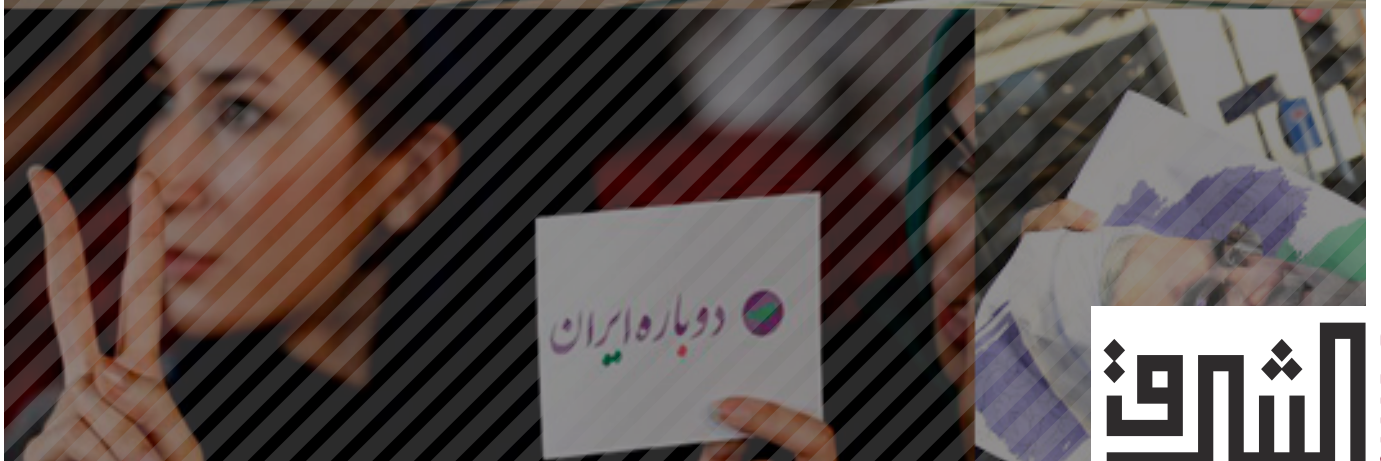


# Iranian Elections

More Than Just The  
Presidency

Abdullah Yegin





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Presidency

**Abdullah Yegin**

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**Abstract:** The Iranian presidential elections always attract the world's attention. The 12th presidential elections, due to be held on May 19, deserve to be followed closely by international audiences as well. In particular, it will have an impact on whether the rekindling of relations with the West and especially the U.S., which began with Iran's President Rouhani, will continue in the aftermath of the election of a noticeably unwilling President Trump. Even more important is how this election will affect the debates on who is to become Iran's new supreme leader in the coming days. Hence, Iranian political elites must choose their tactics in this election much more carefully than if the election were merely choosing the president.



### Introduction:

May 19, 2017 is an important day for Iran. That day will see the election of the country's 12th president as well as the municipal council elections. The question of who will be the next president, however, is one that will interest international audiences as well as those inside Iran. These elections will represent a critical decision for both Iran and the world as to whether Iran will move to a new and different track following the 5+1 nuclear agreement signed under the present president, Rouhani. Moreover, it is not hard to see why this point of fragility in the global system requires the Iranian elections to be followed closely. So, these elections are being scrutinized from many different dimensions—such as the political factions, the candidate profiles, their pledges, the topics of debate, the probable results and their consequences. However, in this analysis, an aspect of the presidential elections that has nothing to do with the race will also be debated. To put it more clearly, two different examples of how different political factions are using this election period to affect Iran's political architecture will be discussed.

***These elections will represent a critical decision for both Iran and the world as to whether Iran will move to a new and different track following the 5+1 nuclear agreement signed under the present president, Rouhani.***

### How did Ebrahim Raisi become a candidate?

Last March, Ebrahim Raisi, then a high-ranking member of Iran's judiciary, was appointed by supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to head the Astan Quds Razavi foundation, the largest foundation in the country and one established in the name of the eighth Shi'a Imam, Imam Reza. The 56-year-old cleric is one of the potential candidates whose name is being mentioned as a possible replacement to supreme leader

Khamenei. Raisi is receiving serious support from a wing of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and at the same time is a member of the Council of Experts, whose role it is to select the supreme leader. Especially in recent times, as rumors of Khamenei's illness have spread, Raisi's name has gradually begun to come more and more onto the agenda.

***Raisi was just a 20-year-old assistant prosecutor in Kerch province. Within a few months, the young mullah became the province prosecutor. His harsh and effective use of his position against the opposition wing opened the way for him to take on the role of Hamedan's prosecutor as well as that of Kerch.***

It's worth taking a look at Raisi's biography here. At the time of the Islamic revolution, Raisi was just a 20-year-old assistant prosecutor in Kerch province. Within a few months, the young mullah became the province prosecutor. His harsh and effective use of his position against the opposition wing opened the way for him to take on the role of Hamedan's prosecutor as well as that of Kerch.

After three years as prosecutor of Hamedan, he became a prosecutor at the Tehran Revolutionary Court. While in this position, Raisi was in a four-person panel who gave death sentences to a series of opposition figures. It is unknown how many were sentenced to death in hearings of mere minutes each in 1988, although Ayatollah Montazeri, who was Khomeini's trustee but then was later removed from this position, states that between 2,800 and 3,800 people were executed in this period.<sup>1</sup> Raisi, who had proven his loyalty to the revolution with this harsh and determined attitude, would go on to take up important roles within the judiciary. Finally, in 2016, Khamenei



appointed him to become the head of the richest and most exclusive foundation in the country.<sup>2</sup>

***Raisi's sudden power and popularity brings to mind the idea that this candidacy is a tactic that serves another agenda.***

If we look at Raisi's career, summarized above, we in fact can see that he is not an especially important or influential name in Iranian politics. How did he nevertheless become a presidential candidate? More importantly, why were leading conservatives who had been mentioned in connection to the presidency like Saeed Jalili suddenly left in the shade, or give up their candidacies in Raisi's favor? If you look at how there were many important conservatives waiting to be presidential candidates, Raisi's sudden power and popularity brings to mind the idea that this candidacy is a tactic that serves another agenda. At this point, it is worth returning to the important point above and recalling that Raisi is one of the names that is being mentioned in connection with the position of the supreme leader after the existing supreme leader Khamenei.

There has long been speculation about who will take over Khamenei's position, and Raisi's name began to emerge after he was made head of the Imam Reza Foundation. Here, however, a problem is foreseen. It is clear that one wing of the IRGC is intentionally bringing Raisi's name to the fore. However, even if Khamenei has no objections to Raisi's presidential candidacy and is in fact encouraging it, it remains in question as to whether he is in agreement with this wing of the IRGC on the issue of the next supreme leader. Hence, naturally enough, we are left with a confusing question: why and by who was Raisi convinced to become a presidential candidate? Because if he were

genuinely a possible future supreme leader, he would be taking a big risk to stand before the voting public as a presidential candidate. Moreover, he would be facing one of the most effective presidents in the history of the Iranian Islamic Republic, Rouhani. Of course, we cannot entirely rule out Raisi beating Rouhani, but it is clear that this will be no easy task. If he wins the election, he will have passed an important test on the way to becoming supreme leader, but if he loses, it will be difficult for him, as someone not even considered adequate to be president by the public, to become the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader. Therefore, we can talk about two possibilities and tactics behind Raisi's presidential candidacy. The first possibility is that running for elections is a sort of PR exercise that is being carried out for Raisi,

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while the second is that he has fallen into a trap. If the first possibility is correct, then Raisi will withdraw from his candidacy at the last minute and support Qalibaf, another conservative candidate. Thus he will remain on the agenda—and in the popular mindset—as one of the most important conservative candidates for a long time, and he will gain increased sympathy as someone loyal and generous, having ensuring the unity of the country's conservative forces. The reason we might consider a second possibility, that a trap has been set for Raisi, is this: however much a wing of the IRGC may want to see Raisi as the next supreme leader, this does not mean that the whole IRGC, nor the power centers of the regime, and most of all Khamenei, think in the same way. If this is





the case, powerful players who do not think of him as a possible future supreme leader may be ensuring that Raisi enters and loses an election against Rouhani, thus putting him out of the picture. Of course, it needs to be said that there is no legal or theoretical obstacle to Raisi becoming supreme leader, even if he does lose the elections.

***If this is the case, powerful players who do not think of him as a possible future supreme leader may be ensuring that Raisi enters and loses an election against Rouhani, thus putting him out of the picture.***

#### **What is Ahmedinejad trying to do?**

In fact, everything first began very well for Ahmedinejad. When he announced his candidacy for the 2005 presidential elections, he was Mayor of Tehran. His humble lifestyle, taking the side of the poor, delivering successful services and his clear devotion to supreme leader Khamenei in carrying out this duty caught the attention of conservative decision makers. His discourse and campaign pledges after becoming a presidential candidate increased his impact on both conservatives and all poor segments of society and ensured it would continue.

He would constantly emphasize the first years of the Islamic revolution and call for the return of the revolutionary fellowship of those times. He strongly criticized the fact that an elite section of society had managed to enrich themselves through the state after the revolution while the great majority were not able to partake of the country's riches. Therefore, the poor felt that one of their own had become a presidential candidate. From the perspective of Khamenei and his close conservative circle the situation was no different, for Ahmedinejad's electoral rival Rafsanjani was an archetype of a person from this minority class who had become rich with the help of the state. Supreme leader

Khamenei had no objection to this type of criticism of Rafsanjani, who had both been his closest comrade and his most important rival. On the other hand, Ahmedinejad's political position was completely in line with Khamenei, whom he would obey without question. For Khamenei and his circle, who since he had become supreme leader had had to work first with Rafsanjani and then with Khatami, both men with very different ideas about important issues, Ahmedinejad was the ideal presidential candidate. Finally, after Ahmedinejad became president in 2005, he performed perfectly in line with Khamenei and other conservatives. So much so, in fact, that Khamenei openly supported Ahmedinejad after the 2009 elections, at a time when opposition figures began protests claiming that there had been electoral fraud. Indeed, Khamenei stated that he was closer to Ahmedinejad than to Rafsanjani, who was the second most important living person who had lived through the revolution,<sup>3</sup> and he personally suppressed anti-Ahmedinejad protests. This happened in two ways: first, he called on those loyal to him to hold anti-protest meetings and marches, and on the other hand, the IRGC and military Basij forces under his control took on fundamental roles in suppressing the protests. But for an unknown reason, some time later their relationship became more distant. The first serious crisis between the two that became public was on the issue of Ahmedinejad's top vice president, Efsandiar Rahim Mashaei. Certain conservative circles in particular claimed that Mashaei was obsessed with mysticism and was influencing and directing Ahmedinejad on these issues. Khamenei asked Ahmedinejad to remove Mashaei from his position,<sup>4</sup> but Ahmedinejad refused. Of course, later on he would have to carry out Khamenei's wishes. Before long, however, a second crisis had erupted between the two: Ahmedinejad wanted to remove the Intelligence Minister from his post, but Khamenei would not allow him to. Resenting



this, Ahmedinejad closed himself inside his home for 11 days in protest, refusing to carry out his official duties.<sup>5</sup> The rift between the pair never healed. Ahmedinejad had not been visible for a long time when he reemerged a few months before the 2017 presidential elections and began holding rallies in cities across Iran. Everyone was saying that Ahmedinejad was preparing for a 2017 election run, but Khamenei openly stated that he did not see Ahmedinejad as an appropriate candidate.<sup>6</sup> In response, Ahmedinejad revealed that he would not be a candidate. With only a short time to go before the election, Ahmedinejad said that his former vice president Hamid Bekai would be his supported presidential candidate. When Bekai went to the Interior Ministry to register his candidacy, Ahmedinejad accompanied him, saying that he was there to support him. However, at that moment there was a development that shocked everybody: Ahmedinejad took out the necessary documents and applied to be a presidential candidate himself.<sup>7</sup> Of course, both his and Bekai's candidacies were rejected by the Guardian Council.

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Why would Ahmedinejad attempt this in spite of the clear warning of the supreme leader? He may have thought that this initiative would have guaranteed that Bekai's candidacy would be accepted; that is, that the council would reject his own candidacy and in return approve Bekai's candidacy. However, it is difficult to say that this is a legitimate and realistic justification. Whether

Ahmedinejad were a candidate or not, it was clear that Bekai's candidacy would be rejected, because Bekai had openly declared his loyalty to Ahmedinejad, even to the point of saying that he would not take a drink of water without his say-so, and that he was proud of the fact.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, everyone accepted that Bekai's candidacy was entirely at Ahmedinejad's wish and that every step he took would be on Ahmedinejad's orders. With this in mind, it was clear that Khamenei, who had openly opposed Ahmedinejad's candidacy, would not see as appropriate a candidate who had openly declared his loyalties to Ahmedinejad. On the other hand, there were only two actors powerful enough to stand their own candidates for election, and on the death of one of them, Rafsanjani, Khamenei became the only man powerful enough to do so. Ahmedinejad could not have believed he was such a strong actor himself, nor that Khamenei would allow the centers of power to give the impression that he was running for the elections without a rival. So it is possible to conclude that Ahmedinejad's move was part of a bigger plan to settle his scores. While it is correct to say that if Ahmedinejad had not made a move, his political life would have completely ended and that this was an attempt to prevent this happening, this explanation is incomplete, because this attempt put both Ahmedinejad and his political life at greater risk. At this point, it is worth recalling an answer Bekai gave to a question he was asked. A journalist asked him why he had been willing to be a candidate for Ahmedinejad, and Bekai had responded that Ahmedinejad had "needed someone to sacrifice himself".<sup>9</sup> This phrase was interpreted as Bekai sacrificing himself for Ahmedinejad, but what we see is that it was actually Ahmedinejad who sacrificed himself in a political kamikaze attack. If this is the case, then Ahmedinejad had aimed at shaking the legitimacy of the whole regime including Khamenei. He may have planned to force Khamenei, who had been careful to



appear to be above politics, to both take a side and become the topic of political debate. In fact, Khamenei's openly pro-Ahmedinejad stance after the 2009 elections had been controversial and had delivered a major blow to his image as being above politics. Khamenei had then openly taken a political side to accuse those against Ahmedinejad of being imprudent, but this time he did the same in openly coming out against Ahmedinejad.

Secondly, the legitimacy of the system based upon the Guardian Council was badly hit, as a person who had previously been seen fit by the same institution and who had served two terms as president was rejected as a candidate solely on the basis that the supreme leader did not see it as appropriate.

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Thirdly, this attempt put the office of president in a difficult position in the eyes of public opinion. From the 1979 revolution to the present day, almost every president in Iran has fought the system. There are only two exceptions to this rule: Muhammad-Ali Rajai, who lost his life in an attack shortly after being elected, and the second was Khamenei, who was elected to the post of supreme leader before finishing his term as president. In other words, neither completed their term of office.

In the end, Ahmedinejad's move was also an attack on the legitimacy of the opposition acting within the system. Despite the reformists, who have been opposition within the system up until the present day, having

strongly and continually criticized other candidacy decisions made by the Guardian Council, they supported, or at least did not object, to its decision over Ahmedinejad. Thus, the principled stand of the reformists has also come into question. Another topic of debate is who Ahmedinejad made this move on behalf of.

***If this is the case, then Ahmedinejad had aimed at shaking the legitimacy of the whole regime including Khamenei. He may have planned to force Khamenei, who had been careful to appear to be above politics, to both take a side and become the topic of political debate.***

#### **Accusations against the candidates: everyone's a thief**

Another issue in the course of the presidential election race that has strengthened perceptions that the system is rotten and thus paved the way for effects beyond the presidential election is the accusations of corruption that the candidates have directed at one another. In order to understand this, it is enough to watch television programs in which the candidates face one another. In Iran, which does not have private TV channels, some of the most important ways of affecting public opinion in the presidential elections are debates with all the presidential candidates live on state television. In these debates, which take place three times with a week between each, the candidates may expect questions and answers on pre-defined topics on the agenda, but in practice the situation is very different. The candidates say what they want to say on the topics they most want to talk about more often than answering the questions asked, and trade mutual accusations in increasingly harsh tones. In particular, the debates that took place before this election tended to get out of control after a certain point, with candidates bitterly criticizing and attacking one another



in a way that has never been done from the Islamic revolution to the present. This situation has both led to a personalization of the debate in a way rarely found in the Iranian political tradition, and has also led to a damaging of the reputation of the system in the eyes of the public, doubtless in a way that none of the candidates would want.

***Despite the reformists, who have been opposition within the system up until the present day, having strongly and continually criticized other candidacy decisions made by the Guardian Council, they supported, or at least did not object, to its decision over Ahmedinejad. Thus, the principled stand of the reformists has also come into question.***

This is because important figures such as the president, deputy president, mayors of the largest city and capital and others within the Iranian Islamic Republic, which defines itself by its 'ethical values' above all, were making accusations about one another's corruption with an unprecedented harshness and concrete claims. As a result, no matter who wins the election, one of the issues on which they will have to spend much effort is correcting the public perception of the rottenness of the system, which they themselves will have contributed to. Of course, it will not just be the president who will be put in a difficult situation by these mutual accusations. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who is the biggest proponent and defender of the values system of the Islamic regime, will need to have words and answer questions on these issues. Finally, the public will follow closely as to whether or not the judiciary will act on these serious and concrete claims. In this sense alone, the presidential election that is to take place in the coming days can be seen as the start of a serious rupture in the Iranian state.

### **Conclusion:**

As we can see, both the election that will take place on May 19 in Iran itself and the electoral process will have a wider influence than simply selecting a president. The path that Iran-Western relations will follow in the aftermath of the nuclear agreement signed with the West in the Rouhani era will be largely dependent on this election, since after the election of Trump in the U.S., who does not see Iran in a positive light, the election of a conservative candidate at a distance from the West in Iran could lead to a return to the old days of tensions. But what is even more important is the likelihood of important developments occurring on the systemic level in the Iranian political scene in the period ahead. In particular, for the past two years all political factions in Iran have been focused on the post-Khamenei era. The loss of Rafsanjani this year, who was considered to be a more moderate figure who would have been active in reforms, has been a big loss for many reformers and moderates in the light of a possible change of supreme leader. At the present moment, Khamenei-affiliated conservatives appear to have had their hand thoroughly strengthened on the issue of deciding the next supreme leader. But it is not difficult to see that they are divided and that there is a type of internal competition on various different issues of the day. One wing of this faction may be supporting Ebrahim Raisi, but it should not be missed that another wing is trying to promote other names. However, however strong the hand of Khamenei supporters, other segments of

***But what is even more important is the likelihood of important developments occurring on the systemic level in the Iranian political scene in the period ahead. In particular, for the past two years all political factions in Iran have been focused on the post-Khamenei era.***



society will certainly try to intervene on the issue of a new supreme leader. Conservatives like Ahmedinejad will not give up directly attacking the system, nor will reformists or moderates who are trying to elect a name like President Rouhani as a new leader cease their fight within the system. For this reason, for a while longer, when we look at Iran's domestic politics we must keep in mind the questions of the future of the system and the identity of the new supreme leader. For these questions are much more important than who will be the president.



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### ABOUT ALSHARQ FORUM

The Sharq Forum is an independent international network whose mission is to undertake impartial research and develop long-term strategies to ensure the political development, social justice and economic prosperity of the people of Al-Sharq. The Forum does this through promoting the ideals of democratic participation, an informed citizenry, multi-stakeholder dialogue, social justice, and public-spirited research.

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## Iranian Elections: More Than Just The Presidency

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The Iranian presidential elections always attract the world's attention. The 12th presidential elections, due to be held on May 19, deserve to be followed closely by international audiences as well. In particular, it will have an impact on whether the rekindling of relations with the West and especially the U.S., which began with Iran's President Rouhani, will continue in the aftermath of the election of a noticeably unwilling President Trump. Even more important is how this election will affect the debates on who is to become Iran's new supreme leader in the coming days. Hence, Iranian political elites must choose their tactics in this election much more carefully than if the election were merely choosing the president.