

Most of Iran's Latest Presidential Aspirants Have a Domestic Background

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Brief Analysis

Few of the prospective candidates have shown much interest in or talent for national security affairs, and none has articulated a vision for tamping down Iran's aggression at home or abroad.

After the registration period for Iranian presidential candidates ended on June 3, Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi stated that 80 individuals had applied to run in the June 28 emergency election to replace the late Ebrahim Raisi. Presumably, he was only counting serious registrants, as past elections have drawn vastly more hopefuls: 592 in 2021, 1,636 in 2017, 686 in 2013, 476 in 2009, 1,014 in 2005, and 814 in 2001. Typically, many of those who register are clearly unqualified, know they will be rejected, but still want the publicity of applying—or, in some cases, the badge of honor that comes with being disqualified by the regime's Guardian Council. Indeed, the council will no doubt pare the current list down drastically in the coming days, as in previous elections (7 candidates approved to run in 2021, 6 in 2017, 8 in 2013, 4 in 2009, 8 in 2005, and 10 in 2001).

Of the serious registrants, nearly all made their mark in domestic politics without much impact on foreign policy or national security affairs. That is certainly true of combative Tehran mayor Alireza Zakani, who has sought out controversy in advancing his support of the regime's Islamic Revolution "brand" at home at all costs, including initiatives to build mosques in public parks and a reported plan to tear down the iconic Shah-era Azadi Tower.

Other applicants known mostly for their role in domestic affairs include three current cabinet members: Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Mohammad Mehdi Esmaili, Urban Development Minister Mehrdad Bazrpash, and Labor Minister Solat Mortazavi. Five former ministers have registered as well: Minister of Science and Research Mohammad Mehdi Zahedi, Agricultural Minister Mohammad Reza Eskandari, Justice Minister Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, Urban Development Minister Abbas Akhoundi, and Minister of Economy Shamseddin Hosseini.

Even one of the most high-profile registrants—Majlis speaker Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf—is known more for his

impact as mayor of Tehran and corrupt domestic deals than for his senior roles in the national police and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. During his time in the IRGC, for instance, he headed the Air Force, served as a division commander during the 1980s war with Iraq, and was managing director of the huge Khatam al-Anbia construction company.

The top registrants most identified with foreign policy or national security issues are two former nuclear negotiators, Saeed Jalili and Ali Larijani. Neither of them was very successful in that post or subsequent roles, however.

On Jalili's watch (2007-13), Iran was subjected to extensive international sanctions as the United States rallied the UN and other powers to curb the dangers of Iran's nuclear program—a fact that his opponents in the 2013 presidential election debates frequently taunted him about. Despite being an initial favorite in that race, he went down to ignominious defeat, placing third with just 11 percent of the vote.

Jalili's predecessor, Larijani, took over the nuclear portfolio in 2005 but was unable to prevent European authorities from turning the issue over to the UN Security Council, which soon passed a series of tough resolutions against the regime. He did little better during the twelve years (2008-20) he served as Majlis speaker, when parliament's influence over Iranian politics steadily declined. His inability to curry favor with regime leaders was capped by the Guardian Council's shocking rejection of his candidacy for the 2021 presidential election.

To be sure, several national security figures have registered for the current election, including former traffic police commander Mohammad Rouyanian and former Basij commander Ali Reza Afshar. Yet none of them are well known, and their prospects of being accepted as candidates are dim. Even so, they have a better chance of making the cut than former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom regime leaders have come to despise deeply.

In all likelihood, none of the final candidates permitted to participate in this month's truncated campaign period will propose a different path on the nuclear file or other foreign policy issues. In other words, this campaign will be entirely different from 2013, when eventual winner Hassan Rouhani and nearly all of his opponents ran on similar three-plank platforms, arguing that (1) Iran's main problem was a lagging economy, (2) the only remedy was sanctions relief, and (3) the quickest way to obtain such relief was by compromising on the nuclear program. Jalili was ridiculed in that campaign for rejecting this vision and sticking to the approach that had backfired on Iran when he was in charge of negotiations. This year's campaign is unlikely to see such free-flowing debates—the regime generally prefers more formal, stilted, “safer” exchanges.

In light of these factors, the West has little reason to **hope for much change** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-emergency-election-will-signal-khameneis-intentions>) from whoever wins this election. None of the registrants has articulated a vision for tamping down Iran's aggression and letting its people achieve the prosperity and dignity they so badly want. Perhaps some candidate will use the short campaign period to set out such a view, but policymakers should not hold their breath.

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