

What To Expect After Iran's Election

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May 19, 2017

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Brief Analysis

The outcome is unlikely to bring much change to Tehran's foreign and security policy, but it will reveal how stable the Iranian system is when the powerful hardliners are decisively rejected by voters.

The announced result of Iran's presidential election, a convincing 57% victory by Hassan Rouhani, raises the question: what will (and won't) change as a result? Four Washington Institute experts offer their takes on the most likely policy consequences.

The Biggest Issue: Hardline Reaction | Patrick Clawson

The election was hard fought, with each of the two top candidates confidently predicting victory. The large margin of Rouhani's victory -- 57% to 38% for his principal opponent, Ebrahim Raisi -- leaves little doubt about whom the voters preferred. But the most important result from the election may be how the hardliners react to this slap in the face, after they campaigned hard for Raisi and used harsh rhetoric to attack Rouhani. Many hardliners may greet such a large margin of victory for Rouhani with great bitterness, spurring them to take provocative actions against reformers at home or in the foreign policy sphere. Yet overconfident reformers may depict such an outcome as evidence that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei cannot get what he wants -- an exaggerated conclusion given that he seemed quite content with the prospect of victory by either candidate.

Iranian politics are rarely "winner take all," but instead a balancing act. The presidential vote occurred alongside city council elections all across Iran, and observers will presumably need a few days to sort out exactly which political forces won at the municipal level, since candidates run as individuals rather than party members. Thus, the winner at the presidential level could be balanced by opposing forces at the local level. Pro-reformist figures presumably will control councils in at least some big cities but pro-hardline figures may win in many smaller cities.

As the months go by, popular reaction to the president will largely be shaped by what happens to the economy. The past four years was a tough time to be president: oil income was compressed by international sanctions and low prices, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad left such a mess that the government was forced to adopt a host of painful steps. Among other things, Rouhani had to sharply curtail the growth of bank credit to rein in inflation, direct state funds toward repaying the arrears run up by his predecessor, and drastically limit hiring in the overstaffed public sector. The next four years will be a much better time to be president: slowly implemented changes will allow Iranian banks to develop more normal relations with the global financial system; government revenues can be used for more productive purposes than cleaning up past messes; and the number of youths turning twenty-two years old will contract from 1.6 million to 1.1 million, making it easier to create sufficient jobs for college graduates entering the labor market.

Consequences for Succession and Domestic Politics | Nader Uskowi

From the moment Raisi threw his turban into the race, he framed the election as a choice between the revolutionary forces of the Islamic Republic and forces not so loyal to the revolutionary ideals. His rhetorical approach made it seem as if he was running to become the next Supreme Leader. After all, it is the Supreme Leader who controls the revolutionary courts, intelligence branches, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), and other powerful organs. The president runs less-important departments with no sway over the judiciary, the armed forces, or regional affairs.

In this sense, Raisi's strategy was a big gamble. Winning the presidency would make him the top contender to succeed the ailing Khamenei. Yet losing would indicate that the revolutionary organs are not as popular as they present themselves to be, since they conducted massive propaganda in support of him over the past several days.

Notwithstanding assertions by Raisi's campaign machine, however, the election results will have limited impact even at home. No matter the outcome, the Supreme Leader's camp will continue their tradition of repression through the judiciary and security forces, as well as their monopoly over the country's most consequential institutions, including the mega-foundations that control more than half the economy.

Little Change on Security Issues | Farzin Nadimi

Although Rouhani and Raisi have sought to emphasize their differences throughout the campaign, many of the policies most central to U.S. interests will remain the same no matter which of them wins. During Rouhani's first term, Iran's weapons programs continued unabated. Various new systems -- some of them offensive in character --

have been unveiled in public since 2013, with Rouhani personally inaugurating some of them, including ballistic missiles. Similarly, the IRGC and defense industries continued to test missiles of all types (e.g., ballistic, antiship, cruise) as well as torpedoes, air-defense systems, long-range surveillance radars, and so forth. The IRGC's naval provocations in the Strait of Hormuz also continued, and relations with the Saudis and other Gulf states headed sharply downhill. Therefore, a second Rouhani government can be expected to continue the previous government's approach -- namely, avoiding direct confrontation and overt military posturing, maintaining readiness by modestly increasing defense spending, and continuing the missile program and other weapons development.

Yet Raisi is a more avid supporter of the IRGC's influence activities and expeditionary operations in the region. Last year, in a meeting with top IRGC commanders, he praised the Guards for expanding Iran's strategic reach by helping and inspiring Shia militias in Iraq, Yemen, Lebanon, and Syria. At the same time, one of Raisi's stated goals is to reduce economic uncertainty and risk at the macro level, which requires a responsible, nonconfrontational posture abroad. Given this duality, a Raisi presidency would probably usher in at least a temporary period of uncertainty and ambiguity in regional policies and diplomacy. But the prospects of rapprochement with the Gulf states would likely be slim, especially with Saudi Arabia, which Raisi often calls "the strategic depth of imperialism" in the region.

U.S. Pressure Will Continue | Katherine Bauer

No matter who Iran's next president is, the Trump administration can be expected to continue implementing nonnuclear sanctions against the Islamic Republic. On May 17, just two days before the election, Washington announced new sanctions on Iran's ballistic missile program and the release of the State Department's semiannual report on sanctions related to human rights abuses in Iran. Meanwhile, the administration extended the waiver of sanctions on Iranian crude oil sales for another 120 days in line with U.S. commitments under the nuclear deal; waivers of other sanctions are not due to expire until July and were not renewed this week.

The new sanctions and partial waiver extensions allow the administration to perpetuate uncertainty about the outcome of its ongoing policy review and the president's approach to the nuclear deal. In updating Congress on Tehran's compliance with the deal last month, as required under the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act of 2015, the State Department said that it is also assessing whether sanctions relief is "vital to the national security interests of the United States." Officials have stated that the administration will continue complying with its commitments under the deal until the review is completed.

The policy review cannot be extended indefinitely, however. The administration's actions thus far indicate a broad approach. Some of these actions send important messages and are likely to be disruptive, such as exposing Chinese companies procuring dual-use goods in support of Iran's ballistic missile program, and calling out Iran's Defense Industries Organization for extending credit to Syria's Scientific Studies and Research Center, the entity responsible for the Assad regime's chemical weapons program. Yet policy clarity is needed to ensure that sanctions are targeted most effectively. The administration has many sanctions tools at its disposal, and Congress seems willing to support aggressive implementation in the context of clear objectives.

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