

Iran's presidential election 2021: what to expect from Ebrahim Raisi's first term

Luciano Zaccara | Research Assistant Professor, Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University | @LucianoZaccara 

Theme

This analysis explores the implications of Ebrahim Raisi's victory in the 2021 Iranian presidential election. First it analyses the process that drove him to victory, the defeat of the reformist and pragmatists, and the impact of the elections on the Iranian political system. Secondly, it describes the foreign-policy decision-making mechanism and how Raisi will build his power structure within such mechanism. Third, it tries to foresee the possible Iranian foreign policy during his first term in office.

Summary

Ebrahim Raisi won Iran's presidential election in an engineered electoral process that guaranteed his victory while avoiding any surprises, as has occurred several times before. This will force him to create his own power structure within the political system and to strengthen his alleged bid for succession to the Leadership. Despite the strong support from conservative factions, and even the Leader, Ali Khamenei, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Raisi will not be able to implement his foreign policy initiatives without a consensus within the Iranian foreign policy complex, headed by Khamenei but also including many other personalities and institutions. Despite his strong stand on certain policy issues, mainly the relations with the US and the nuclear deal, Raisi will be constrained by the inherent pragmatism in Iran's foreign policy, as well as the pre-existing conditions and signed agreements with which he must comply. This will likely contribute to prevent further radical changes in Iran's foreign policy in the coming four years.

Analysis

The election of Ebrahim Raisi

As expected, there were no surprises and the engineered electoral process of 18 June 2021 achieved its goal: the triumph of Ebrahim Raisi. Since 1993, when Hashemi Rafsanjani achieved victory almost unopposed, the political establishment had been unable to guarantee their candidate's victory. The lack of unity within the traditional conservative camp and the appearance of unexpected charismatic or promising candidates, such as Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad or Hassan Rouhani, contributed to their failure to achieve the presidency in the six electoral processes held since then. In June 2021 the Guardian Council was able to eliminate all the candidates that might have endangered Raisi's victory, and the core conservative factions claimed

the presidency, the most important elective institution in the country. Even though the conservatives now control most of the elective and non-elective government institutions, this does not mean that the intra-elite power struggle will disappear. However, it might facilitate agreements in particular domestic and foreign policy decisions in the coming four years.

Ebrahim Raisi, until now the head of the Judiciary since his appointment in March 2019, has occupied many core positions in the Islamic Republic's institutional framework, such as the Direction of the Astan-e Qods Razavi Foundation in Mashad (2016-19), the General Prosecution of Iran (2014-16) and the Assembly of Experts (since being elected in 2006 as the South Khorasan province representative), while he has served as Deputy Head of the Judiciary (2004-14), Head of the General Inspectorate (1994-2004) and Head of the Tehran and Karaj Prosecution Office since 1981. His background and education are mainly those of a religious jurist, mostly at Qom seminaries. Although he is usually known as an *ayatollah*, his clerical credentials are contested by many, who claim that he should be considered only as *hojat-ol-eslam*. He was included in the US Executive Order 13876 of 24 June 2019, which designated Iranian government officials who prevented free and fair elections. He could be investigated due to his alleged participation in the mass executions of 1988, according to the UN Human Rights Rapporteur Javaid Rehman.

Even though the Leadership is the most powerful position in Iran, the occupant of the Presidency has a certain significance and, at least since 1997, a relatively high impact on foreign policy. Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani made their own marks on Iran's foreign policy, devised various international actions and diplomatic initiatives and prompted different and opposed reactions among both neighbouring countries and great powers. Similarly, Raisi's victory will also have domestic and international implications due to his own background and style, as well as the circumstances surrounding his victory and future tenure as President. Therefore, a meticulous analysis is required to understand future trends in Iranian politics and the impact of his victory on the country's political system, foreign policy decision-making complex and overall foreign policy orientation and behaviour.

According to many analysts, particular attention should be given to the fact that Raisi could be the chosen successor of Ali Khamenei in the republic's Leadership. This alleged goal will certainly condition Raisi's domestic and international political performance since he needs to show the political establishment and all Iranians that he deserves the position and is the right person to lead the republic following Khamenei's demise.

The impact of Raisi's victory on the political system

The Iranian political system has never been monolithic despite the repeated claims to the contrary in the press and among the regime's critics at home and abroad. Instead, it has always been a factionalised system since the establishment of the Islamic Republic

in 1979. Many references were made to the *hojjatieh* and *maktabi*¹ in the 1980s when the ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was still alive. The same occurred after his death in 1989, with the coexistence of different political factions: pragmatists, traditional conservatives, reformists and radical conservatives. The factions have always been involved in the struggle for power, affecting not only domestic policies but also foreign policy-making and outputs.

The Iranian political system is also very dynamic, and politicians and groups have been moving within the limits of the Islamic Revolutionary ideology between conservatism and reformism over the past four decades. This happened with Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mir Hussein Mousavi, Mehdi Karrubi, Hassan Rouhani, Ali Larijani, Ali Motahhari and others that were considered radicals in the 1980s and 1990s, but eventually became reformists, pragmatists or moderate conservatives. The fact that Larijani, who was the Director of IRIB (the Iranian broadcasting corporation) and is the Leader's representative in several institutions, was the reformist and pragmatist's hope to defeat Raisi in these past elections speaks volumes about how Iranian politicians have been moving across factional lines, seeking to attract more popular support to the detriment of the establishment. This factional characteristic of the Iranian political system converted some of them into the type of candidates desired by the West and by neighbouring states, who saw them as 'moderates', compared with those still considered radicals, such as Raisi, Saeed Jalili and Baqer Ghalibaf. However, it should be borne in mind that in 2005 both Rafsanjani and Larijani were presidential candidates and that both were considered the government's preferences, which the Iranians decided to back, while they were not the candidates desired by certain Western countries, who preferred reformists such as Baqer Moin and Mehdi Karrubi instead.

Following Raisi's recent victory, the reformist and pragmatist camps seem to have lost their grip on Iranian society, with two electoral defeats in a row (legislative in 2020 and presidential in 2021), and indeed lost most of their positions within the elective and non-elective political structure. Without the protection provided by Rafsanjani, who died in 2017, with Khatami politically banned, Mousavi and Karrubi in house arrest since 2011, Rouhani and Zarif relatively discredited, and no other emerging political figure attracting popular support, the chances of recovering a share in the elective arena in the short term seem very slim. However, this does not mean that the political system is now unified, monolithic and that there will be no discrepancies. During this last electoral process it was already possible to discern some discrepancies that cannot be considered misleading but a tangible demonstration that the factional disputes between reformists, pragmatists and conservatives will now be transferred to the inner conservative circles.

First, two days before the release of the official list of candidates by the Guardian Council, Fars News, affiliated with the IRGC (also known as *Sepah-e Pasdaran*), leaked the list

¹ These terms refer to factions that existed within the sole party remaining after the 1979 revolutions, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). They differed in their support for certain policies, such as the Islamisation of society, state control over the economy and foreign policy. The IRP was dissolved by Khomeini in 1987, but factionalism remained the most salient feature of Iran's political system. For more details see Ariabarzan Mohammadi (2014), *The Path Dependent Nature of Factionalism in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Discussion Paper, Durham University, HH Sheikh Nasser Al-Sabah Programme, Durham; and Mehdi Moslem (2002), *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, Syracuse University Press.

of approved candidates a couple of days before the official release on 26 May. This had never happened before and was considered by many as an attempt to pressure the Guardian Council about possible approved candidates that might have endangered the IRGC's presumed preferred candidate, Raisi. The IRGC Commander, Major General Hossein Salami, also officially congratulated Raisi immediately after his victory.

Secondly, when the list was released, the President, the head of the Expediency Council, Sadeq Larijani, and even the Leader himself showed their disagreement with the disqualification of, at least, Ali Larijani. The list of candidates was so unbalanced towards the conservatives, leaving no room for competition, that even Raisi complained about the limited options available to Iranian voters. However, and despite expectations of a possible retraction from the Guardian Council after Khamenei's remarks, the Council replied promptly, dismissing any further changes in the decision taken.

Third, the results showed that, despite Raisi gaining 18 million votes, two more than in 2017,² he did not manage to get more votes than any of the three previous Presidents, or to attract many more than those who had already voted for him and were ideological votes. This means that despite the formal support of other conservative groups, the latter did not or could not mobilise their social bases to vote in favour of a single conservative candidate.

Raisi and Iran's foreign-policy making

It is worth remembering that Iran's revolutionary foreign policy principles were devised by the founder and first Leader of the Islamic Republic, ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in 1979, and sustained by his successor, the current Leader Ali Khamenei, since 1989. But this does not mean that there are no other trends and opinions on foreign policy issues within the Iranian political establishment. Indeed, the last three Presidents had different foreign policy orientations, with very distinctive outcomes, diplomatic strategies and actions. The Iranian foreign policy complex is formed by decision-making units³ comprising a combination of different personalities and institutions, among them those that formally and informally take part in the political structure, such as the Leadership, the Presidency, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Supreme National Security Council, the *Majlis* (Parliament) Committee on Security and Foreign Policy, the IRGC, the National Army (*Artesh*) and the Expediency Council.

Iran's foreign-policy decision-making units perform depending on who is occupying the top positions and how much relative power they have within the political establishment to influence the collective decision mechanism. The Leader has the last word in every decision, but these decision-making units set foreign policy orientations, make decisions and implement policies. Because of this, it is possible to understand that, despite Khamenei's alleged support for the candidacy of Ebrahim Raisi, who has been very

² For a more detailed analysis on the election results and its meaning, see Zaccara, L. (2021), *Iran Presidential elections 2021: What the numbers say*, OPEMAM Analysis (<http://www.opemam.org/node/11757?language=en>).

³ M. Hermann (2001), 'How decision units shape foreign policy', *International Studies Review*, vol. 33, nr 2, p. 47-81.

critical of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), there is still a round of negotiations in Vienna with the outgoing Foreign Minister. If there had been no approval from the Leader, the negotiations would never have taken place. Nevertheless, on the other hand, if it were not because Rouhani's administration still influenced a collective decision, the Vienna meeting would have not occurred.

Raisi's situation within the political system, with a victory that shows his limited popularity and the need to deliver both internally and internationally, despite the resistance narrative and anti-US stance, can provide some preliminary ideas of how he will perform in the coming four years in office. More importantly, understanding such decision units' mechanisms and functions can help to foresee Raisi's first initiatives on issues such as the nuclear deal.

At his first [press conference](#), Raisi set out the ideological framework of his foreign policy, with no concessions to the US on the renegotiation of the JCPOA or the Iranian missile programme, his interest in [strengthening ties with China and Russia](#) and the priority to be given to neighbouring countries –the Arab Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia– with which Iran expects to have cordial and better relations than heretofore. Despite the defiant tone of his speech, he showed a predisposition for dialogue, contrary to the first public presentations by Ahmadinejad back in 2005, with whom Raisi has often been compared. Raisi is building up his image internally, regionally and internationally, while at the same time shoring up his power support structure within the establishment. Even though the Presidency is relatively powerful, moreover with solid support from the Leadership and non-political actors such as the IRGC, Raisi needs to count on the support of the Majlis, the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council to get his legislative proposals approved and to avoid a backlash in his foreign policy initiatives. So far, the first two seem to be aligned with him, but the Expediency Council, now led by Sadeq Larijani, might represent a counterbalance in some particular cases.

Moreover, in his bid for Leadership succession, Raisi needs to demonstrate he is ideologically fit for the position and a good administrator, politician and public speaker. While the first one seems to have been achieved, the last three roles were not performed noticeably until now. In addition, being sanctioned by the US may limit his travels and presence, for instance, at the UN General Assembly meetings, which is adding an extra handicap to his diplomatic agenda.

Raisi's recent [meeting](#) as President-elect with the other presidential candidates to discuss possible agendas to solve the country's problems is a step towards achieving internal and international recognition as a good administrator and politician. The debate is now centred on the possible cabinet that Raisi will choose for his first term. Opinions are divided between those who claim that mainly hardliners and politicians with IRGC backgrounds will occupy the most important positions, and those who consider that, due to his long-term objective of becoming an accepted leader and being popular, his cabinet will be more inclusive within the conservative and moderate camps. Some are already advising Raisi on foreign policy issues, like Saeed Jalili, Hossein Amirabdollahian and Ali Bagheri Kani, and one of them will likely be chosen as the next Foreign Minister.

Raisi's possible foreign policy

The most cited reference made by Raisi during his first press conference was his refusal to a possible meeting with US President Joe Biden. This seemed to predict a conflictive approach towards the nuclear negotiations and the US, although this may not be the right interpretation. In fact, no Iranian President has ever met a US President in person since 1979: not even Hassan Rouhani with Barack Obama during the nuclear negotiations that led to the signing of the JCPOA in 2015. Conscious of the controversy that such a meeting could have provoked, the diplomats of both administrations agreed to only have a personal telephone conversation between the two Presidents in November 2013, when Rouhani was attending the UN General Assembly in New York. The negotiations on the agreement, along with the photographs including the Iranian and US flags, always involved Secretary of State John Kerry and Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif. Therefore, and as occurred during President Ahmadinejad's mandates (2005-13) and with many before him, every time that it was required, unofficial and official conversations between the US and Iran had actually taken place at different levels.

A likely scenario after President Raisi's inauguration in August is one with a JCPOA renegotiation deal already reached in Vienna still under Rouhani's administration. The achievement of such an agreement would indeed liberate Raisi from starting his mandate negotiating directly with the US, something that he was strongly opposed to being his first foreign policy objective. However, this does not mean he will not comply with a deal signed by the outgoing administration and the negotiation team in Vienna. At the end of the day, if there is a negotiation, it is because Khamenei approved it and Raisi is obliged to comply. This compliance would demonstrate his respect for the decisions taken by a previous President with a different ideology, contrary to what occurred with President Trump in 2018. Indirectly, Raisi would be giving a signal to the international community that Iran's compliance with international agreements does not depend on the political orientation of the President, but rather on the interests of the state. Raisi made this explicit clarification at the conference, reaffirming the inherent pragmatism of Iran's foreign policy.

Despite the strong stand that Raisi made during his election campaign and his speeches after his victory, Iran's nuclear diplomacy will not change drastically, and pragmatism will be the core defining guideline of his foreign policy. Under the umbrella of the anti-nuclear weapon *fatwa* (religious edict) issued by Khamenei in 2005,⁴ Raisi will reaffirm, as Rouhani did, Iran's rights to acquire a complete cycle of nuclear energy under the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) and under the supervision of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). However, the steps towards de-escalation after the renegotiation of the JCPOA could be more challenging. Mistrust in the US and international organisations could justify the delay in returning to the pre-Trump situation (if the JCPOA is finally re-floated, as expected).

⁴ The first reference of Ali Khamenei's 2005 *fatwa* can be found at the IRNA website at <https://web.archive.org/web/20130810154009/http://www.mathaba.net/news/?x=302258>. A simplified statement can be seen at Ali Khamenei's official website at <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=228#2790>, in Persian, English and Spanish.

In terms of Iranian regional policy, mainly towards the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Raisi is expected to continue with the negotiations started with Saudi Arabia to reduce bilateral tensions. It should also be borne in mind that every time a new President assumes office this has been a common initiative, which shows how important it is to avoid escalating tensions in the region, mainly with Saudi Arabia, to the entire Iranian political elite regardless of ideological orientation. Raisi stressed this idea at his first press conference, including a possible re-opening of embassies.

Finally, and bearing in mind that Raisi will begin his tenure with an international accusation against him on human rights abuses, his Presidency will try to avoid further controversies in that respect, focusing on economic issues rather than social and cultural ones. This may lessen societal constraints, mainly against youngsters, preventing a new and expected brain drain that would harm even further the already crippled Iranian economy. The fact that Iran is currently facing the fifth wave of the COVID-19 pandemic triggered by the Delta variant, and the need to slow down its spread without damaging even further the economy, would certainly add an extra conditioning factor to the country's foreign policy initiatives. The emphasis on the resistance economy, import substitution, indigenous medicine production and the reliance on local production will occupy a relevant portion of the presidential narrative.

Conclusion

Ebrahim Raisi became Iran's President in an electoral process that raised some controversy due to the disqualification of all other possible contenders. Known as a hardliner, and with a turbulent background in the Iranian judiciary, his stance on foreign policy would seem to predict a stronger tone on certain issues, such as Iran's nuclear diplomacy and its relations with the US. However, many factors could presumably prevent Raisi from promoting drastic changes on Iranian foreign policy orientations. First, the existence of a complex mechanism of decision making. Secondly, his need to reaffirm his possible candidacy to become the next Leader and his international position as a legitimate President. Third, the already constrained economic and international conditions with which Raisi will start his term in office. Pragmatism will therefore be the most likely the driving force behind his foreign policy decisions, which could contribute to guarantee the respect for a JCPOA re-negotiation deal reached in Vienna, still during Rouhani's mandate.