

Khamenei's Second-Round Dilemmas

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Brief Analysis

Allowing a runoff in the presidential election is a somewhat risky move for the Supreme Leader, but engineering a one-round outcome would raise domestic problems of its own.

The rush presidential campaign that Iran launched after Ebrahim Raisi's sudden death has seen sharper public criticism than expected about a wide variety of government policies. That has to be a source of concern for Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, since the tone could become even sharper if no candidate wins a majority of the vote on June 28, necessitating a runoff election on July 5. A second round has become more likely in recent days because neither of the top two hardline candidates has withdrawn, making it improbable that they or the lone reformist candidate can win a majority.

Sharp Critiques

Perhaps the bluntest criticism heard during the current round has centered on the regime's harsh enforcement of laws requiring women to wear the hijab—the same issue that sparked a mass protest movement in 2022. Reformist candidate Masoud Pezeshkian is not the only one to voice this complaint. Clerical candidate Mostafa Pour Mohammadi—widely described as a hardliner—has stated flatly that “under no circumstances should we treat women with such cruelty,” emphasizing education instead. He even went so far as to argue that the government has lost the people's trust, and that restoring it “would require a miracle.” Meanwhile, Pezeshkian's supporters have been circulating clips in which he criticized how authorities responded to the 2022 torture and death of Mahsa Amini for hijab “violations.”

The debates also highlighted deep contrasts between the candidates regarding how previous governments and power centers handled hot-button issues in recent years. Pezeshkian reminded voters that some factions tolerate literally inflammatory behavior against foreign governments, asking, “Who climbed the walls of the British Embassy

[in 2011]? Who set fire to the Saudi embassy [in 2016]?...Whose newspapers wrote plaudits about the attack?” He also blamed domestic rivalries for blocking efforts to revive the 2015 nuclear deal, arguing that this failure caused Iran’s soaring inflation.

In contrast, Vice President Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi (who has since dropped out of the race) defended Raisi’s harder line on the nuclear issue: “Why did Biden ease sanctions for Raisi?...This means that Martyr Raisi forced the Americans to ease sanctions,” something his more moderate predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, was supposedly unable to do. Indeed, several candidates criticized Rouhani for entering the deal in the first place and thereby limiting Iran’s nuclear program. Speaker of Parliament Muhammad Baqer Qalibaf even bragged about his role in passing a law that required the government to deliberately violate the deal by boosting uranium enrichment to 60 percent. Yet Pezeshkian responded to this bluster by bluntly asking the other candidates exactly how they intend to resolve growing problems with the West over the nuclear program.

The contenders also raised sharp questions about corruption. For example, some candidates were pressed about their role in the government’s controversial 2002 natural gas deal with an Emirati company, which eventually resulted in Iran being ordered to pay a \$607 million penalty for canceling the contract.

Khamenei’s Concerns About a Second Round

On June 24, Hossein Shariatmadari—editor-in-chief of the hardline newspaper *Kayhan* and a close confidant to Khamenei—warned that despite Pezeshkian’s status as someone who is inside “the circle of the revolution,” his candidacy is being backed by some “leaders of the sedition,” a reference to Mohammad Khatami and other top reformists who supported mass protests against the rigged 2009 election. Pezeshkian has also been endorsed by Rouhani, whose presidency is bitterly regarded by hardliners as a catastrophe for Iran. Indeed, Khatami and Rouhani’s endorsements sparked strong social media reactions on both sides, with many commentators weighing in on how each leader’s policies might relate to a potential Pezeshkian presidency, whether positively or negatively. If he makes it to a second round, much more will likely be said about past reform initiatives.

Khamenei would presumably dislike this scenario, since he has never been a fan of open debate about the regime’s shortcomings. In a televised speech on June 25, he once again cautioned citizens about criticizing the Islamic Republic or proposing deep change, arguing that such remarks might “delight the country’s enemies.” More of these cautionary notes can be expected in round two if Pezeshkian is still in the race. Khamenei also fired warning shots at the candidates, telling them to avoid “America-loving” advisors and noting that a contender who even “slightly opposes” the principles of the Islamic Revolution is “not of any use.”

Despite his concerns, Khamenei has seemingly avoided the most obvious means of preventing a second round—namely, he could have gone behind the scenes and “counseled” one of the top hardliners, Qalibaf or Saeed Jalili, to withdraw, giving the other an easier path to outright victory in round one. Indeed, prominent conservatives have been pushing this option for days. Shariatmadari told the remaining hardline candidates, “You must accept a coalition; otherwise, God forbid, your frequent emphasis on continuing the path of martyr Raisi would be questioned.” Similarly, Tasnim News Agency, which is closely tied to the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), ran a piece on June 22 urging the “revolutionary current” to form a coalition behind a single candidate, arguing that Pezeshkian will likely win if the election goes to a runoff. The conservative *Khorasan* newspaper republished this article on June 24, while former IRGC commander and Raisi subordinate Mohsen Rezaei tweeted that “a coalition of the revolutionary current is a national urgency to improve efficiency and accelerate the country’s progress.” In explaining their withdrawals, hardline candidate Hashemi called for “unity and consensus among the revolutionary forces,” while Alireza Zakani declared that he stepped down “to prevent the formation of a third Rouhani government.”

Numerous polls indicate that with Jalili, Qalibaf, and Pezeshkian still in the race, none of them can come anywhere near the majority required for a first-round victory. The polls could be wrong of course, especially since predicting voter turnout in this election is difficult. More likely, however, a one-round victory would signal that the regime engaged in vote-rigging as blatant as that seen in 2009, which did not work well for its legitimacy. Hardliners and reformists alike would be bitterly disappointed and skeptical of the process if the other side won in this fashion. Although Qalibaf was widely expected to secure a quick majority when the campaign began, his lackluster performance and the enthusiasm shown for other candidates would now raise suspicions if he were announced as the outright winner this week.

Presumably, Khamenei's desire for high turnout is one of the main reasons he has not taken action to narrow the field. On June 25, he reminded voters that showing up on election day would "bring honor to the Islamic Republic" and "silence enemies." Polls indicate that the public's intention to vote has increased markedly during the campaign. At the same time, however, higher turnout would likely mean more votes for Pezeshkian, which raises other political risks for Khamenei.

The Supreme Leader also appears to prefer that neither of the top hardliners simply coasts to victory. Jalili and Qalibaf are both ambitious and out for more power, and Khamenei has rarely allowed other figures to achieve sufficient stature to undercut his absolute authority if they so desired. One alternative scenario that would be less challenging for him is a runoff between Jalili and Qalibaf; with no reformer in the race, the campaigns would be less critical of the regime's policies. To be sure, Pezeshkian's supporters would howl in protest at his elimination, alleging—probably accurately—that the vote was rigged. But that may be less worrisome to Khamenei than the alternative.

At the end of the day, Iranian presidents **have limited impact (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/khameneis-presidential-choice-weak-reformer-or-strong-hardliner>)** on broader regime issues. This includes the question of who will succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader—though admittedly, little is known about how the behind-closed-doors phase of that selection process will work. Regarding foreign affairs, the choice of president matters somewhat—not so much because of what certain candidates might choose to do once in office, but because of the signal their victory would send about Khamenei's preferred policy direction. If Pezeshkian prevails, Western officials can assume that the Supreme Leader wants Iran to sound less threatening. But if the past is any indicator, the regime would not hesitate to continue its most problematic policies even under a reformist president, as seen when it pursued an explicitly weapons-focused nuclear program during Khatami's presidency.

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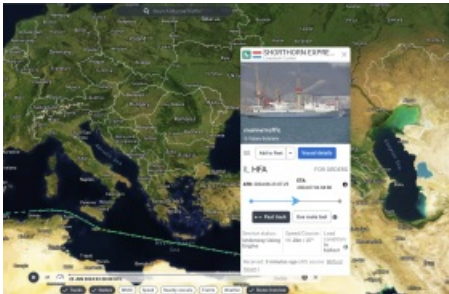
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