

Iran's run-off presidential election won by “reformer” advocating rapprochement with US imperialism as it sets Mideast ablaze

Keith Jones
7 July 2024

Friday's run-off election for President of Iran was won by Masoud Pezeshkian, a representative of the “reform” wing of the Islamic Republic's bourgeois-clerical political establishment.

Pezeshkian's campaign combined denunciations of corruption and the state enforcement of conservative Islamic mores (such as the obligatory wearing of the veil by women in public) with calls for rapprochement with the United States and the European imperialist powers.

Central to his campaign was an explicit call for the revival of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord. In May 2018, the Trump-led United States unilaterally repudiated the accord with the stated aim of using brutal economic sanctions to crash Iran's economy and precipitate “regime change.”

Six years on and under conditions where US imperialism is sponsoring the Netanyahu regime's genocidal onslaught on the Palestinians of Gaza, and using its Israeli attack-dog to prepare the terrain for a wider war whose principal target would be Iran and its “axis of resistance” allies, Pezeshkian provided no explanation as to how the nuclear accord could be revived and the punishing economic sanctions removed.

Rather he relied on support from sections of the bourgeoisie and upper middle class who believe that Iran's wholesale surrender to the imperialist powers will result in their personal enrichment, and who fear deep-rooted popular anger over social inequality, an inflation-driven collapse in living standards, and the regime's violent suppression of anti-government protests in 2018, 2019 and 2022.

Pezeshkian won 16.4 million votes (53.6 percent) in Friday's run-off election to 13.5 million (44.2 percent) for Saeed Jalili (with some 600,000 votes spoiled or otherwise invalid.) A long-time member of Iran's security establishment, Jalili is notorious for his strident advocacy of socially conservative views and is considered a “hardliner” even among the dominant “conservative” or Principlist faction.

The other major candidate in the first round, the current speaker of Iran's parliament and one-time Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) commander Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, threw his support behind Jalili in the run-off, but it is apparent that not all of his voters followed suit. This and a significant increase in voter participation enabled Pezeshkian to increase his vote total by almost 6 million votes in the second round, and his lead over Jalili from about 4 to 9 percentage points.

In all, close to 31 million people participated in the second round of the presidential election. This represented a 10-percentage point jump from the first round, which saw the lowest turnout in any presidential or parliamentary election since the 1979 revolution that overthrew the despotic rule of the US-installed Shah. Nevertheless, according to the government's own reckoning only 49.8 percent of Iranians voted.

Ayatollah Khamenei, the Islamic Republic's supreme leader since 1989, had signalled during the campaign his strong preference for a

“conservative” president.”

Putting the best face on the result, he issued a statement that lauded the Iranian people for going to the polls and “confronting the manufactured furor of boycotting the elections [that] the enemies of the Iranian nation had launched to induce despair and deadlock.” He met with the president-elect on Saturday, only hours after he had been declared the election's victor.

Similar messages trumpeting the unity of the nation and declaring their readiness to work with a Pezeshkian-led government have been issued by the heads of the IRGC and the army, by top figures in the outgoing government, and by Jalili.

A narrowing base of popular support

None of this, however, can cover up the fact that the elections have underscored the narrowing popular base for Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime; and the ever-widening fissures in its ranks, under conditions where it is caught between the imperialist powers, which view the Middle East as a key battleground in their drive to repartition the world through global war, and an increasingly restless working class.

Pointedly, in his congratulatory message, Khamenei urged the incoming president to follow in the footsteps of his predecessor, Principlist cleric Ebrahim Raisi, whose death in a May 19 helicopter crash made the special presidential election necessary. The Supreme Leader urged the president-elect to “continue the path of Martyr Raisi to make the best use of the enormous capacities of the country.”

Elected to the presidency in 2021, Raisi focused his administration's efforts on building an “economy of resistance” to withstand the economic warfare unleashed on Iran by US imperialism and supported by Britain, Germany, France and the rest of the European Union. This included strengthening economic and military-strategic ties with Russia and China.

At the same time, Raisi deputized his foreign minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian—who also died in the May 19 helicopter crash—to enter into discussions with the Biden administration and representatives of the European imperialist powers about possibly reviving the nuclear accord. During the 2020 election campaign, Biden and his aides sharply criticized Trump for scuttling the accord, claiming it destabilized the Middle East and pushed Iran into the embrace of Washington's chief rivals, Russia and China. However, once the negotiations began, the Biden administration, with its allies' support, kept increasing their demands.

After August 2022, the talks to revive the accord unravelled. A significant factor in this, and the Europeans' increasingly enthusiastic

embrace of Washington's campaign of "maximum pressure" against Iran, was the outbreak of the US-NATO instigated Ukraine war and the imperialist powers' anger with Tehran for supplying Russia with drone missiles.

US imperialism plots war on Iran

Since the outbreak of the Gaza war last October, Washington has set into motion its longstanding plans for war with Iran. To date, its preferred strategy has been to degrade IRGC forces deployed outside Iran and Iranian-allied forces like Hezbollah and the Houthis, whether directly or through its Israeli attack-dog, while falsely accusing Iran and its allies of "escalation" whenever they take even the most minimal measures of self-defense. This incremental or "low intensity" war is aimed at preparing the ground militarily and politically for launching an all-out attack on the Iranian led "axis of resistance" at a time of Washington's choosing and with the aim of reasserting unbridled imperialist domination over the Middle East.

None of the competing factions of the bourgeois-clerical regime, that consolidated its rule by hijacking the anti-imperialist upsurge that swept aside the Shah's regime and brutally suppressing the left and all forms of working class self-expression, has any progressive answer to the mounting imperialist aggression and the Israeli rampage.

All are incapable of and organically hostile to the struggle to mobilize the working class and the oppressed toilers of the Middle East—Iranian, Kurdish, Turkish and Israeli—against imperialism. Such unity could only be established on the basis of an appeal to their common class interests, their striving for social equality and democratic rights, in opposition to all the capitalist governments, rival factions of the competing national-based capitalist elites, and their various political representatives.

Instead, whatever faction of the political establishment has led Iran's government—Principlist, "reformist" or the "center" grouping identified with the late President Hashemi Rafsanjani and his political disciple, the ex-President Hassan Rouhani—has invariably responded to increased imperialist pressure by attacking what remains of the social concessions made to the working class in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution.

Under Khamenei, the Islamic Republic has see-sawed between using pressure tactics and making overtures to strike a bargain with the imperialist powers that recognizes the Iranian bourgeoisie's claim to regional-power status. It has combined Shia populist appeals to the region's "dispossessed," including posturing as the foremost defender of the Palestinian people, with military pressure and repeated failed attempts at rapprochement. These include the overtures Tehran made to the Clinton administration under President Rafsanjani, the secret "grand bargain" offered to George W. Bush as the Iranian regime connived in the 2003 US invasion of Iraq, and the 2015 nuclear accord.

Assuming a bonapartist role, the Supreme Leader has tried to play the factions against each other and use the cleavages between them to implement diplomatic forays and policy changes without irrevocably committing the regime. Thus Khamenei greenlighted the nuclear accord negotiated by Rouhani and his Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, while claiming that he understood the skepticism of its many "conservative critics." Then, when the hoped-for European imperialist investment boom failed to materialize and the Trump administration torpedoed the nuclear accord, he quickly distanced himself from Rouhani and Zarif and claimed vindication.

In the 2021 election that chose Rouhani's successor, Pezeshkian and all but a handful of Principlists were barred from running by the anti-

democratic Guardian Council.

This year, the Guardian Council again eliminated some 80 would-be candidates, including several Principlists such as former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, but allowed the candidacy of Pezeshkian to proceed, so as to boost the election's credibility.

A 69-year-old former heart surgeon and one-time health minister, Pezeshkian had the very public backing of the two architects of Iran's failed attempt to forge a new relationship with the imperialist powers, ex-President Rouhani and his foreign minister, Zarif. So prominent a role did Zarif play in the campaign that the *Guardian* referred to him as Pezeshkian's "co-running mate."

In the election debates, Pezeshkian claimed that the only way to address Iran's economic crisis is to secure massive investment from the western imperialist powers. He called for friendly relations with all countries, except Israel, while avoiding any discussion as to why the US and its European allies are threatening Iran and waging economic war on it.

He also made clear his support for the neo-liberal economic policies imposed under Rouhani, and the overtures his administration made to the IMF.

At the same time, Pezeshkian tried to camouflage his reactionary intentions with criticisms of the fierce repression of anti-government protests and by highlighting his family background, as the son of an Azeri father and a Kurdish mother, and knowledge of multiple languages to suggest he would pay greater attention to Iran's minorities.

Chinese President Xi and Russia's Putin have welcomed Iran's new president and called in their congratulatory messages for strengthened economic and strategic ties.

Any response from the western powers has been cautious and circumspect. European Union spokeswoman Nabila Massrali congratulated Pezeshkian, adding it is "ready to engage with the new government in line with EU policy of critical engagement." US State Department spokesman Vedant Patel said there was no expectation of any "fundamental change in Iran's direction."

The developing global war and the crisis of the Islamic Republic underscores the urgency of the Iranian working class intervening as an independent force and mobilizing all the toilers and oppressed behind it in the struggle for workers' power. The tragic outcome of the 1979 revolution and the four and a half decades of Iran's bourgeois nationalist-clerical regime have demonstrated in the negative the validity of Trotsky's program of Permanent Revolution. In countries of belated capitalist development, like Iran, the fundamental problems of the democratic revolution, including the throwing off of imperialist oppression and the separation of church and state, can only be realized through the establishment of a workers' republic and as part of the fight for world socialist revolution.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact