



# Iran Democracy Monitor No. 218

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## A CORONATION IN TEHRAN...

On June 18th, Iranians went to the polls to select a replacement for outgoing president Hassan Rouhani, who has served out two terms in office. The runaway victor of the contest was judiciary head Ebrahim Raisi, who is estimated to have garnered more than 60 percent of the 28.6 million ballots cast. He formally takes office August 3rd. (*Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2021)

## ...AMID CLERICAL MANIPULATION...

Raisi's selection is hardly a surprise. It had been clear for some time that the controversial cleric - who has been implicated in the death of nearly 10,000 political prisoners in the late 1980s - was the favorite of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei to replace Rouhani, and that the Islamic Republic was stacking the political deck in his favor. As in past electoral cycles, that included significant manipulation by the country's clerical institutions.

In the run-up to the voting, nearly 600 hopefuls had filed papers to run for the Iranian presidency. However, all but seven were disqualified by the Guardian Council, the Islamic Republic's constitutional vetting body, as not being sufficiently ideologically compatible with the regime's revolutionary tenets. In addition to Raisi, approved candidates included Expediency Council secretary Mohsen Rezaei; Saeed Jalili, a former nuclear negotiator for the regime; deputy parliament speaker Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi; former vice president Mohsen Mehralizadeh; central bank governor Abdolnasser Hemmati, and; former parliamentarian Alireza Zakani. By election day, however, three of them had dropped out of the race, making Raisi's election a virtual certainty even before Iranians cast their ballots. (*Al-Jazeera*, May 25, 2021; *TRT World*, June 16, 2021)

## ...AND WIDESPREAD POPULAR DISAFFECTION

Traditionally, the Iranian government has expended great effort to ensure that national elections garner widespread participation, which it views as a crucial barometer of its own legitimacy. It has also historically sought to imbue the electoral field with at least some semblance of choice, to supply the appearance of real differences between "reformists" and "hardliners." In this cycle, however, the regime clearly emphasized political consolidation over the appearance of alternatives for its citizenry.

That priority did not go unnoticed by ordinary Iranians. A survey of some 80,000 prospective voters carried out by the Netherlands-based GAMAAN center in late May and early June found that fully 75% of respondents had no plans to participate in the election, with the vast majority of them citing the "unfree and ineffective nature of elections in the Islamic Republic" as their reason for sitting out the electoral contest.

Their discontent was visible on election day. The proceedings were plagued by low turnout, prompting authorities to extend polling into the early morning hours of the next day in an attempt to bolster the official participation tally. Ultimately, less than 50 percent of eligible voters are estimated to have cast their ballots - the lowest tally in the Islamic Republic's history. (GAMAAN, June 2021; *Iran International*, June 19, 2021)

## THE PRESIDENCY AS A STEPPING STONE?

While Raisi has only just been elected president, speculation is already swirling that that job may be merely a prelude to him assuming an even more lofty position: that of Iran's Supreme Leader. The question of succession has loomed large over the Islamic Republic for some time. Iran's current Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is now 82 years old and said to be suffering from a number of significant ailments. Despite his advanced age, however, Khamenei has thus far avoided formally selecting a successor, leading to fevered speculation about who might ascend to Iran's top post when Khamenei leaves the scene.

Raisi's name has consistently figured in those conversations in recent years, and his electoral triumph seemingly paves the way for yet another promotion for the 60-year-old hardliner. Notably, Raisi was the only cleric among the candidates approved to stand for the presidency by Iran's Guardian Council - and thus currently the most high profile figure within the Islamic Republic with the credentials to succeed Khamenei when the time comes. Tellingly, Iran's elites seem to think the same thing; in their congratulatory messages to Raisi, the other presidential contenders are said to have offered felicitations not just for securing the presidency, but for his eventual ascension to the country's top clerical post as well. (*Al Arabiya*, May 28, 2021; *Times of Israel*, June 18, 2021; *Iran International*, June 19, 2021)