



INFO PACK

# The 2021 Iran Presidential Elections: Prospects and Expectations

Fatih Şemsettin Işık



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*Fatih Şemsettin Işık*

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**WRITTEN BY**

Fatih Şemsettin Işık

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ULUS, BEŞİKTAŞ

İSTANBUL / TURKEY

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# Introduction

**O**n June 18, Iran is scheduled to hold presidential elections following Hassan Rouhani's eight year tenure. With the ongoing nuclear talks in Vienna and the country's deteriorating economic situation the significance of these elections are magnified. This info-pack explores the contours of the political dynamics in Iran ahead of the June 18 presidential polls. Following a brief account of Rouhani's presidency, the presidential candidates and those barred from taking part in the elections will be examined. Finally, an assessment of the challenges facing the new president will be discussed.

After eight years of Hassan Rouhani as president, Iran will elect a new president on June 18, 2021. Amid renewed nuclear talks with the United States in Vienna and the sanctions-related economic deterioration, the significance of these elections is heightened. Even though presidential authority is relatively limited compared to the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, the presidential office is nonetheless significant. The presidential office is a balance holder between the modernisers, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-linked securocrats, and the Principlists. The latter represent the more conservative wing in Iranian politics and hold a hawkish stance on defending the revolution within Iran itself.



Former vice-president Hamid Baghaei (R), Former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (C) and Former First Vice-President of Iran, Esfandiar Rahim Mashaei pose as Ahmadinejad registers to run in the presidential race at Interior Ministry in Tehran, Iran on April 12, 2017. (Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

## Rouhani's Legacy

With Hassan Rouhani's departure, a new period in Iran's history will begin. Rouhani's presidency represents a landmark in Iranian history since the Islamic Revolution. Rouhani's first term was widely held to be more successful compared to his second. However, diplomatic achievements in his first term, most notably the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), were overshadowed by the problems that emerged in his second term. In addition, assassinations and the worsening economic conditions in the domestic sphere have further deteriorated Rouhani's standing. As a result, the long-standing rivalry between the reformist/modernising camp and the Principlists has acquired new dynamics.

Rouhani, who was supported by the reformist/modernising camp, came to power in 2013 following the tenure of controversial presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Following the signing of the JCPOA in 2015 with former US president Barack Obama's support and a relative economic improvement stemming from the removal of sanctions, both Rouhani and the reformist camp entered the 2017 elections with confidence. However, their victory in the 2017 elections was short-lived following the election of Trump and his subsequent decision to withdraw the US from the nuclear agreement. As a result, the reformist/modernising camp saw its influence reduced. Modernisers have lost credibility largely because the benefits of the nu-

clear agreement were short-lived and Iranians did not see the real impact of the agreement on the economy.

Rouhani's second term was also overshadowed by the assassinations of high-ranking officials including Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, the deputy commander of the Iran-backed group in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the mastermind of Iran's nuclear programme. According to many observers, these killings, among other things, served to diminish Iran's influence in regional conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, which had been on the rise since the early days of the Arab Spring. Given these and other reasons, there is a distinct possibility that Rouhani and his inner circle could be put under the watchful eye of pro-Principlist elite, recalling the case of former president Mohammad Khatami (1997-2003) and Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Mousavi and his inner circle have been under [house arrest](#) since the post-election unrest in 2009. Khatami, a reformist president who took a [moderate](#) tone towards the West, has been [banned](#) from political, media and public activities. Similarly, Rouhani, as a ["centrist"](#) figure between the reformist/modernizer-hardliner/Principlist axis, may find himself restricted should he wish to express a critical viewpoint of the government in the coming period.



Saeed Jalili, Member of the Iran's Supreme National Security Council speaks to media after registering his candidacy for Iran's presidential elections, at the Interior Ministry in Tehran, Iran on May 15, 2021. (Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

## Candidates

Ebrahim Raisi, the current president of Iran's judiciary, is the current front-runner and many Iran observers expect him to emerge victorious. With his close relations to Khamenei and his hawkish stance towards protecting the revolution, Raisi is also the establishment's favourite candidate. In addition, Raisi is reportedly close to the Paydari (The Islamic Revolution Stability Front) group within the Principlist camp, which is known for their ardent opposition to the West and support for hard power solutions for Iran's challenges. Born in 1960 in Mashad, Iran's second-largest city, Raisi has been active in the bureaucracy since the first years of the revolution and a part of the ruling elite in the Islamic Republic. Since the revolution, he has served in a number of key positions, including as chairman of the Astan Quds Razavi, the country's largest foundation and member of the Assembly of Experts, a popular-vote-elected 88-member body of Islamic jurists, which has the power to appoint the country's Supreme Leader and dismiss him if needed.

Raisi's rhetoric towards the nuclear deal has become more critical since the 2017 presidential campaign. In 2017, Raisi [said](#) that the nuclear deal and its achievements should be protected. However, in the current campaign, Raisi has expressed a more critical stance towards the agreement, [stating](#) that even though the agreement is a respectable national document, achieving sanctions relief will not ultimately be achieved through negotiations. Raisi is also on the [US](#) and [EU](#) sanctions list for violations of human rights due to his [involvement](#) in the 1988 massacres that saw the execution of thousands of political dissidents. This could serve to further complicate relations with the West. In the domestic sphere, his agenda mostly focuses on relieving the economic burden on Iranians brought on by sanctions and the pandemic as well as fighting against corruption. In this regard, Raisi [promised](#) to restore market stability, bring inflation down to single-digits, and reduce income inequality.



Chief Justice of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi registers his candidacy for Iran's presidential elections, at the Interior Ministry in Tehran, Iran on May 15, 2021. (Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

## A Timeline of Ebrahim Raisi's Political Career

**1960:** Born in Mashhad into a clerical family

**1975:** Began to study at the Qom Seminary

**1981:** Appointed as the chief prosecutor in Karaj and Hamadan

**1985:** Appointed as the deputy prosecutor of Tehran

**1988:** Part of the committee behind the mass execution of imprisoned political dissidents

**1989:** Appointed as Tehran's chief prosecutor

**1994:** Appointed Chief of the General Inspection Office

**2004:** Appointed First deputy chief justice of Iran

**2006:** Elected to the Assembly of Experts

**2009:** Appointed as the secretary of the Assembly of Experts

**2012:** Appointed as the Chief prosecutor of the Special Clerical Court

**2014:** Appointed as Attorney-General of Iran

**2016:** Appointed as the Chairman of the Astan Quds Razavi Foundation

**2018:** Appointed as the regime's Judiciary Chief

Raisi's pursuit of the presidency is widely seen as a prelude to his potential election as Supreme Leader once Khamenei dies. Given numerous reports that Khamenei's health has been deteriorating, this may become a reality sooner rather than later. In addition, the deaths of potential rivals, such as former President Hashemi Rafsanjani and Former Judiciary Chief Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi have only increased his chances. Should Raisi win the presidency, his time in office will represent a test of his political leadership. Should he cultivate an image as a capable political leader, his road to the Supreme Leader's chair will have one less obstacle.

Saeed Jalili, former chief nuclear negotiator and former deputy foreign minister during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, is another leading candidate. Having close relations with the Paydari camp like Raisi, Jalili also enters the presidential elections for the second time in his political career, after coming third in the 2013 elections. However, unlike Raisi, Jalili's political influence lays in the security apparatus of the Islamic Republic. This is due to his previous stint as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (2007-2013) and as a member of the Expediency Council, which arbitrates between parliament and the Guardian Council. Jalili is expected to focus on Iran's foreign policy more than Raisi should he become president. He [advocates](#) that Iran should have the right to uranium enrichment for peaceful purposes and rejects

the notion that Iran is pursuing nuclear weapons because it is "against the teachings of Islam". Moreover, Jalili [highlights](#) Iran's developing relations with China and considers these relations as leverage against the US.



Chief Justice of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi speaks to the press after registering his candidacy for Iran's presidential elections, at the Interior Ministry in Tehran, Iran on May 15, 2021. (Fatemeh Bahrami - Anadolu Agency)

## Election Promises of the Candidates

### Ebrahim Raisi

Pledges to restore market stability, single-digit inflation, jobs for 1 million people per year, improve the high value-added sector, and reduce income inequality.

### Saeed Jalili

Vows to focus on the economy, build one million houses annually, and launch reforms in healthcare system.

### Mohsen Rezai

Promises to increase the value of the Iranian riyal, provide monthly payments to 40 million Iranians, increase the involvement of women in the Cabinet, and provide salaries for housewives.

### Abdelnasser Hemmati

Promises to restore the autonomy of the central bank, less interference in the economy and 600,000 new houses for low-income families built annually.

### Mohsen Mehralizadeh

Pledges to improve the social status of women, remove bureaucratic barriers to production, improve foreign relations, and undertake banking reforms.

### Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh

Vows to reduce inflation to 5% within 4 years, fight corruption, introduce welfare assistance to young couples, and increase employment.

### Alireza Zakani

Promises to formally recognise the right to protest and remove obstacles to production, including eradicating corruption.

Out of the seven approved candidates, only two hail from the reformist camp. Abdelnasser Hemmati, an experienced technocrat, is arguably the reformist's leading figure in these elections. Having served as the governor of Iran's central bank since 2018, Hemmati has pledged to implement a detailed plan to support the agriculture sector and rejuvenate the sanctions-crippled financial sector if elected. Along with his latest post in the Central Bank of Iran, he is a veteran bureaucrat. His former positions include President of Iran Central Insurance and head of the Insurance Supreme Council; chairman and CEO of several banks, including Bank Melli, Future Bank, and Bank Sina; member of the economic committee of Iran's Supreme National Security Council (SNSC); and Vice President of Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB).

Mohsen Mehralizadeh, former Vice-President during the Khatami presidency (1997-2005), is another reformist candidate. His agenda consists primarily of fixing the ongoing economic problems. As the case of the 2005 presidential elections revealed, in which Khamenei made an extraordinary intervention and approved Mehralizadeh's candidacy, he was previously perceived as an acceptable reformist figure by the establishment. Contrary to some reformist figures in the past, such as Khatami and Mousavi, Mehralizadeh and his reformism is seen "less dangerous" in the eyes of the establishment. However, he is believed to be the weakest candidate, a perception stemming from his lack of institutional affiliation (Raisi as chief justice, Hemmati as the recent governor of the Central Bank, Jalili as a representative of Iran's supreme leader to the Supreme National Security Council).

Among the other candidates, Mohsen Rezai, former chief of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) (1980-1997), is known as being a "perennial candidate" (he previously ran in the 2005, 2009 and 2013 elections) who has even been ridiculed for constant presence in Iranian presidential politics. Finally, Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi and Alireza Zakani are the other candidates for the elections on June 18. However, unlike Raisi and Jalili, these three hardliner/Principlist candidates do not enjoy considerable public support. For this reason, in an effort to prevent vote splitting among the hardliner/Principlist camp, these three candidates are likely withdraw in favour of the establishment's favourite Ebrahim Raisi before election day.

Source: Anadolu Agency, Center for Iranian Studies in Ankara [IRAM]

## Disapproved Candidates

According to the Iranian constitution, presidential candidates must be approved by the Guardian Council. The council is composed of 12 members, half of whom are directly [appointed](#) by the Supreme Leader and the other half is elected by the Parliament. The council interprets the constitution, supervises elections and vets candidates for the Assembly of Experts, the president and the parliament. For these elections, the council [approved](#) only seven candidates among 592 applicants. Controversies around these decisions run deep since no apparent reason was announced for disqualifying them.

Even the Supreme Leader Khamenei urged the council to reconsider the disqualifications, describing the process and accusations against some candidates as “oppression” in a televised [speech](#) on June 4. Following the speech, Khamenei stated in a [post](#) on his official Twitter page that there were mistakes in the qualification process, saying, “Protecting people’s honour is one of the most important issues. I call on the responsible bodies to restore their honour.” Before Khamenei, the outgoing president Rouhani also [criticised](#) the decisions. “The soul of an election is competition,” he said during a cabinet meeting in Tehran on May 26 and added: “If you take out the competition, it [election] becomes like a soulless body, and collapses.” [According](#) to Mehdi Mahdavi Azad, an analyst on Iranian politics, Khamenei was probably responding to disappointment among supporters of Larijani and others over the council’s decisions, and in particular wanted to dampen hostility from the Larijani family.

### Members of the Guardian Council

Ahmad Jannati (Secretary)

Abbas Ali Kadkhodaei (Spokesperson)

Mehdi Shabzendedar Jahromi

Siamak Rahpeyk (Deputy Secretary)

Sadeq Larijani

Sayyid Fazlollah Mousavi

Mohammad Reza Modarresi-Yazdi

Mohammad Dehghan

Alireza Araf

Mohammad Hasan Sadeghi Moghadam

Sayyid Ahmad Khatami

Hadi Tahan Nazif

Several veteran politicians from both political camps were

blocked from entering the race. For instance, Eshaq Jahangiri, the first vice president of the Rouhani administration, is a leading figure from the reformist camp whose application was disapproved. Since the 1990s, he has enjoyed close relations with prominent reformist figures of Iranian politics, including Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mir-Hossein Mousavi. Having served as the Minister of Industries and Mines (1997-2005), Jahangiri also took part in managing the presidential campaigns of Mousavi and Rafsanjani in 2009 and 2013 respectively. Thus, the rejection of his application has been seen by some as a means of undoing Rouhani’s legacy. Following the decision, Jahangiri [stated](#) that the disqualifications were a “serious threat to public participation and fair competition” in democracy.

Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) is another politician whose application was rejected for the second time. From the 2017 presidential elections onwards, he became a fierce critic of the regime. After his second disqualification, Ahmadinejad announced that he would not vote in the elections and would not endorse any candidate, calling the [decision](#) “an insult to the people and a violation of the constitution.” According to some [experts](#), rejection of his application is actually what Ahmadinejad wants, as it can help him in his long-term rebranding campaign, in which he is promoting himself as an opposition figure who fights with the Iranian establishment. In a striking incident, Ahmadinejad was notified by the authorities in advance that he would be disqualified by the Guardian Council and they asked him to bow down to the decision without stirring up any trouble for the establishment. According to the announcement Ahmadinejad [published](#) on his official website, Hossein Nejat, the Revolutionary Guards’ security chief for Tehran, called him at his house in east-Tehran to tell him he was disqualified from running and ask him “to keep silent and cooperate.”

However, the most unexpected disqualification was that of former parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani. Coming from a very [influential](#) family in Iran, in which his father, Hashem Amoli was Grand Ayatollah and his brother Sadiq a former judiciary chief and a current member of the Guardian Council, Larijani has served in numerous high-level offices in the bureaucracy since the revolution, including the Supreme National Security Council, the IRGC, and Iran’s state broadcasting service. He is known as a pragmatic figure and has maintained good relations with many high-ranking officials from different political camps for years, including Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani.

For this reason, Larijani's disapproval garnered significant reaction both politicians and journalists. Hossein Derakhshan, a prominent journalist, [said](#) that Larijani's disqualification "is like Baath party's staging a coup against Sayed Ali Khamenei," meaning that Larijani, as a significant figure of the establishment in Iran, was ironically disqualified by the establishment that he belongs to.

These disqualifications may demotivate people to go to the ballot boxes for the reason that only a few "legitimate" candidates were offered to them in the elections, which might lead to low voter participation. Golnaz Esfandiari, a senior correspondent with RFE/RL, [stated](#) that turnout is expected to be low, because people are "frustrated by the limited powers of elected officials, their failure to de-

liver on promises, and the absence of meaningful change to the lives of ordinary citizens." According to a [survey](#) by the Netherlands-based Iranians Survey Group (GAMAAN), turnout is expected to be less than 25 per cent, the lowest ever in the history of presidential elections since the revolution. This figure was around 73 per cent in the last elections four years ago and the highest ever turnout of 84.8 was recorded in 2009. The lowest voter participation at 50.6 was seen in 1993 when Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani took office for the second time.

## Challenges Facing the Next President

The 8th president of Iran since the Islamic Revolution is expected to confront several challenges in the next four years. Foremost among them is the future of the nuclear deal and relations with the West. Considering most of the presidential candidates are from the conservative/hardliner camp that enjoys a close relationship with Khamenei, the next president of the Islamic Republic is likely to be affiliated with this camp. This camp's hostile perception of the West may ultimately undermine efforts to calm tensions between Iran and the US. Even though negotiations in Vienna are ongoing, a conservative/Principlist leadership in Tehran will alter the mood of the talks and make things more complicated. Both Raisi and Jalili, two leading figures of this camp among the candidates, are known for their ardent opposition to the West and support for hard

power solutions to Iran's challenges. With the failure of the JCPOA, a conservative/hardliner president could derive legitimacy on the pretext that engaging talks with the West does not serve Iran's interests and Iranians have to show solidarity in resistance.

The worsening economic situation will be the biggest challenge for the next president. This deterioration has been exacerbated by the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic. While the inflation [rate](#) is at almost 50%, the national currency is in freefall. In July 2015, following the signing of the JCPOA, \$1 bought some 32,000 riyals. As of June 2021 \$1 buys 238,000 riyals. In addition, the economy shrank by nearly 5 percent in 2020, and has not grown since 2017. For these reasons, the next president's [priority](#) will be lifting sanctions on the oil and banking sectors.

## Conclusion

Iranians will elect a new president for the Islamic Republic on June 18. However, many indicators reveal that the electoral race is far from being competitive. After Hassan Rouhani's eight year tenure, the next president of Iran will face several challenges that emerged in the outgoing administration's second term. While he will have to revive the deteriorating economic situation resulting from sanctions, he will have to deliver Iran's demands clearly to the Western states for restoring ties after the devastating impacts of

the Trump administration in the US. Lastly, these elections are noteworthy for being a prelude to the potential election of the next Supreme Leader after Khamenei, considering Ebrahim Raisi, the frontrunner of the elections, is among the potential candidates to succeed Khamenei as Supreme Leader.

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