

Ebrahim Raisi wins Iran's rigged election presaging repression to secure regime's survival

Jean Shaoul
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Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's chief justice and a prominent conservative connected to the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), is set to succeed the centrist President Hassan Rouhani at the end of his two-term limit in August.

Friday's elections put the hardline or principalist faction in control of all branches of the state apparatus, reflecting the bourgeois clerical regime's ever-increasing reliance on the IRGC, which also controls much of the economy, to suppress the Iranian working class and ensure its survival.

The election victory comes in the wake of Rouhani's failed gambit of staking all on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—the nuclear deal with US and European imperialism that failed to deliver the promised economic benefits—and amid talks aimed at reviving the deal in Vienna.

The accord was not a treaty but an “executive agreement”, because President Barack Obama could not have secured a two-thirds majority in the US Senate. This enabled his successor, President Donald Trump, to unilaterally abandon the Accord in 2018 and reimpose and add more crippling sanctions on Iran's oil exports. These cost the country at least \$200 billion as part of Trump's “maximum pressure” campaign to destabilise the country.

Rouhani and the reformist and centrist factions around him have placed the full burden of the sanctions and the coronavirus pandemic on the working class. The pandemic has had its most deadly impact in the Middle East on Iran, with nearly 83,000 people dead, according to the widely discredited official figures, thanks to US sanctions that have gutted the country's healthcare system, as well as the venal criminality of the Iranian bourgeoisie that has devastated the lives of the Iranian people. The value of the rial has plummeted, leading to an annual inflation rate of nearly 50 percent, hours-long electricity blackouts and a poverty rate of 50 percent, with nearly half the population, 20 million people, living in extreme poverty.

Rouhani's lethal crackdown on the protests over a rise in gas prices in 2019-20 in which at least 1,500 were killed exposed the reformists and moderates' agenda as no less reactionary than that of the principalist faction.

The 60-year-old Raisi, who lost to Rouhani in the 2017 elections, fought the election on an anti-corruption platform, an empty slogan that played on decades of bitter experiences with Iran's elite, while advancing a socially conservative program. His victory, with around 18 million of the 28.9 million ballots cast, or 62 percent of the vote, equates to just one third of those eligible to vote, hardly a ringing endorsement of his legitimacy or that of the regime.

Mohsen Rezaee, a former IRGC commander in chief, won around 3.4 million votes. Abdolnasser Hemmati, the former central bank governor from Iran's moderate reformist wing, came third with around 2.4 million votes. The fourth candidate, Amirhossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, won around 1 million votes. There were some 3.7 million “white” ballots, cast without any candidate's name written in, protesting the lack of candidates who represented their views.

Just under 50 percent of Iran's 59 million eligible voters from a population of 84 million cast their ballots, after voting closed early Saturday morning following the government's extension to the balloting to accommodate “crowding” at several polling places. This was the lowest turnout since the 1979 revolution that ended the rule of Washington's client, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi.

Raisi's victory was always assured, given that the Guardian Council, Iran's constitutional watchdog, had only approved conservative candidates aligned with the 81-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the IRGC, rejecting all but seven of the nearly 600 candidates who had put their names forward.

The 12-member council, six of whom were chosen by Khamenei, disqualified prominent political figures such as Ali Larijani, a former speaker of the parliament who was expected to be Raisi's main rival; current vice president,

Eshaq Jahangiri, closely aligned with Rouhani; and Mohsen Hashemi Rafsanjani, the son of former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. Such was the disquiet about the blatant rigging of the election that Khamenei acknowledged that it had been a mistake to eliminate some of the disqualified candidates, although he had earlier rejected Rouhani's request to intervene against the removal of Larijani and Jahangiri's names from the approved list.

This left Hemmati, who had to stand down as head of Iran's central bank, to run as Raisi's main moderate challenger. Days before the election, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, a former provincial governor and vice president from the moderate reformist faction, stood aside in a bid to boost votes for Hemmati. Former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili and hardline legislator Alireza Zakani dropped out to consolidate the hardline vote behind Raisi, leaving just four candidates in the race. The reformist faction threatened to mount a boycott because of the exclusion of all their candidates, a campaign that was only partially successful.

Raisi, who wears a black turban identifying him in Shiite tradition as a direct descendant of Prophet Muhammad, is seen as a likely successor to the Supreme Leader. He will be Iran's first serving president sanctioned by the US government before even entering office.

Raisi was sanctioned by the Trump administration in November 2019, along with eight other officials close to Khamenei, for his role as Tehran's deputy prosecutor general in the mass execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. Most of those executed were members of the Mujahideen al-Khalq, the Communist Party and other regime opponents. The sanctions also relate to his role as the senior prosecutor and chief judiciary during the lethal crackdowns on antigovernment protests in 2009, 2017 and 2019. According to human rights groups, at least 7,000 protesters were arrested, tortured and sentenced to harsh prison terms by the Raisi-led judiciary following the 2019 protests.

American sanctions against Raisi, as well as most of the other 1,600 imposed by Trump, are based not on the 2015 nuclear deal but on America's counterterrorism laws, for the explicit purpose of preventing an incoming president from canceling them as part of a return to the nuclear deal. While President Joe Biden has lifted a handful of sanctions as a goodwill gesture, he will need congressional legislation to remove most. Raisi's victory takes place amid the ongoing talks in Vienna to revive the deal and lift the crushing US sanctions on Iran that all factions of the ruling elite are desperate to relieve. According to Mikhail Ulyanov, the Russian representative to the talks, the negotiations are approaching the final round, with only a few secondary issues remaining.

Raisi has declared his support for the negotiations and a signed agreement "if it serves the interests of Iran," indicating that Khamenei is determined to reach an agreement. It has been suggested that Khamenei has postponed signing any agreement until after the election but still during Rohani's government, to place responsibility for the agreement on Rohani without compromising Raisi's "conservative purity." This will enable him to claim that he inherited the agreement should it fail to deliver the much sought-after economic rescue. Tehran insists that the sanctions relief in the 2015 agreement was limited in that it did not allow Iran to carry out a range of international financial transactions, including through the SWIFT system used by financial institutions to transfer money and settle international debts.

Washington wants Iran's agreement to commit to return to the negotiating table as soon as the old deal is restored and begin hammering out the terms of a wider agreement that would be "longer and stronger." Tehran has refused to agree to any changes that would limit its nuclear production even further, or to accept any limits on their missile capabilities and their support of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria, the Shiite militias in Iraq, Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

The replacement of the centrist Rouhani with a member of the principalist faction will not resolve Iran's deep-going political, social, and economic crisis. The real fear of the Iranian bourgeoisie is of an eruption of class struggle driven by declining living standards and a dramatic increase in social inequality as those at the top have enriched themselves, while working people have faced death, disease, unemployment and impoverishment.

The struggle in defense of living standards and basic democratic rights can be advanced only by securing the political independence of the working class from all bourgeois parties as well as their affiliated corporatist trade unions. A new revolutionary leadership must be built as sections of the International Committee of the Fourth International in Iran and throughout the region.



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