

Iran's Emergency Election Will Signal Khamenei's Intentions

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Brief Analysis

As in past elections, the contest to determine a replacement for the late President Raisi will be less about the people's choice and more about what direction the Supreme Leader wants the Islamic Republic to go.

As Iran prepares for its emergency presidential election on June 28, the regime faces a considerable challenge if it wants to generate enough public interest to make the contest look credible. In past years, the Islamic Republic carefully set up elections to give the impression of competition, in part to convince those Iranians who want change that they can achieve it by working within the system. These days, however, the elite seem to care less about maintaining that fiction.

For instance, in the second round of this year's parliamentary election, held May 10, the government acknowledged that less than 8% of eligible voters in Tehran participated—a major fall-off from the 41% who voted nationwide in the first round on March 1. Presumably, many more voters will show up for the presidential election, but turnout in big cities could be well below the 60% that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has previously touted as the minimum to “prove” popular support for the regime. In the 2021 election, the government claimed 49% turnout, a steep drop from the announced 70% in 2017, 76% in 2013, and 85% in 2009—and even this low claimed number was implausibly high, according to various observers. If turnout has become less important to the regime, then what will it be prioritizing in the current election cycle?

Khamenei's Track Record of Stage-Managing Elections

The Supreme Leader has a long habit of manipulating presidential elections toward his desired outcome, even when his objectives are contrary to what outsiders might expect. For instance, in 2013, he surprised many by doing nothing to pare down the field of conservative candidates permitted to run, enabling moderates to unify behind one candidate—Hassan Rouhani—while the hardline vote was split among several. To make a moderate

victory even more likely, he eschewed his traditional call for voters to turn out as a way of showing their support for the Islamic Republic, instead asking all Iranians—even those who dislike the regime—to vote. He also allowed freewheeling debates in which Rouhani demolished the leading hardline candidate, Saeed Jalili. In other words, Khamenei guaranteed Rouhani's victory, just as he used rule changes and other tactics to ensure the victory of hardline candidates in other elections.

The point of this manipulation is to prod Iranian policy in the direction he wants it to go—elections are a signaling device, not an opportunity for voters to express their preference. In 2013, Khamenei had decided that Iran's flagging economy needed relief from U.S. sanctions, which meant pursuing a nuclear deal. This is why he authorized talks with the United States even before that election. The nuclear deal was completed on Rouhani's watch, but the fundamental decision to go that route was made by Khamenei, who paved the way for the moderate president's electoral victory in order to facilitate a deal. Similarly, during the 2005 election cycle, the Supreme Leader wanted to bury the old elite, so he engineered the defeat of longtime kingmaker Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani.

In more recent elections—including the March 1 vote for parliament and the Assembly of Experts—the Khamenei-controlled Guardian Council **disqualified** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/five-questions-irans-elections>) any candidates who were even mildly critical of hardline policies. This included Rouhani, who had long served on the assembly but was barred from running this year. In response, Rouhani **warned** (<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/iran-bans-ex-president-rouhani-running-elite-assembly-2024-01-24/>) that the “politically biased” decision “undermines the nation's confidence in the system” and shows that the ruling elite are trying to “reduce public participation in elections [and] dictate the people's fate.” More such damning statements may come out in the lead-up to the June 28 vote, giving the U.S. government opportunities to publicly circulate examples of Iranian officials decrying what a sham their elections have become.

Scenarios for the Current Election

The most likely victor on June 28 will be a candidate who is committed to keeping Iran on its current path. For months now, Khamenei's frequent speeches, which are the best indicator of where Iranian policy is headed, have shown great satisfaction rather than concern about sanctions, inflation, or other problems. Because the West and Israel are isolated and losing, he argues, now is the time to maintain pressure on them. Even his message about President Ebrahim Raisi's fatal May 19 helicopter crash emphasized this theme, with Khamenei stating, “The nation doesn't need to be worried or anxious, the administration of the country will not be disrupted at all.”

Accordingly, the upcoming campaign is unlikely to feature any serious discussion of policy alternatives. Instead, the regime may promote a consensus candidate, presumably someone rather colorless and weak who poses no threat to any power center—much like Raisi. This would argue against some perennial high-profile candidates such as Speaker of Parliament Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf, who did badly in the 2005 and 2013 presidential elections, withdrew from the 2017 campaign in favor of Raisi (who lost to Rouhani), and is not particularly popular today following several corruption scandals. In the March 1 Majlis election, he won just 35% as many votes as he did in 2020.

To be sure, the Supreme Leader could conceivably surprise observers by facilitating the victory of someone who will push for the compromises necessary to secure a deal with the West. Yet that would be quite out of character with Khamenei's usual argument that “resistance” is the route to victory.

Regarding the next foreign minister—and, by extension, the next government's prospects for opening fruitful talks with Washington—Khamenei may have signaled his intentions by selecting Ali Bagheri Kani to the post in an interim capacity after Hossein Amir-Abdollahian was killed in the helicopter crash. Many observers expected Bagheri Kani to be named foreign minister after Raisi's 2021 election, but he was reportedly passed over due to his close

relationship with Saeed Jalili—an association that included managing the disastrous 2013 presidential campaign in which Jalili opposed any concessions on the nuclear front. When the nuclear deal came up for approval in 2015, Bagheri Kani strongly opposed it, repeatedly arguing that negotiations with the United States were a mistake. He seems to have changed his stance since then, leading last year’s hostage negotiations with Washington and this year’s indirect talks in Oman. He is a figure of quite some influence, not least because he is part of the ruling family: his brother is married to Khamenei’s daughter. If any new negotiations unfold, he would bring a hardline anti-Western stance to the table, but also greater ability to deliver given his close relationship with the Supreme Leader.

Next Steps for Washington

Although U.S. statements about Iranians deserving democracy rather than sham elections have zero prospect of influencing Tehran’s short-term policies, repeating such statements frequently and loudly is still important in terms of reaching out to the Iranian people and affirming that America stands with their desire to have more influence over their lives. In the coming weeks, there will be many occasions for these types of statements: during the registration of presidential candidates (when reformers and moderates will presumably be disqualified en masse), during the campaign (when the regime’s heavy hand will come down on those who criticize how it is running the election), on election day itself (when turnout will likely be limited), and when the winner assumes office (if another status-quo hardliner prevails). Washington should use each of these opportunities to hammer home the message that the Islamic Republic is not really a republic, but an autocracy that is out of touch with the Iranian people.

Such sentiments were already evident in the State Department’s announcement following Raisi’s death: “As Iran selects a new president, we reaffirm our support for the Iranian people and their struggle for human rights and fundamental freedoms.” This is consistent with Washington’s messaging about recent Iranian elections and is well worth repeating often.

Two of the best avenues for this message are social media (the primary news source for many Iranians) and foreign broadcasts, including channels financed by the U.S. government and outside media appearances by U.S. officials. There, American voices can highlight for Iranians what their regime-controlled media at home will hide—namely, the contrast between past popular support for the Islamic Republic and today’s popular apathy, if not opposition. Low voter turnout is no threat to the regime’s **iron grip on power (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/tehran-makes-gains-concerns-persist-about-regime-vulnerability>)**, but it does refute any claim that Iran’s leaders enjoy the support of their people. Besides reinforcing U.S. democratic values, tweaking Tehran about whether it or Washington has more support from the Iranian people is a good way to gain some much-needed leverage, since the regime is hypersensitive to international perceptions.

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