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Iran's Hardliners are Back, Too



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To some critics, U.S. elections are managed affairs. According to this cynical view, the “powers that be” narrow the field of candidates, the two parties don’t represent the real range of public opinion in the country, and periodic elections are just shadow plays staged by powerbrokers behind the scenes. In this way, U.S. democracy is a sham.

Although certainly distorted by the powerful, U.S. democracy is not entirely scripted. If nothing else, the victory of Donald Trump in 2016 should have dispelled this particular misconception since the array of forces within the Republican Party, the intelligentsia, and Wall Street were initially unified against him. By the same token, the come-from-behind

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victory of Black Lives Matter activist Cori Bush in her House race in Missouri in 2020 also demonstrates, on a smaller scale, that U.S. elections cannot be predicted in advance.

Iranian elections, on the other hand, are generally considered semi-democratic at best. Here, a true deep state of clerics and security organs really does stage-manage the elections in often quite transparent ways. This year, for instance, the Guardian Council of clerics and lawyers qualified only seven presidential candidates out of the 592 that registered. Forty women threw their hats into the ring, and the Council rejected all of them. It also made sure that no viable reformist candidates would compete in the race.

As a result, hardliner Ebrahim Raisi handily won the election last week. Just as Joe Biden was declaring in his first European trip that “America is back”—by which he meant that an internationally engaged America is back—the recent Iranian election has been an opportunity for the Iranian conservatives known as principlists to declare their return to power. Raisi will take over from the reformist President Hassan Rouhani, who’d staked his political career on a nuclear deal with the United States and a reduction of U.S. economic sanctions, which was initially a winning bet. Thanks to Donald Trump’s rejection of that nuclear deal and his ratcheting up of sanctions, however, the reformist agenda lost credibility, if not among the population then at least among Iran’s ruling elite. Many Iranian voters were so disgusted by what was on offer in the recent election that they refused to vote. The turnout, under 50 percent, was the lowest since the revolution of 1979. Perhaps most telling was the candidate that came in second place. Actually, it wasn’t a person at all: it was “void.” More than four million votes were declared invalid.

Combined with the number of voters who stayed home, those who voided their ballots sent a signal that they, at least, know a sham when they see one. If one wants to be optimistic, the low-turnout election reveals just how strong the pro-democratic constituency is in the country.

And ironically, this poor showing demonstrates that elections do matter in Iran since the Guardian Council had to go to great lengths to guarantee its preferred outcome.

When Donald Trump won in 2016, he set about transforming U.S. foreign and domestic policy. The swing in Iranian governance from reformist to conservative might be expected to produce a similar sea change in how Iran deals with the economy, with its nuclear program, and with the outside world.

But Raisi may end up selling the reformist agenda better than the reformists themselves.

The Nuclear Deal

The United States and Iran have just concluded a sixth round of negotiations on reviving the Iran nuclear deal, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). It's just possible that the two sides, in negotiations facilitated by the European Union, will come to an agreement before Ebrahim Raisi assumes the presidency in August. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, for instance, is upbeat about a quick and positive conclusion to the talks.

But even if such an early agreement is not forthcoming, there's no reason to expect that Iran will suddenly pull out of the negotiations. True, the JCPOA was integral to the reformist program, and the reformists were just voted out of office. But Ayatollah Khamenei backed the agreement and continues to do so. Raisi himself has expressed support for the deal, with the caveats that it was America's fault for jeopardizing the agreement and that he's no fan of negotiations for the sake of negotiating.

Raisi is looking to tread a fine line. His election campaign was based largely on improving the Iranian economy and that will require the reduction and eventual elimination of nuclear-related sanctions. At the same time, he has made clear that he's not interested in following the reformist agenda of using the nuclear deal as a cornerstone of rapprochement with the West. He stated this week that Iran's missile program is not up for discussion—something that might have figured in post-JCPOA negotiations—and he is not looking to meet with Joe Biden.

“The Americans trampled on the JCPOA and the Europeans failed to live up to their commitment,” Raisi pointed out. “I reiterate to the US that you were committed to lifting the sanctions—come back and live up to your commitments.”

That's a fair assessment of what happened under Trump (the trampling part) and what has so far failed to happen under Biden (the lifting of sanctions part). Still, if both sides return to the JCPOA even without future agreements, it would be an improvement over the dangerous impasse of the last few years.

So, the message is acceptable. The messenger, however, is problematic.

Accused of gross human rights violations from his time as a prosecutor in the 1980s and a judge after that, Raisi was included in a 2019 Treasury Department sanctions list. So, Iran's new president is going to face some difficulties traveling to the West and will not likely give a speech at the UN General Assembly meetings in New York as his predecessors routinely did. Given his reception in the West, it's not surprising that Raisi is unenthusiastic about a detente with his detractors.

Yet, because Raisi will now be presiding over a state that hews closer to the conservative views of the clerical establishment, there will be less political infighting at the top and Raisi may very well be able to sell an agreement at home more effectively than the reformists.

The Economy

The Iranian economy is a mess. Before the pandemic hit, the country experienced significant contractions in GDP of 6 percent in 2018 and nearly 7 percent in 2019. With Trump applying maximum pressure on Iran, Europe was supposed to pick up the slack. In fact, trade with Europe dropped by an astonishing 85 percent after 2017 as European countries buckled under the threat of secondary sanctions from the Trump administration.

The rise in prices for consumer goods, particularly gas, prompted widespread protests throughout Iran at the end of 2019, to which the government responded with force. U.S.-imposed sanctions, the disruptions of COVID-19, and chronic budget deficits have all contributed to the inflation that generates a good deal of public discontent in the country.

In the late 1990s and first decade of the 2000s, Iran experienced a huge expansion of its middle class from below 30 percent of the population to nearly 60 percent. This middle class generally supported the modern, outward-looking agenda of reformists like Hassan Rouhani, who served two presidential terms beginning in 2013.

Instead of cultivating that constituency, however, the Trump administration undercut the reformists by withdrawing from the JCPOA and applying punitive measures that hurt the middle class. This was not a case of unintended consequences. As Ryan Costello explains at *Responsible Statecraft*, elements of the U.S. far right quite consciously supported hardliners in Iran as the political figures most likely to unwittingly precipitate an uprising and, ultimately, the collapse of the regime. The maximum pressure campaign of the Trump years was designed with the same ends in mind.

Instead of mobilizing another Green Movement, which protested the last hardliner to preside over Iran's political system, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the return of the conservatives to power will more likely provoke apathy or even eventually support for anti-Western policies. "A decade of economic stagnation caused by sanctions and broken international promises has brought Iran's middle class to a point that it may reconsider its future as a force for political moderation and globalization," economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani concludes.

Raisi, meanwhile, has promised to fight corruption and economic mismanagement in the Iranian economy. He has his work cut out for him. The country ranks 149 out of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index. Bribery and favoritism are widespread, while a number of officials have been prosecuted for embezzlement and influence-peddling. It's going to be difficult to root out corruption since the system basically runs on clientelism. The new patrons who take over the government apparatus expect to siphon off a portion of the state's wealth for distribution through their patronage system.

As a result, Raisi might find it easier to improve Iran's economy by negotiating a reduction of external sanctions than a reduction of internal corruption.

Regional Relations

One of the side benefits of the Biden administration's rethink of relations with Saudi Arabia is that it has forced Riyadh to hedge its bets in the region.

Trump lavished praise on the Saudis, even as they were killing Yemenis, assassinating a *Washington Post* columnist, and jailing human rights activists. Under Trump, the United States and Saudi Arabia bonded on their anti-Iran agenda.

Now, with the Biden administration pulling back from its support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen and criticizing the Saudi record on human rights, Riyadh has begun secret negotiations with Iran to mend their relationship. Those discussions, which began last month in Baghdad, cover a number of flashpoints, but particularly the places where the two countries are competing for influence such as Yemen and Iraq.

Shortly after his electoral victory, Raisi announced that he wanted to improve relations with the Gulf Arab states. He singled out Saudi Arabia, which severed diplomatic ties with Iran in 2016. "There are no obstacles from Iran's side to re-opening embassies," Raisi said. "There are no obstacles to ties with Saudi Arabia."

A rapprochement between these two regional hegemon's, however superficial, could significantly improve the prospects for reducing tensions in the region. And that in turn could be good news for a Biden administration that so desperately wants to shift its attention away from Middle East conflicts.

In contrast to hawks like Elliott Abrams, I certainly do not root for the hardliners to win in Iranian elections. I believe that the Iranian system, led by the reformists, can evolve in a more democratic, more peaceful, and more equitable direction.

But in the short term, the victory of Ebrahim Raisi might just be good news. After all, he supports the nuclear deal, needs the reduction of U.S. sanctions to fulfill his economic

promises, and is open to better relations with his neighbors. Imagine if Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Iran's version of Donald Trump, had returned to power. Fortunately, the Guardian Council disqualified him as well. That's not a bad lesson for Congress, as it confronts the possibility of Trump's return to public office.

John Feffer is the director of *[Foreign Policy In Focus](#)*, where this article originally appeared.

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