

Rouhani Likely to Survive Election Shake-Up

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Brief Analysis

Although the entry of two high-profile hardliners could make the race more interesting, the current president remains the favorite in Iran's May 19 election, which could also help determine the next Supreme Leader.

On April 12, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad surprised observers by announcing he would run in the upcoming presidential election, despite his own former statement to the contrary and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's opposition to such a move. Having gradually lost the support of hardliners, the former Iranian president is now portraying himself as someone willing to defy Khamenei to an even greater degree than are the reformists.

In 2013, Ahmadinejad's plan to maintain influence through supporting the presidential run by his former chief of staff, Esfandiar Rahim Mashai, backfired when the Guardian Council disqualified Mashai. Then, some months ago, Ahmadinejad announced his backing for the candidacy of Hamid Reza Baghaei, who served as his vice president. In running himself, Ahmadinejad likely is seeking leverage for Baghaei's bid in the event Ahmadinejad is disqualified. The late Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took a similar step in 2013 with the aim of securing now president Hassan Rouhani's run.

Should Ahmadinejad or Baghaei end up on the ballot, turnout could surge in ways both detrimental and favorable to them -- on the negative side, from voters, including some hardliners, who have bad memories of Ahmadinejad's leadership; on the positive, from working-class Iranians who fondly remember Ahmadinejad's populism, despite his track record of corruption.

Uncertain Prospects for Raisi

Rouhani's hardline and conservative opponents face generally difficult odds, including divisions among the top echelons as well as lack of organization at the grassroots. Sayyed Ebrahim Raisi, an Assembly of Experts member, likely recognized this scenario when, on April 9, he too announced he would compete for the presidency,

running as an independent. Just last March, Raisi was appointed custodian of the Imam Reza Shrine, the largest Muslim endowment worldwide and arguably the most powerful institution in Iran. He did not, however, succeed the late former custodian, Abbas Vaez Tabasi, in his other two posts -- as the Supreme Leader's representative in Khorasan province and as head of the Khorasan seminary.

Born in 1960 in Mashhad, Raisi studied in the seminaries of Mashhad and Qom before joining the judiciary just after the 1979 revolution, when he was still a teenager. Having served in various seminary posts over the years, he still holds the position of general prosecutor, by Khamenei's appointment, at the Special Court for Clerics. Alongside his lack of management credentials, Raisi could face scrutiny over his past role in the execution of political opponents, especially in the mass killing of political prisoners in 1988, when he was one of three members of a "death committee" assembled by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.

Adding to Raisi's obstacles is his judiciary and intelligence background, which historically has not boded well for presidential candidates. One such example is Mohammad Mohammadi Reyshahri, who in 1997, serving as intelligence minister and having previously been general prosecutor at the Special Court for Clerics, earned the fewest votes of those running. Ali Fallahian, a past intelligence minister, fared the same in his 2001 bid. And, in 2013, Mostafa Pour Mohammadi, another member of the "death committee" as well as a former deputy at the Ministry of Intelligence under Fallahian, backed out of a run after surveys showed his low odds.

Since announcing his candidacy, Raisi has been savaged by Persian media outside Iran as well as Persian social media over his human rights record. Among the effects of this media campaign could be additional votes for Rouhani, even from his critics, based on an assessment of him as the lesser evil of the two. The graver consequence for Raisi would be a reduced chance at helping decide who succeeds Khamenei. And, unquestionably, losing the election would kill Raisi's chance at actually becoming the next Supreme Leader. A withdrawal by Raisi from the race would thus indicate a reluctance to take this risk.

President Still the Front-Runner

Rouhani is favored to keep his position, but his path is not without difficulties. Despite his successful nuclear diplomacy, Rouhani won last time with just 50.88 percent of the vote, and his failure to deliver on economic and political pledges could give some potential supporters pause. Indeed, April 15 marked the deadline for new candidates to register. At the last minute, in an apparent attempt by Rouhani to hedge should the Guardian Council disqualify him, his vice president, Eshaq Jahangiri, entered the contest. Yet precedent offers promise for Rouhani. Since the founding of the Islamic Republic, all but two Iranian presidents have won reelection.

The Supreme Leader has his own reasons to implicitly back a second term for Rouhani. One is that Iranian presidents tend to become much weaker in their second terms, with a key cause being their greater susceptibility to control by the Supreme Leader and his institutions. This helps explain Khamenei's possible abstention from active support for the hardline candidates. Separately, Khamenei assisted in Rouhani's 2013 campaign, including through his unusual call for regime opponents to vote "for the sake of their country." Evidently underlying such stances is anxiety that polarization could mobilize citizens in a way that ultimately causes turmoil, as occurred following the 2009 vote. In opposing Ahmadinejad's run this time, Khamenei thus claimed it could "polarize the country and it is harmful to the country."

Also buoying Rouhani is support from the broad spectrum of reformists, including former president Mohammad Khatami and several others, who have granted their full backing before the official start of the campaign, set for twenty days before the May 19 vote.

The Trump Factor

In helping facilitate a Rouhani victory, Khamenei is likely considering international as well as domestic dynamics. In particular, lacking clarity on U.S. president Donald Trump's policies toward Iran, Syria, and the broader region, Khamenei may view another term for Rouhani as a means of preventing escalation between Tehran and Washington. Lately, a U.S. bill to impose new sanctions on Iran has been delayed in the Senate, purportedly for election-related reasons. Alleviating obstacles to economic recovery in Iran could therefore offer yet another reason for the Supreme Leader to ease the way for Rouhani's reelection.

Larger Consequences

However important the Iranian presidential vote, even more significant for both Iran and Iran-U.S. ties is the looming succession to the Supreme Leader position. Yet one could well affect the other. If Ayatollah Khamenei, who is seventy-eight, dies in the next few years, the Assembly of Experts, of which Rouhani is a member, will seek to name a successor. But if it fails to do so immediately, a provisional leadership council consisting of the president, judiciary chief, and a Guardian Council member (chosen by the Expediency Council) will be formed until a new Supreme Leader is named. Here, Khamenei himself serves as evidence that the president can himself become Supreme Leader. He was the Islamic Republic's third president before the Assembly of Experts decided in 1989 to appoint him as Khomeini's successor. This explains why the winner of the upcoming vote could play a greater role than his three predecessors.

Further, Iran's presidential campaign has thus far centered on economic issues, not foreign policy, and no evidence supports the frequently heard Western claim that a tougher U.S. stance hurts Rouhani and helps the hardliners. Khamenei's actions over the rest of the campaign will determine whether this assumption holds true.

Even though the Islamic Republic's electoral system operates under an authoritarian regime, election results are hardly predictable. And, regardless of the winner, the president holds less power than many might expect, including in the executive branch, and whoever wins will not be empowered to alter the country's decisionmaking processes. More important, he will have comparatively little influence over the government's foreign, nuclear, and military policies -- the very policies that matter most for the outside world.

Mehdi Khalaji is the Libitzky Family Fellow at The Washington Institute and author of its recent study [The Future of Leadership in the Shiite Community](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-leadership-in-the-shiite-community). (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-future-of-leadership-in-the-shiite-community>) ❖

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