



Policy Analysis /
PolicyWatch 3490

A Race of One? Iran Slashes Its Presidential Candidates List

by [Omer Carmi](#)

May 25, 2021

Also available in

[Arabic](#) /

[Farsi](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Omer Carmi](#)

Omer Carmi was a 2017 military fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

The regime is seemingly removing any obstacle that might prevent Ebrahim Raisi from winning the presidency and, perhaps, succeeding Khamenei down the road, but the risk of further eroding its internal legitimacy is high.

Iran's presidential campaign offered up a "May surprise" this week, with the Guardian Council announcing that several prominent candidates had been disqualified from running in the June 18 vote. Although mass disqualifications are nothing new for the regime, some of the names on this year's chopping block were unexpected: only seven of the forty candidates who met the minimum registration criteria earlier this month were ultimately approved to run, and the finalists do not include high-profile figures such as former Majlis speaker Ali Larijani, Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri, or former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

So far, Larijani and other disqualified candidates have announced that they accept the council's judgment and will not ask Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to overturn it. Yet other prominent figures have been openly critical. Larijani's brother Sadegh, a former judiciary chief, called the decision "indefensible." Disqualified reformist Mostafa Tajzadeh went further, arguing that "no responsible citizen should surrender" to the council's move, then declaring that the decision aimed to topple the "republican" part of the Islamic Republic. Even Ebrahim Raisi—the frontrunner who stands to benefit most from the disqualifications—expressed concern, noting that he has been trying to make the election more competitive and participatory. Yet his statement was probably self-serving, meant to build his legitimacy and counter mocking public references to the race as "Raisi vs. Raisi"—and, perhaps, preserve his chances of succeeding Khamenei down the road.

Who's on the Final List?

The seven candidates who made the cut lean heavily toward the conservative side of the map, with two minor non-conservative names added as a fig leaf for the regime's latest power move. The most prominent conservative is **Ayatollah Raisi**, the judiciary chief who is now widely seen as Khamenei's favorite candidate after weeks of implicit endorsements and the withdrawal of various senior conservatives (e.g., former Basij chief Ali Reza Afshar, former defense minister Hossein Dehghan, former oil minister Rostam Ghasemi).

Four other top conservative/hardline figures do appear on the final list, at least for the time being: former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) chief and current Expediency Council secretary **Mohsen Rezaii**, former Supreme National Security Council secretary **Saeed Jalili**, former Majlis member **Alireza Zakani** (who was disqualified from two past presidential contests), and deputy Majlis speaker **Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi**. If history is any indicator, however, most of them will likely withdraw before the finish line and unite behind Raisi as the main conservative candidate.

Two non-conservative candidates made the list as well: **Abdolnaser Hemmati**, the Central Bank governor who is affiliated with late Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's party but is seen as more of a technocrat than a political leader, and reformist **Mohsen Mehralizadeh**, who served as vice president under Mohammad Khatami. Neither of them has a strong constituency or presence in Iranian politics, especially compared to the candidates who were not allowed to run.

Making Room for Raisi

The most important and surprising of the council's cuts was Ali Larijani, whose political pedigree and name recognition run deep in Iran. His family is one of the country's most prominent, with strong ties to both the clerics of Qom and the political elite in Tehran. He has also served the Islamic Republic in numerous senior capacities since the 1980s—as an IRGC officer, minister of Islamic guidance, national broadcasting chief, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, chief nuclear negotiator, and, most recently, three-time speaker of parliament. He qualified to run for president in the past (winning around 5 percent of the vote in 2005), and remains part of the regime's top echelon today.

Since registering for this year's election, Larijani has been very active on Clubhouse, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media outlets, posting several times a day and lashing out at some of his hardline rivals, including Raisi and Jalili. Some have suggested that his pragmatist turn is aimed at appealing to President Hassan Rouhani's base of younger, more educated voters, who generally do not want to see Raisi become president.

The official reason for Larijani's disqualification was not published—according to some reports, the Guardian Council has attempted to place the blame on his daughter for allegedly studying in the United States. Far more likely, however, his noteworthy track record and potential as a powerful compromise candidate are what got him disqualified.

The council also removed other hurdles for Raisi by cutting key reformist-affiliated candidates such as Jahangiri, Tajzadeh, and Mohsen Hashemi Rafsanjani (son of the former president). The reformist front registered multiple candidates in the hope that at least a few would be allowed to run, but they were doubtlessly expecting a more prominent figure than Mehralizadeh (who was not one of their applicants) to pass the bar. In response to the council's final list, the front's spokesperson, Azar Mansoori, tweeted that they would not support any candidate because all the reformists had been disqualified.

As for Ahmadinejad, he failed to make the cut much like the previous election; although this decision was expected, the regime reportedly deployed security forces to his neighborhood just in case the announcement went over poorly. IRGC official Saeed Mohammad was rejected as well.

Securing Raisi's Future Could Erode Regime Legitimacy

When the Guardian Council disqualified prominent figures in past elections, it usually tried to balance the cuts by allowing other less “risky” compromise candidates to run. The idea was to give pragmatist voters someone to align with and lessen the chance of embarrassingly low turnout. In 2013, for example, the elder Rafsanjani was barred from running as a powerful pragmatist candidate, but the “safer” Rouhani made the cut and eventually won.

Various wildcards may yet minimize domestic blowback to the council's announcement. For instance, Khamenei might decide to reinstate certain disqualified candidates as he has occasionally done in the past, or he may just rely on popular interest in the simultaneous municipal elections to ensure a respectable turnout for the presidential vote. At the moment, however, the regime seems willing to alienate some of its core supporters just to make sure that Raisi wins at all costs. One potential explanation for this risky approach lies in the [numerous signs](#) that Raisi is gradually being groomed to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader. Winning next month's vote could boost his executive pedigree for that position, while losing a second presidential race in a row could end that possibility altogether. Either way, the regime may wind up further undermining its domestic legitimacy.

Omer Carmi, a former visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, previously led IDF analytical and research efforts pertaining to the Middle East. ❖



[View/Print Page as PDF](#)

SHARE



EMAIL ALERTS



[Sign Up](#)



TO TOP

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iraq's Muqawama Focuses Attack Claims on U.S. Bases in Syria](#)

Jul 28, 2021

◆
Crispin Smith,
Hamdi Malik

BRIEF ANALYSIS

[A Mikati Government Will Not Save Lebanon](#)

Jul 28, 2021

◆
Hanin Ghaddar

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Political Crisis in Tunisia: U.S. Response Options

Jul 27, 2021

Sarah Feuer

TOPICS

Arab and Islamic Politics

Democracy and Reform

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Iran

STAY UP TO DATE



SIGN UP FOR EMAIL ALERTS



THE
WASHINGTON INSTITUTE
for Near East Policy

1111 19th Street NW - Suite 500
Washington D.C. 20036
Tel: 202-452-0650
Fax: 202-223-5364

[Contact](#)

[Press Room](#)

[Subscribe](#)

The Washington Institute seeks to advance a balanced and realistic understanding of American interests in the Middle East and to promote the policies that secure them.

The Institute is a 501(c)3 organization; all donations are tax-deductible.

[About TWI](#) /

[Support the Institute](#)





© 2021 All rights reserved.

[Employment](#) /

[Privacy Policy](#) /

[Rights & Permissions](#)