous spectacle.

In the end, the turnout in the first round of the presidential elections was 39.92 per cent, the lowest rate since the founding of the Islamic Republic. This is far from the approximately 80 per cent of the presidential elections at the end of the twentieth century. Figures of opposition to the regime, unions such as the Vahed or the teachers' union, political prisoners, as well as members of the diaspora, had called for a boycott of the vote, judging that the conservative and reformist camps represent two sides of the same coin.

"It is completely wrong to think that those who did not vote in the first round are against the system," said Supreme Leader Khamenei, while on the eve of the first round he had called on voters to vote massively.

Today, the regime considers its success in holding these so-called elections to be that it was able to organize them without incidents and without unforeseen consequences. Due to the call for a boycott, the regime did not find itself facing a movement comparable to that of 2009 with the slogan "Where is my voice?"

To save face, the regime can always put on a minimum show by calling on the Pasdaran, the Basij militias, the army, civil servants, as well as the families of these different bodies.

## A tactical change of the regime

The regime has realized that it can no longer govern with the usual methods of cheating and repression. The failure of the ultraconservative Raisi has pushed the hard core of the regime to want to make adjustments intended to give the regime some breathing space in the face of a mass movement that has no intention of abating, given the conditions mentioned above.

It is clear that for Supreme Guide Khamenei, the early presidential election after Raisi's death created an unexpected opportunity to change the foreign policy line. Khamenei seized this opportunity without hesitation.

## The first round of voting June 28

On Friday, June 28, 61 million voters were called to the polls to elect the new president. Out of 86 candidates, 6 had been authorized to run. Masoud Pezeshkian, the only "reform" candidate allowed to run, came out on top, with 42.5 per cent of the vote, compared to 38.6 per cent for his main rival, the ultraconservative Said Jalili.

Said Jalili is nicknamed the "living martyr" for having been wounded at the age of 21 during the Iran-Iraq war. A negotiator on the nuclear issue between 2007 and 2013, he had firmly opposed the agreement finally concluded in 2015 (Vienna Agreement on the Iranian nuclear program - JCPOA - Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) between Iran and Western powers, including the United States. This agreement imposed restrictions on Iranian nuclear activity in exchange for an easing of sanctions. The nuclear negotiations are currently at an impasse following the unilateral withdrawal of the United States in 2018, which reimposed severe economic sanctions on Tehran.

Jalili had previously run unsuccessfully in the 2013 and 2021 presidential elections. In 2021, he withdrew from the race at the last moment in favor of former President Ebrahim Raisi. This time, as soon as he filed his candidacy, Jalili pledged to preserve the legacy of President Raisi. Supported by the "Front for the Stability of the Islamic Revolution", the most right-wing faction on the political spectrum, Said Jalili rolled out all the ideological fundamentals

of his camp during the electoral campaign: social ultraconservatism, economic isolationism and an openly expressed distrust of the West.

Masoud Pezeshkian was previously unknown to the general public; a surgeon by training, he had been Minister of Health under the reformist President Khatami (1997-2005). He defines himself as a "reformer". In particular, he wants to bring Iran out of isolation and has declared that he wants to put an end to the "morality police".

Pezeshkian 's main public supporter was the former "reformist" president Khatami. Moreover, Masoud Pezeshkian an unambitious and obedient reformist, has repeatedly expressed his unwavering allegiance to the Supreme Guide and has assumed the role of a lackey. In the past, Pezeshkian had shown himself to be a follower of Khomeini's successor and the "Imam's line" by repressing students, as well as participating in a bloody so-called "cultural revolution" to Islamize universities.

With a parliament with a "conservative" majority and control of the judiciary, the Khamenei clan is not afraid of this "reformist" candidate.

## Between the two rounds

During the debates, both candidates agreed on the same priority: the country's economic recovery. During Raisi's four years in office inflation was around 40 per cent per year, while unemployment continued to rise against a backdrop of endemic corruption. "We live in a society where many beg in the streets," Pezeshkian said . The most urgent thing to do to fix this, he said, is to act "immediately" to get US sanctions lifted and "repair the economy. "

Sanctions have been further tightened since the Gaza war and Iran's support for the Palestinian Hamas. Pezeshkian is therefore banking on negotiating a new agreement. "Historically, no government has been able to achieve results by being locked in a cage. "

Pezeshkian 's election (July 6)

In the second round, voters faced a forced choice: an "ultraconservative," a hardliner among the hardliners of the theocracy, hostile to any concession to Western countries; against a "reformist," a supporter of a rapprochement with the United States. It would have been difficult to find two more antagonistic candidates.

Pezeshkian's main supporter, former President Khatami, called on voters to turn out to "prevent Iran's situation from getting even worse ." Without publicly showing his support for Pezeshkian, the Supreme Guide Khamenei hinted through his puppets that he favoured Pezeshkian's election .

Masoud Pezeshkian won with 53.6 per cent (16 million votes) to the detriment of his rival, Said Jalili, who received 44.3 per cent (13 million votes). But in the end, less than 27 per cent of voters voted for Pezeshkian. This is the lowest percentage of votes in the 14 presidential elections held since the February 1979 Revolution. The previous record belonged to Ebrahim Raisi , who was elected by just over 30 per cent of the electorate. These figures should be taken with caution, however, as they are those published by the regime.

The day after his election, Pezeshkian appointed former foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, known to be pro-Western, as his diplomatic adviser. The latter was one of the architects of the nuclear deal concluded in 2015 with the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, France, Russia and China. With this appointment, he sent a signal to Western governments. Although strategic policies, including those relating to the nuclear issue, are defined by the Supreme Guide, the tactics and the way in which they are implemented depend on the skills and will of the government team. Under the presidency of Raisi, there was an incompetent team, which understood nothing about diplomacy and negotiations. It failed to achieve anything.



On July 18, two weeks after the end of the elections, *Tassnim*, the official newspaper of the Pasdaran, published the following conversation between Farid Zakaria (the editor of the American magazine *Foreign Affairs*, closely linked to the Council on Foreign Relations think tank ) and Bagheri Kani (Said Jalili 's deputy on the Supreme National Security Council, deputy foreign minister under Raisi, head of the Islamic Republic's negotiating team and acting foreign minister after the helicopter crash):

Farid Zakaria: "I noticed that you mentioned the possibility of nuclear negotiations and even moving towards a new nuclear agreement or returning to the previous agreement..."

Bagheri Kani: "We have an agreement concluded in 2015. This agreement was finalized with the agreement of Iran and the 5+1. We are still a member of the JCPOA. America withdrew from this agreement and caused damage to this agreement. America has not yet managed to return to the JCPOA. Therefore, the goal we are pursuing is the revival of the 2015 agreement (JCPOA)."

## And now ?

Getting Iran out of its multiple crises requires secularizing and democratizing the entire state system: all executive, judicial and legislative institutions, as well as laws and regulations. This path can only be opened with the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

Since its birth, the Iranian bourgeoisie, all tendencies combined, has been linked to religion and the power of the clergy by many visible and invisible, direct and indirect links. Some factions, such as the monarchists, the People's Mujahideen (PMOI) and the national-religious parties, openly defend this dependence. As for the liberal factions of the opposition, they do not have the radicalism necessary to overcome this obstacle.

Only a mass popular revolution, based on the majority of workers, can achieve complete and democratic secularism.

The political contradictions in Iranian society are not limited to conflicts between ruling factions. These reflect conflicts of interest between exploiters and exploited over:

- sharing the fruits of the exploitation of workers,
- control of resources and how to "manage society",
- how to "interact" with foreign powers in order to gain a share of regional power.

These struggles within the different sectors of capitalism and their reflection in political struggles, weaken the regime to a certain extent. They can facilitate the opening of opportunities for the expansion of the struggles of the working masses. But the exploited and oppressed must act independently on the basis of their own goals, their own strategy, their own tactics, and above all their own organizations. Only in this way will they be able to properly take advantage of the opportunities created by the internal conflicts between the ruling factions. The alternative to the current regime of thieves and murderers can only be socialism.

The slogan of "active boycott" has this time succeeded in keeping the majority of the masses away from the ballot boxes. Despite the tricks and frauds of the regime as well as the propaganda of the "reformists", this is a relative success for the revolutionary opposition in Iran.

August 7, 2024

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