



A Coronation In Tehran

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Last week, Iranians went to the polls to select a replacement for outgoing president Hassan Rouhani, who has served out his two terms in office. The runaway victor of the June 18th contest was judiciary head Ebrahim Raisi, who is estimated to have garnered more than 60 percent of the 28.6 million ballots cast.

Raisi's selection was hardly a surprise. It had been clear for some time that the controversial 60-year-old conservative cleric – who has been implicated in the death of nearly 10,000 political prisoners in the late 1980s – was Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's choice to replace Rouhani, and that the Islamic Republic was working overtime to stack the political deck in his favor. As in past electoral cycles, that tinkering included significant manipulation of the vote by the country's clerical institutions.

In the run-up to the election, nearly 600 hopefuls had filed papers to formally 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 regime nuclear negotiator; Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, the deputy speaker of the *majles*, Iran's parliament; former vice president Mohsen Mehralizadeh; Central Bank governor Abdolnasser Hemmati; and former parliamentarian Alireza Zakani. By election day, however, three of those had dropped out of the race, making Raisi's election a virtual certainty even before Iranians cast their ballots.

That was assuredly the regime's intention. 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 give the appearance of real differences between "reformists" and "hardliners." In this cycle, however, the regime 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 three-quarters (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 evident on election day. The proceedings were a low energy affair, so much so that authorities were forced to extend polling into the early morning hours of the next day 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 more than four-decade-old history.

Raisi's elevation, meanwhile, has paved the way for him to one day assume an even more lofty position: that of Iran's next 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 suffering from a range of ailments. Yet, despite these factors, he has thus far avoided formally selecting a successor. Khamenei's silence, in turn, has generated fevered speculation about who might ascend to Iran's top post when he finally leaves the scene.

In recent years, Raisi's name has figured prominently in those conversations. His current electoral triumph thus could well pave the way for yet another promotion. Raisi, after all, was the only cleric among the candidates approved by Iran's Guardian Council – and so is currently the most high-profile figure within the Islamic Republic with the religious credentials to succeed Khamenei when the time comes.

Tellingly, Iran's elites seem to have come to the same conclusion. 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.