

Iran's presidential election rigged amid fraught political situation

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Iran's Guardian Council has disqualified all candidates from the so-called reformist and moderate factions in the June 18 presidential election. The constitutional watchdog has only approved candidates from the conservative or hardline faction aligned with the 81-year-old Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC).

President Hassan Rouhani, a centrist politician who staked everything on the 2015 nuclear accord with the imperialist powers, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), has to step down after serving the maximum two terms. The deal, which failed to deliver the promised economic benefits, was unilaterally abrogated by former US President Donald Trump in 2018. Trump reimposed and added more crippling sanctions targeting Iran's oil exports that have cost the economy at least \$200 billion as part of his "maximum pressure" campaign to destabilise the country.

This has served to discredit Rouhani and the reformist and centrist factions that have placed the full burden of the sanctions and the pandemic on the working class. Inflation has risen from 8.2 percent in May 2018 to nearly 50 percent today, while the rial has lost its value by four times in the same period. Electricity blackouts for hours at a time are widespread. The numbers living in extreme poverty has risen fivefold to 20 million.

The pandemic has caused the deaths of around 80,000 people according to official figures, in large part due to the impact of sanctions. It has further exacerbated both the healthcare and the economic crisis. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, Iran is one of dozens of countries facing severe oxygen shortages because of surging Covid-19 cases, up at least 20 percent since March, threatening the "total collapse" of health systems. The countries have all vaccinated less than 20 percent of their populations. Iraq has now agreed to transfer \$125 million of frozen Iranian funds to a European bank for the

purchase of 16 million Covid-19 vaccine doses.

At the same time, the regime has brutally suppressed dissent, including killing more than 400 protesters during demonstrations and riots over the introduction of a petrol rationing system in November 2019, highlighting the reactionary character of the bourgeois clerical regime that has escalated its attacks on the working class as it has sought to reach an accommodation with the imperialist powers. The ruling elite, notwithstanding factional infighting over how far they will go in seeking some sort of accord with Washington, is united in support of free market economic policies and hostility to the working class.

As well as rising economic and social unrest at home, the elites face the hostility of US imperialism, the regional Sunni powers and Israel. Since abrogating the deal, Washington has carried out several military attacks on Iran, as well as the assassination in January 2020 of IRGC commander Qassem Suleimani, while on an official visit to Baghdad. Israel, its regional attack dog, has carried out a series of attacks inside Iran on its infrastructure, including its nuclear facilities. This has prompted Tehran to disregard the limits it agreed to on its nuclear programme and install more advanced centrifuges capable of producing enriched uranium closer to that needed to manufacture a nuclear bomb.

With all the seven remaining candidates little known and lacking a voter base, from a list of nearly 600, the decision paves the way for the victory of Ebrahim Raisi, who lost to Rouhani in the 2017 elections. Raisi is the country's Chief Justice and a prominent conservative connected to the IRGC, which has increased its power in large part due to its vast business empire as well as its much-feared intelligence service, to become the key arm on which the regime depends for its survival.

The Guardian Council's decision will likely produce the lowest voter turnout since the 1979 revolution, with

the reformists threatening a boycott. Less than 40 percent of the electorate is expected to vote, leaving the inevitably victorious conservative faction with little popular legitimacy.

The 12-member council, six of whom are chosen by Khamenei, even disqualified prominent political figures such as Ali Larijani, a former speaker of the Parliament who was expected to be Raisi's main rival. Others disqualified were current vice president, Eshaq Jahangiri, closely aligned with President Hassan Rouhani, Mohsen Hashemi Rafsanjani, the son of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and former President Ahmadinejad. Another disqualified was Mostafa Tajzadeh, a former political prisoner who has demanded an end to the obligatory head covering for women and challenged the absolute authority of the supreme leader.

Larijani, whom Khamenei appointed to lead the negotiations for the 25-year economic deal recently agreed between Iran and China, is from a prominent political family. His brothers include the head of Iran's judicial system, a leading nuclear scientist and a member of the Guardian Council who decried the list as indefensible, blaming "the increasing involvement of the intelligence services" in the vetting.

Even Raisi, the expected winner, voiced concern and called for the reinstatement of some of the candidates to give the election the appearance of a competition. Hassan Khomeini, grandson of the founder of the Islamic Republic, said that if he were standing he would step aside in protest. Rouhani reportedly appealed to Khamenei to intervene as news leaked out of the removal of Larijani and Jahangiri's names from the approved list. Khamenei's subsequent announcement of the list indicates that he had rejected the president's request. Larijani has accepted the Guardian Council's decision to exclude him.

The decision comes in the wake of a leaked interview, recorded as part of an "oral history" research project in February, in which Foreign Minister Javad Zarif revealed the extraordinary tensions within the ruling elite. He criticised the dominance of the assassinated IRGC commander Suleimani in Iranian diplomacy, who told him what to do and say in negotiations with international figures, admitting that his own influence over Iranian foreign policy was sometimes zero.

The interview, first disclosed by the Saudi-funded TV channel Iran International, was presumably leaked to discredit Zarif, the reformist faction's best hope of winning the election who was pushing for a revival of the

nuclear accord, torpedoing his chances of launching a successful bid for the presidency. In the event, the backlash against him prevented him from putting himself forward as a candidate.

US President Joe Biden is seeking a broader agreement with Iran that would limit not only its nuclear programme, which Tehran insists is for civilian not military purposes, but also its missile development and wider regional influence, particularly its support for the Shi'ite militias in Iraq, President Bashar al-Assad in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza and the Houthis in Yemen. Washington is taking part in indirect negotiations with Tehran in Vienna, launched by the other signatories to the agreement, the European Union, Germany, France, the UK, Russia and China.

While some Iranian officials have talked up the chances of reaching an agreement, expectations of success are low amid a spate of unexplained attacks and explosions widely attributed to Israel. These include a cyber-attack on Iran's nuclear facility in Natanz in April, a blast killing one worker last weekend at a complex housing a factory manufacturing drones (after Israel had claimed Iran was providing drones to Hamas in Gaza), and an explosion in an oxygen pipeline at a petrochemical plant in Assaluyeh that killed one worker and injured two others.

Last week, a jubilant Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said, as he stood beside US secretary of State Antony Blinken in Jerusalem, said, "We discussed many regional issues, but none is greater than Iran."

Netanyahu hoped the US would not rejoin the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, "because we believe that that deal paves the way for Iran to have an arsenal of nuclear weapons with international legitimacy." He insisted that regardless of the success or otherwise of the Vienna talks, "Israel will always reserve the right to fight regimes committed to getting weapons of mass destruction," a position from which neither Blinken nor the Biden administration sought to distance themselves from.



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