



Iranian Presidential Elections 2021: Implications for India

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Iran held its 13th Presidential elections on June 18, 2021 and elected Ebrahim Raisi, the Hardline candidate as the next President of Iran to succeed Hassan Rouhani on August 03, 2021. These polls were crucial for Iran in a number of ways as the incumbent President Hassan Rouhani could not contest election for the third successive term constitutionally, eventually leaving Iran's regional role, nuclear deal negotiations with the West and the crumbling Iranian economy under the pressures of sanctions and COVID-19 pandemic. After the 2013 Presidential elections, moderate-reformist government came to power and served two terms under incumbent President Hassan Rouhani. However, unlike last two terms, this time the hardliners—also referred to as principalists or conservatives—won the elections to the Presidential office. In this context it becomes pertinent to discuss and understand the political structure of Iran as well as analyse the implications of the new Iranian President on India-Iran bilateral relations.

Iran's Guardian Council,¹ responsible for vetting the candidates for the Presidential elections on May 25, 2021 released the list of seven candidates from a list of total 592 candidates which included the names of Saeed Jalili, Ebrahim Raisi, Alireza Zakani, Amir Hossein Qazizadeh

Hashemi, Mohsen Mehralizadeh, Mohsen Rezaei Mirgha'ed, and Abdol Naser Hemmati. The Guardian Council disqualified many candidates including former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmedinejad, current Vice-President Eshaq Jahangiri and the former Parliament Speaker and

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key nuclear negotiator Ali Larijani. Many leaders along with the incumbent Iranian President Hassan Rouhani expressed disappointment over the selection process of the Guardian Council. The

rejection of the candidatures of Eshaq Jahangiri and Ali Larijani was an unpredicted move of the Guardian Council. It was however suspected at that time that if Ali Larijani contested elections could have tilted the support in favour of the moderate-reformist camp. This could have led to him to emerge as one of the main contenders against the now-elected President Ebrahim Raisi. The closed selection process of the Guardian Council have led to the speculations that corruption could have been one of the reasons for the rejection of Ali Larijani's candidature. It is widely speculated that through these rejections the Guardian Council paved the way for the election of a hardliner candidate as the next President of Iran. A number of experts of Iranian affairs are of the view that the lack of detailed plans to tackle the issues related to nuclear

negotiations and sanctions related negotiations with the world powers along with increasing inflation, unemployment, water shortage and more recently the COVID-19 pandemic could be the reasons for the lack of willingness among the voters to come out and vote. In this backdrop, it would be interesting to analyse the political structure of Iran and how it differs from other democratic forms of government prevalent globally.

Political Landscape of Iran

The government structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on an Islamic theocracy comprising of the elements of a presidential democracy. However, different from any other form of a Presidential form of Democracy, in case of Iran the ultimate authority is vested with the "Supreme Leader." The Supreme Leader in Iran is the head of state and also the highest ranking political and religious authority. The position of Supreme Leader was created after the Iranian Revolution (1979) wherein Ayatollah Mousavi Khomeini—the father of Iranian Revolution held this position till his death in 1989. Since 1989 this position currently is being held by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Even though elections are held at the regular intervals in Iran, due to this position and authority of the Supreme Leader it is often referred to as authoritarian form of government.

The President in Iran is the second highest ranking official. Still the power of the President is restricted by the Constitution of Iran which assists the entire executive branch to the Supreme Leader. In fact, Iran is the only nation in which the executive branch does not head the armed forces. The key functions of the Iranian President include the formation of economic policies. The President has nominal rule over the Supreme National Security Council and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security. The Supreme Leader commands all the matters of foreign and domestic security. The President is assisted by a cabinet of 22 ministers and this Council of Ministers is validated by *Majleis* (Parliament).

The important factor related to the Iranian political landscape is that it consists of three main ideological streams i.e., the hardliners or conservatives or principalists, the moderates and the reformists. The Hardliners, who are in favour of expanding its nuclear programme; moderates who are in favour of maintaining the *status quo*; and the reformists who largely want to transform the internal theocratic structure of Iran. In Iran, the presidency has often fluctuated between the reformists and the hardliners. The reformists have assured the lessening of social restrictions, along with press freedoms and accountability on human rights. Reformists also underline the fact that Iranian state is the primary republic in which Islam acts both as the vanguard and a check on the traditional institutions of power. However, as against this the hardliners largely adhere to the rigid doctrine initiated after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. They often argue that the

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words of Supreme Leader and God's law has the definitive authority. In such a scenario, with the new hardline President in power, Iran could be facing rigid

rules both in the domestic as well as foreign affairs (in future). Iran has a dichotomic political order wherein both the parts are constantly conflicting with each other. One part of it is the institutions which function in the democratic system i.e., the directly elected President, an elected national assembly and a government accountable to the assembly. Another crucial aspect of Iranian political process is related to the feature that ardently safeguards the ideology and principles of the Islamic Revolution (1979). However, this has led to the formation of institutions in Iran which have weakened its democratic characters.

There were seven candidates approved by the Guardian Council. Out of these the majority of candidates (five out of seven candidates) were the hardliners/conservatives namely Amir Hossein Qazizadeh, Saeed Jalili, Ebrahim Raisi, Alireza Zakani and Mohsen Rezaei Mirgha'ed. The Council also approved two other names one of which was a reformist candidate, Mohsen

Mehralizadeh and the other one, a moderate candidate, Abdol Naser Hemmati. However, there is a big group of believers which believes that a disciplined Iran led by a hardliner president can be more confident in dealing with the West, especially the US. One of the foremost reasons for the this win for the hardliners could also be related to the rising dissatisfaction quotient amongst the Iranian population against the Rouhani government which failed to fulfil its promises after coming to power.

The winning of the hardliner candidate sends a signal to the west regarding Tehran's actual political purposes and stance in regional and global politics. This was made clear by the denial of the President-elect Ebrahim Raisi's refusal to hold talks with the US President Joe Biden. However, it was speculated that if the hardliners win, the struggle between the various institutions working under the Supreme Leader and President will be less.

Also, the Iranian military establishment is likely to kowtow to the policy changes made by the hardliners in the government. The new hardliner President being elected in Iran makes the situation a bit tough for the US to ease out the tensions in its bilateral relations while trying to ease out the situation related to Iranian nuclear deal. It is to be kept in mind that the President-elect Ebrahim Raisi himself is a hardline cleric and had held several positions in Iran's judicial system.

Even though the hardliners in Iran have voiced their criticism in the past related to the nuclear deal, it seems that, the then moderate-reformist government or now the hardliner government, both will support to bring the nuclear deal back on track. This is due to the general consensus in Iran that the nation could only stabilize economically through the benefits that come as part and parcel of the nuclear deal. Most of the Iranians feel that the Rouhani government has failed to provide the economic incentives yet

they remain indecisive of whether the hardliner President would be able to rectify the Iranian economy.

President-elect Raisi is often referred to as the protégé of the Supreme Leader Khamenei. In the current elections he swept more than 60 percent of the 28.9 million votes. At the same time, the June 18, 2021 elections also saw the lowest turnout in the history of Iran clearly showing the discontentment amongst the Iranian public. So, the issue facing the President Elect Raisi is - whether he can jumpstart the economy as well as ease the financial pressure being faced by the Iranian population. At the same time, it is to be kept in mind that a lot depends on Iran's negotiations with the West (especially the US) related to bringing the nuclear deal back on track and removal of sanctions required to sustain its economy. Furthermore, in his first interview after elections President-elect Raisi has refused to negotiate with the American

demands related to Tehran's missile programme and Tehran's support of regional militias.

Major Power Play in West Asia

The geographical location of the West Asian region has always been a reason for the increased interest and role of the major powers in this region. Added to this is the presence of huge hydrocarbon resources which has made this region the theatre of great power competition with major powers such as the US, Russia, China and the European powers. The regional political scenario has also made these major powers to play a more pronounced role in the region for their own interests or the interests of their allies in the region. Though the US is still a dominant militarily actor, China's expanding influence and Russia's renewed interest both pose challenges to the American interests in the region. The nuclear deal between Iran and P5+1 countries changed the regional dynamics of West Asia with a number of American allies becoming vocal of their resentment against this deal. However, the

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situation again turned for the worse when the US withdrew from the deal in 2018 in the region.

With the new President coming to power in the US, there emerged hope amongst the experts in favour of the Iran deal within Iran and around the world that there will be chances of revival of nuclear deal. Iran reached this nuclear agreement with P5+1 countries in 2015 which also resulted in the removal of sanctions from the already crippling Iranian economy. However, former US President Donald Trump backed out from this deal in 2018 bringing both Iran and the US at the loggerheads. However, China and to a certain extent Russia had been the supporters of Iran in the region against the American 'maximum pressure' strategy. In such a scenario, various multimillion dollar deals between Iran and China have made the US apprehensive. There are chances of a more active role of Russia in the West Asian region in terms of political and security field; whereas enhanced role of China in the fields of economy, trade and business. Nevertheless, Russia will also try to translate its role into economic field apart from more pronounced role in the political and security spheres to protect its growing economic interests. However, both Russia and China have indicated their desires of a much deeper involvement in regional affairs by presenting their own regional security initiatives. On the other hand, with the aim of increasing its influence in the region the US had pushed for the more active engagement with the region which was visible in previous US President Trump's initiative of normalising relations between Israel and the two Arab states of the UAE and Bahrain through the signing of the Abraham Accords.

What could India Expect?

How will the new Iranian president act and react regarding its relations with India is there to be seen in the foreseeable future. It cannot be ignored that the new hardline President of Iran is a conservative leader taking a hardline stance just after being elected the President and refusing

to negotiate on the two important terms with the US President Biden. In such a scenario, what would be the future foreign policy outcomes under his presidency remains to be seen. However, the need for Iran to continue trade to support its economy remains its priority. In this, India's market size and requirements provide Iran an option crucial to explore. There are a number of factors which affect India's relations with Iran - both internal and external. India's relations with the Islamic Republic improved a bit after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and removal of sanctions. India-Iran oil trade also improved with Iran becoming India's second largest oil trading partner. This partnership also materialised into India developing the two terminals of the Chabahar port in Iran. It is to be kept in mind that

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India and Iran jointly run the Shahid Beheshti Terminal of Chabahar Port. According to MEA reports it has processed more than 12 lakh tonnes of bulk cargo and 8200 containers till November 2020. However, the relations between Iran and India were stressed after the former US President Donald Trump applied the 'maximum pressure' strategy against Iran forcing India to reduce its oil trade with Iran to be almost negligible in the year 2019. Added to this have been the repeated calls of Iranian Supreme Leader- the terrorist acts in Kashmir as freedom struggle- has made the situation between India and Iran a bit tense. In case of Iran, other than India being a large market for its hydrocarbon resources and other export products, there is also a need for convergence related to secure and prosperous economic region in the Indian Ocean. Iran and India have developed institutional mechanisms to pursue converging objectives. Furthermore, Iran was also inclined to ask India for technical help to update its Russian supplied military hardware. Before the American pressure on India to withdraw its oil trade with Iran, its share in India's oil requirement was almost 10 percent along with being a stable partner in the South Asia region. All these factors make India a significant partner for Iran.

For India, Iran is an essential gateway to not only the Central Asian or the larger Eurasian region but also Afghanistan. Therefore, for the sake of geostrategic significance it is necessary for India to continue its positive engagement with Iran for its own interests. At the same time, New Delhi should keep an eye on the increasing Chinese influence in both Iran and the West Asian region which could hamper India's interests. Also, India's growing proximity with the Arab world and Israel has also become an issue of concern for Iran. However, for this there is a need from both sides to work positively on the bilateral relations. So,

for this cooperation to run smoothly including cheaper oil trade between India and Iran, it is necessary that the new Iranian President maintains a favourable position towards India and balanced relations with the US.

Note:

¹ The Guardian Council also known as *Shūrâ-ye Negahbân* is responsible to vet candidates and oversee elections in Iran. It is a 12-member council of jurists nominated by the Supreme Leader of Iran and the Supreme Judicial Council appointed by the Iranian Parliament or the *Majleis*.



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