

MP-IDSA *Issue Brief*

Pezeshkian's Victory and Return to a 'Balanced' Foreign Policy

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S*ummary*

Masoud Pezeshkian's victory reverses the trend of conservative consolidation of power in Iran since 2018 when the US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement weakened the moderate Rouhani government. Pezeshkian has criticised the 'Look East' policy supported by conservatives as a 'single-option' policy, and argued for a 'balanced' approach between the Eastern and Western powers.

Masoud Pezeshkian, 69 years old cardiac surgeon, an ethnic Azeri Turk and a reformist parliamentarian from Tabriz secured 53.6 per cent of votes in a presidential runoff, defeating hardliner Saeed Jalili. The snap elections in Iran were held following the death of Iranian President Ibrahim Raisi in a helicopter accident on 19 May. A total of four candidates including Pezeshkian, Jalili, Mohammad Baqer Ghalibaf, a former Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander and current parliament speaker, and Mustafa Pourmohammadi, who served as deputy intelligence minister under former President Rafsanjani, had competed in the first round.

Two other candidates who had been qualified to run by the Guardian Council, namely Alireza Zakani, mayor of Tehran since 2021 and Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, a former parliamentarian and head of the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, withdrew from the race to endorse Jalili. However, Ghalibaf, who had backing of the pragmatic conservative camp, refused to withdraw in Jalili’s favour even after pre-election surveys indicated Jalili’s substantial lead over him.

A triangular contest made a run-off including Pezeshkian almost inevitable. The initial vote on 28 June recorded a turnout of 40 per cent from the over 61 million eligible voters. Pezeshkian garnered 42.45 per cent of votes, while Jalili came second with 38.61 per cent.¹ Pezeshkian’s lead of nearly one million over Jalili overturned the conventional wisdom that reformist prospects depend on high turnout. The most plausible explanation is a shift of conservative votes in his favour. Jalili and Ghalibaf together garnered 12.8 million votes, a decline of 5.2 million from the 2021 elections when Raisi emerged victorious with no serious challenger. But as Pezeshkian failed to secure more than 50 per cent of votes, the election went into a runoff. In the runoff, the voter turnout increased to 50 per cent.

Reformists Return to the Political Arena

In 2018, the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear agreement and nation-wide protests triggered by fuel subsidy cuts had the effect of severely weakening the moderate Rouhani government. In subsequent parliamentary and presidential elections, conservative-dominated Guardian Council has systematically disqualified the majority of reformist and moderate candidates. At a time when Iran faced ‘maximum pressure’ from the United States and is undergoing a crucial generational change in the political leadership, and is looking at a potential succession of the Supreme Leader, the Iranian establishment has favoured a

¹ Mona Hojat Ansari, “[Iran’s Constitutional Council Confirms Presidential Election Results](#)”, *Tehran Times*, 30 June 2024.

conservative consolidation of all branches of power—presidency, parliament, and judiciary.

As the recent elections were reduced to a contest within the conservative camp, the voter turnout has continuously plummeted. The March 2024 parliament elections recorded a turnout of 41 per cent, the lowest in Iran’s electoral history. In protest against disqualifications restricting voter’s choice, former president Mohammad Khatami boycotted the recent elections. During the ‘Women, Life, Freedom’ protests, Green Movement leader Mir Hossein Mousavi, who has been under house arrest since 2011, called for a referendum on Iran’s political system and the drafting of a new democratic constitution.

Hassan Rouhani, who was disqualified from running for March 2024 elections for the Assembly of Experts, a clerical body responsible for electing the Supreme Leader, has criticised the conservative consolidation of power as the “rule of minority”.² The disengagement of a majority of the population and elites from the electoral process was an alarming sign for a political system that has been under siege from its very birth.

In this context, the approval of Pezeshkian, a five-term parliamentarian from East Azerbaijan province, who served as Minister of Health and Medical Education under Reformist President Mohammad Khatami, and was disqualified in the 2021 presidential election, unexpectedly brought the reformists back to the political arena. Since nearly two decades ago, when the Reform Movement brought Muhammad Khatami to presidency, reformists have offered a democratic political imagination of a pluralist civil society and cultural liberalisation, which appealed to the middle class.

In contrast to the conservative Islamist conception of politics as a moral conflict between opposing identities/civilisations, the reformists have sought de-securitize Iran’s relations with the West. In a bid to attract the alienated voters, Pezeshkian took ‘Baraye Iran’ (For Iran), the anthem of the recent protests, as his campaign slogan. During the campaign, he criticised Jalili’s track record as chief nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad by saying that diplomacy was not about an uncompromising stance and revolutionary slogans. While linking it to securing peoples’ livelihood, and a positive face for Iran, he said that “diplomacy and negotiation do not amount to humiliation”.³

² [“Iran’s Former President Rouhani Slams His Disqualification from Elections”](#), *Iran Front Page*, 25 January 2024.

³ [“Pezeshkian Says He Favors Diplomacy But Vows Not to Cave In to Coercion”](#), *PressTV*, 18 June 2024.

Pezeshkian’s candidacy was endorsed by two former presidents Rouhani and Khatami, while Mohammad Javad Zarif, former foreign minister played a crucial role in his campaign as a foreign policy advisor. Jalili was backed by hardliner ‘Endurance Front’, known by its Persian acronym Paydari.⁴ A downside of concentration of power within the conservative camp has been an intensive infighting between mainstream conservatives and an ascendant, younger generation of hardliners.

In the March 2024 parliament elections, Paydari performed better than pragmatic conservatives led by Ghalibaf. It had carried out an ‘anti-Ghalibaf’ campaign focussed on corruption allegations against him. In defeat, Ghalibaf extended support to Jalili, but several of his supporters publicly backed Pezeshkian instead.⁵ On the occasion of Eid al-Ghadir on 25 June, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei noted that people's participation in the election is a part of the essence of the Islamic Republic and also a key factor in dealing with the enemies’ hostilities.⁶ While maintaining that Iran believes in interaction with the whole world, in an indirect criticism of the reformist candidate, he said that certain politicians who believe that progress can only be achieved by relying on foreign powers and have the illusion that the US is the only path to development, do not see these capacities of the nation.

A People-centric and ‘Balanced’ Foreign Policy

In the four presidential debates, the primary focus was on candidates’ economic plan, especially on sanctions, and foreign policy outlook. Jalili disapproved of any dependence on accords with foreign countries, while Pezeshkian highlighted internal corruption, inefficiencies and losses under sanctions.⁷ Pezeshkian not only criticised Jalili’s track record as chief nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad but attempted to present a people-centric and development-oriented foreign policy narrative.⁸

By linking diplomacy with the West to securing peoples’ livelihood and a positive face for Iran, Pezeshkian said that “negotiations are not humiliating for me”. At the same time, he referenced Supreme Leader Khamenei to make his case for negotiations with

⁴ Sina Toosi, [“The Conservative Power Struggle Shaping Iran’s Election”](#), *Foreign Policy*, 26 June 2024.

⁵ [“Will Qalibaf’s Supporters Decide Outcome of Iran’s Presidential Elections?”](#), *Amwaj Media*, 2 July 2024.

⁶ [“Iranian Nation Will Not Permit Others to Determine Their Fate: Leader”](#), *Tehran Times*, 25 June 2024.

⁷ [“Deep Dive: First Iranian Presidential Debate Focuses on Economy, Sanctions”](#), *Amwaj Media*, 18 June 2024.

⁸ [“Pezeshkian, Jalili Hold Last Debate Before Iran Presidential Runoff”](#), *Islamic Republic News Agency*, 3 July 2024.

the West on the basis of “dignity, wisdom and expediency”. Like the ‘moderate’ Hassan Rouhani government, he argued for implementing global financial standards set by the Financial Action Task Force.

Notably, Pezeshkian’s narrative of a ‘balanced foreign policy’ had imprint of his two foreign policy advisors Zarif and Mehdi Sanaei, a Professor of International Relations at Tehran University and former Ambassador of Iran to Russia. While Zarif is a well-known advocate of diplomacy to revive the nuclear agreement and lift sanctions, Sanaei has advocated an Asia-orientation policy of deepening ties with China and Russia, not as a substitute but complementary to constructive relations with the West.⁹

Pezeshkian invoked the traditional foreign policy principle of ‘equilibrium’, which is traced back to early 19th century era of ‘great game’ between Tsarist Russia and British Empire, as crucial for ensuring Iran's national independence as well as interests. Criticising the “single-option approach” of ‘Look East’ supported by his conservative rivals, Pezeshkian maintained that “neither should the Eastern powers think they are our only option, nor the Westerners”.¹⁰ As he emphasised the strategic significance of the 2015 nuclear agreement for Iran’s economy and overall international relations, he stated that “we seek good relations with Europe on an equal footing”.

Pezeshkian’s foreign policy vision therefore makes a departure from the Raisi government, which focussed on implementing the 25-year agreement with China, and was in process of finalising a long-term strategic partnership agreement with Russia, which will institutionalise the comprehensive strategic nature of the partnership across military, economic and political domains.¹¹ Reformists and Moderates, who favour outreach with the West, tend to seek more tactical relations with Russia that would not be seen as an obstacle in building relations with Europe.¹² As Iran entered into election phase, further work on Iran–Russia comprehensive cooperation agreement was paused.¹³

On regional policy, in addition to supporting Raisi government’s efforts for rapprochement with Saudi Arabia and others, he revived offers of non-aggression

⁹ Mehdi Sanaei and Jahangir Karami, “[Iran’s Eastern Policy: Potential and Challenges](#)”, *Russia in Global Affairs*, July–September 2021.

¹⁰ “[Where Pezeshkian and Jalili Stand on Key Issues](#)”, *Tehran Times*, 30 June 2024.

¹¹ “[Iran’s Russia Envoy Reveals New Details of Strategic Bilateral Deal](#)”, *Nour News*, 25 February 2024.

¹² Abdolrasool Divsallar, “The Pillars of Iranian-Russian Security Convergence”, *The International Spectator*, Vol. 54, No. 3, 2019, pp. 107–122.

¹³ “[MFA Calls Cooperation Agreement with Iran a Strategic Decision](#)”.

pact with Persian Gulf neighbours, made earlier by Zarif as Foreign Minister during the Rouhani administration. Pezeshkian linked de-escalation with the US as necessary for relieving economic hardships faced by people under sanctions. At the same time, he emphasised support for the ‘resistance front’, a region-wide network of non-state actors supported by the IRGC, who share Iran’s geopolitical goal of countering US military presence and Israel. In one of the debates, Pezeshkian stated that “defensive and deterrent power that the IRGC and the Iranian Army have built is a source of pride for our country”.¹⁴ However, implicitly, he raised the issue of cost-benefit balance in Iran’s regional policy, when he argued how after Iran under General Soleimani’s leadership made sacrifices in saving Iraq from the Islamic State, Baghdad has held up payments it owes to Iran for supplying electricity and gas.¹⁵

Conclusion

After assuming the presidency on 30 July, Pezeshkian will be expected to deliver on the key issues he raised in his campaign such as action against mandatory hijab, internet filtering and sanctions. During the campaign, candidates had also debated the authority of the president in bringing any meaningful policy change. According to the Iranian constitution, the broad contours of country’s security and foreign policy are determined by the Supreme Leader. However, the President as the head of the executive, designs these policies together with his cabinet and gets them ratified by the Supreme National Security Council and the Leader.

Notably, Pezeshkian throughout his campaign argued for unity and consensus. He is well aware that any meaningful change at the domestic or external front will require that he doesn’t antagonise the conservative-dominated parliament and parallel institutions headed by Khamenei. Upon Pezeshkian’s victory, Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated his call to follow on the path of ‘martyr Raisi’ by relying on the internal capacities of the country rather than looking towards foreigners.¹⁶ Pezeshkian’s presidency may not see any sharp change on security and foreign policy front, but there is likely to be definite change in the narrative and a wait and watch approach on the key issue of negotiating with the United States.

¹⁴ [“Highlights: Fourth Debate in 2024 Iran Presidential Election”](#), *PressTV*, 24 June 2024.

¹⁵ [“Pezeshkian: Why Doesn't Iraq, Which We Have Served So Much, Return Our Money?”](#), *PressTV* on X, 2 July 2024.

¹⁶ [“Ayatollah Khamenei Receives Iran President-elect, Wishes Him Success”](#), *PressTV*, 6 July 2024.

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