

Khamenei's Presidential Choice: Weak Reformer or Strong Hardliner

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Jun 20, 2024

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Brief Analysis

Iranian presidential elections often produce surprise results, so a victory by Pezeshkian, the one reformist candidate, cannot be ruled out.

Three of Iran's last four presidents were surprises whose election was not expected when the campaign began. Will the next election, to be held June 28, bring another surprise? Will the reform candidate, Massoud Pezeshkian, at least make it to the second round?

Of the six candidates, five are hardliners with rather close ties to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has never let someone close to the IRGC win the presidency. In fact, three of the last four winners had poor relations with the IRGC: Mohammad Khatami got an open letter from senior Guard commanders warning him they would act if he did not crack down on protesters; Mahmoud Ahmadinejad had such poor relations with the IRGC that in one live televised address to senior commanders, he referred to them as "brother smugglers," complaining about their corruption; and in 2013, Hassan Rouhani won against several candidates openly preferred by IRGC leadership. To be sure, the late Ebrahim Raisi had good relations with the IRGC, but he never served in the Guards.

Khamenei's approach of keeping the IRGC out of the presidency fits his general style of preventing powerful figures from emerging. Most famously, he refuses to allow talk about who will succeed him and has not named a deputy. In addition, he has created a multitude of competing institutions with overlapping responsibilities and has moved previously powerful figures into shadowy positions at those institutions or made them into one of many advisors.

As a result, past Iranian presidents have not been particularly powerful. Khatami complained openly that he had no authority over some of his most important cabinet members, including the minister of intelligence, who had been chosen by Khamenei. When Raisi took office, it was widely expected he would be more powerful than his predecessors because he was believed to enjoy broad support among the ruling elite, including close relations with

Khamenei. That did not prove decisive, however, and he was not particularly consequential in decisionmaking.

This year's emergency presidential race has two candidates who are openly ambitious and have powerful circles of associates and supporters. The fanatics of the revolution, organized in what they call the Paydari camp, have given Saeed Jalili vigorous support, campaigning loudly on social media, where they argue that Pezeshkian represents Tehran University while Jalili represents Imam Sadiq University—the former institution being where many technocrats studied, and the latter being home to many ideologues close to the IRGC. State television—controlled by Imam Sadiq alumni, some of them Jalili relatives—has blatantly favored Jalili. Parliamentary speaker Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf is no shrinking violet either. He began the campaign as the presumed front-runner based in part on extensive ties from his various command positions—head of the national police, head of the IRGC Air Force, speaker of the Majlis—and his many business dealings.

If either Jalili or Qalibaf became president, he would seek the limelight—not necessarily something Khamenei wants. The Supreme Leader may be more comfortable with a low-key, little-known technocrat and mild reformer with a proven track record of not rocking the boat; in other words, Pezeshkian. That would arguably continue the pattern shown with Raisi—a president who does not matter much—though this time with enough reform credentials to quiet some regime critics. Alternatively, Khamenei may prefer someone with a firmer ideological stance, even if said figure has ambitions to be powerful. With an eye toward his own eventual succession, Khamenei has shaped all Iranian institutions so that those most committed to his ideology are in power. After all, he was recently comfortable with a very powerful figure atop the IRGC-Qods Force—the late Qasem Soleimani—though he seemed to be the exception that proves the rule.

If the latter option proves correct, why did Khamenei permit Pezeshkian to run at all? The Supreme Leader has always touted the importance of voter turnout as a way to showcase the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic, which presumably was an important reason to allow a reform-minded candidate to run. But the big mystery is, why only one reformer but five hardliners? There has been a great deal of social media commentary across the political spectrum saying that this combination works to the advantage of the reformers, whose votes will be concentrated, while hardline votes will be dispersed among the five.

A related question is why do Jalili and Qalibaf both remain in the race given that they do not disagree much on the issues? The likeliest answer is that both have strong egos and are convinced that the other should withdraw. In practice, whether they both remain in the race is up to Khamenei. If he “counsels”—also known as “orders”—one of them to withdraw, that would strongly suggest he prefers Pezeshkian to lose. But if both remain in the race, that could be a sign that he is prioritizing a large turnout. In either case, the regime has much experience in announcing results that fit the authorities' preferences no matter what the voters do.

Much of the commentary about Pezeshkian's chances has focused on his Azeri background, which he shamelessly promotes, and his reformist credentials, which are modest but real. He tries to play to all camps. When campaigning in Qom, he called himself a “principalist,” the name used by hardline ideologues, yet he has been endorsed by prominent reformers, including Khatami, as well as less hardline figures like Mohammad Javad Zarif, who has vigorously campaigned for him as the bearer of Rouhani's legacy. However, Pezeshkian's reform credentials may not matter much, as there is considerable evidence that Iranians are exhausted by politics and prefer not to get involved in supporting the reforms so many want. It is by no means clear how many ordinary people will turn out to vote; it is certainly many more than if Pezeshkian were not on the ballot, but not necessarily enough to even force a second round, which will take place if no candidate gets a majority in the first.

The campaign's five scheduled debates could have considerable influence on the voting. Jalili is often described as making a poor impression and did terribly in the 2013 debates. In this year's first debate—an economic policy discussion held June 17—no candidate fell on his face, but none landed knockout blows either. Pezeshkian suggested

Iran must do more to address international concerns, underscoring the urgency of implementing the anti-money laundering and financial transparency reforms called for by the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) as a key step toward easing foreign investment. Pezeshkian and Mostafa Pour Mohammadi—a cleric candidate who has little chance, though he has run an effective campaign—were the two who decried the impact of sanctions, while the others **downplayed their importance (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehran-makes-gains-concerns-persist-about-regime-vulnerability>)**.

What does all this mean for the United States and the West? The June 24 debate on foreign policy will give some guidance. That said, whoever wins the presidency will not necessarily have much impact on the substance of Iran’s policies, though he may influence the tone. Pezeshkian has emphasized that he will not introduce dramatic changes. In his interview with state television—each candidate gets one—he stated, “We are not going to change the direction, and the general policy is stability.” His comments about the National Development Plan—“We are not going to write a new plan, and we are not going to announce a new policy in the country”—could apply to his general approach if elected. He would bring a less confrontational tone, less strident denunciations of “the evils of the West,” and more recognition that Iran must take steps rather than just blaming others. But none of that would mean he would support reducing aid to the “resistance front” against Israel and the West or making **substantial changes (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iaea-censure-risks-iranian-escalation>)** in the nuclear program—not that these would be within his authority even if he were so minded.

Jalili, on the other hand, would bring a more confrontational tone, though again, it is by no means clear how much the substance of Iran’s policy would change. Qalibaf would presumably want to show that he can make a deal with the West, though there are no indications he would lobby for any real change in the policies to which the United States objects. In short, the election will not have much effect on setting Iran’s foreign policy, which is determined by the Supreme Leader and the rest of the hardline establishment.

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