

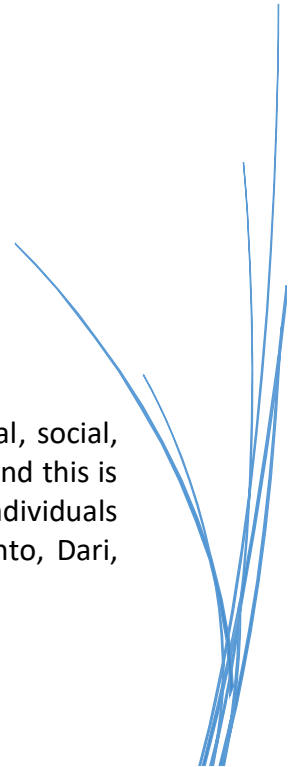
WEEKLY ANALYSIS

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THE ELECTION OF MASOUD PEZESHKIAN AS PRESIDENT OF IRAN: CONTINUATION OR CHANGE IN FOREIGN POLICY



Weekly Analysis is one of the CSRS publications analyzing significant weekly political, social, economic, and security events in Afghanistan and the region. The prime motive behind this is to provide strategic insights and policy solutions to decision-making institutions and individuals in order to help them design better policies. Weekly Analysis is published in Pashto, Dari, English and Arabic languages.



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Center for Strategic and Regional Studies (CSRS)



THE ELECTION OF MASOUD PEZESHKIAN AS PRESIDENT OF IRAN: CONTINUATION OR CHANGE IN FOREIGN POLICY

Introduction

In the 2021 presidential election of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi emerged victorious and began his presidential term, which according to the country's constitution lasts for 4 years. However, fate was not kind to him, and on May 20th of this year, he tragically lost his life in a helicopter crash. During the final two and a half years of his presidency, Raisi focused his foreign policy on fostering friendships with neighboring and regional powers. He achieved significant success in this endeavor, aiming to use this foundation to balance Iran's relations with Western countries. Following his untimely death, an early election was held to select a new president, in which Masoud Pezeshkian was elected. The question now is whether, amidst existing regional and international issues, there will be a change in the country's foreign policy concerning relations with the Western world, regional countries, and Afghanistan. This analysis aims to address this question based on various aspects.

PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION ACCORDING TO THE CONSTITUTION OF IRAN

According to Article 104 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the president is elected for a term of 4 years and may run for one consecutive term. If the president dies, becomes afflicted with a terminal illness, or goes missing during his presidency, Article 130 of the Constitution stipulates that, with the agreement of the country's leader, the powers and responsibilities of the former president are transferred to the first vice president. A council consisting of the Speaker of the Parliament, the Head of the Judiciary, and the First Vice President is then obligated to hold a new presidential election within 50 days.

According to Article 117 of the Constitution, the president is elected by an absolute majority of the voters. The same article states that if no candidate secures the majority of the votes in the first round, a second round of elections will be held. In this round, the two candidates who have received the highest number of votes will participate, and the election will be held on the following Friday.

When the former president, Ebrahim Raisi, passed away on May 20, 2024, the Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, ordered Mohammad Mokhber Dezfuli, who was the First Vice President, to assume Raisi's powers for a short period. Based on the aforementioned constitutional provisions, the date for the new election, which would be the fourteenth presidential election, was set for June 28, 2024. The Guardian Council approved six presidential candidates for this election: Masoud Pezeshkian, Mostafa Pourmohammadi, Saeed Jalili, Alireza Zakani, Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. Among these candidates, Zakani and Ghazizadeh withdrew from the election, leaving four final candidates: Masoud Pezeshkian, Mostafa Pourmohammadi, Saeed Jalili, and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf.

After the election was held on the set date, election officials announced that no candidate had secured an absolute majority of the votes, necessitating a second round of elections between the two leading



candidates, Masoud Pezeshkian and Saeed Jalili, on July 5, 2024. This election was held as scheduled, and Masoud Pezeshkian won with 16.3 million votes against Jalili's 13.5 million votes.

Masoud Pezeshkian was born in 1954 in East Azerbaijan, Iran. He pursued higher education in cardiac surgery up to the specialization level. Alongside his medical practice, he has served as the President of the Medical University, Deputy Minister of Health, Minister of Health, First Deputy of the Islamic Council, and a representative in the Islamic Council for the cities of Tabriz, Azarshahr, and Osku.

IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY DURING RAISE'S PRESIDENCY

During Ebrahim Raisi's presidency, Iran's diplomatic apparatus focused on lifting or at least mitigating the effects of sanctions imposed by Western countries, particularly the United States. It aimed to foster balanced political and economic relations and good interactions with Eastern, regional, and neighboring countries. During this period, Iran achieved full membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Iran joined the SCO as an observer in 2005 and applied for full membership a year later. After much deliberation, this request was approved at the 22nd summit of the organization in 2021 during Raisi's presidency. Membership in the SCO is considered highly significant for Iran's regional participation and trust, providing a foundation for increased regional interactions.

Additionally, in 2024, during Raisi's term, Argentina, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Iran joined the BRICS group (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa). Iran's membership in this organization is deemed crucial for strengthening multilateral relations in the realm of international relations. Furthermore, within this short period, Iran resumed political relations with several neighboring Arab countries and African nations such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Libya, Djibouti, and the Maldives.

In March 2023, mediated by China, Iran's National Security Secretary met with his Saudi counterpart, Musaad bin Mohammed Al-Aiban, in China. After brief discussions, they agreed to resume relations between the two countries. Subsequently, Iran's then Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, met with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince and Prime Minister in Jeddah. This visit was unprecedented in the past seven years of strained relations between the two countries.

Iran and Saudi Arabia, as influential players in the region, can significantly impact the political and geopolitical landscape of the Middle East. Given the strained relations over the past few years, this undoubtedly negatively affected the political-security situation in the region. Therefore, efforts to restore relations between the two countries intensified, leading to significant successes that positively impacted the national and regional security and interests of both nations.

Moreover, Iran's comprehensive support for Islamic fighters in the region, particularly Hamas, led to unprecedented operations against the Israeli regime. On October 7, 2023, following the Al-Aqsa Storm operation to halt Israel's occupation, Hamas forces launched missile attacks on occupied Israeli territories and infiltrated areas under Israeli control. This operation resulted in the deaths of over 1,400



Israelis and injuries to more than 3,000 others, marking a historic defeat for the Israeli regime. In response, Israeli forces, with full support from the United States and European countries, launched an attack on Gaza.

More than 35,000 Palestinians were killed in these attacks, with over 70,000 injured, the majority being women and children. The civilian casualties and bombardment of residential areas by Israel sparked reactions worldwide, with strong positions taken at international forums. The International Criminal Court, established to find and punish international criminals and ensure international criminal justice, reacted by demanding the arrest of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. However, the attacks and killings by Israel continue, extending to the city of Rafah.

In recent months, Iran's foreign policy, led by former Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, who was considered one of the most effective foreign ministers in the region and the world, actively worked towards stopping the war and implementing a ceasefire in Gaza, engaging in significant negotiations and consultations with his counterparts.

Strengthening relations with China and Russia were two other achievements of Ebrahim Raisi's administration. His government expanded interactions with these two countries in political, economic, cultural, and military fields more than previous administrations. Trade between Moscow and Tehran reached four billion dollars, while trade with China approximated three billion dollars. Another significant achievement of Raisi's administration was retaliating against Israel's attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus by launching explosive drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles targeting Israel. This attack garnered substantial regional and international media coverage. However, despite the attack, the close ally of Israel, the United States, only responded diplomatically without taking severe actions, highlighting Iran's growing capabilities and influence in regional and international political-military dynamics.

Raisi's foreign policy aimed at enhancing interactions with neighboring countries. Consequently, Afghanistan, under the re-established Islamic Emirate, showed interest in Iran's foreign policy and established connections with the country. Iran and Afghanistan shared mutual interests and were affected by similar issues during this period. Iran kept its embassy open in Kabul after the re-establishment of the Islamic Emirate and handed over the affairs of the Afghan embassy to representatives of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan in Iran. Successful negotiations on water issues and economic and trade interactions resulted from the good relations and successful diplomacy between the two countries.

MASSOUD PEZESHKIAN AND HIS FOREIGN POLICY

Massoud Pezeshkian assumed power at a time when Iran was grappling with severe economic sanctions imposed by the United States, which had significantly impacted the country's economy. The national currency had plummeted to unprecedented lows. Additionally, the ongoing conflict between Israel and Hamas further complicated the situation, with Western countries backing Israel and Iran supporting Hamas, intensifying tensions between Iran and the West.



After his victory, Pezeshkian issued a statement on X (formerly Twitter) calling for unity among Iranians. In this statement, he expressed his support for dialogue with Iran's adversaries, particularly regarding the nuclear program and lifting sanctions. He emphasized that these measures were essential for addressing the country's internal issues. He had repeatedly mentioned during his campaign that Iran needed to resolve its problems with the world, asking rhetorically if the country truly wanted to solve its issues or not. He asserted that overcoming crises was crucial for national progress.

The election of a moderate and reformist president like Pezeshkian could positively influence negotiations between the West and Iran. He is expected to work towards establishing relations with Western countries and resuming talks to lift sanctions. However, it's important to note that Western countries do not anticipate an immediate change in their relations with Iran due to this election. Nonetheless, Pezeshkian's moderate stance makes him a favorable candidate for the West compared to his rival, who would have escalated existing tensions.

Regionally, Pezeshkian is likely to follow many of Raisi's policies, striving to strengthen ties with China and Russia more than ever. Additionally, he will focus on maintaining and enhancing relations with Saudi Arabia, accelerating efforts in this regard. Iran will continue its presence in the Middle East, especially concerning Israel, by continuing the previous administration's policies of supporting Palestine against Israel. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei reiterated this stance in his first message after Pezeshkian's victory, advising reliance on God and the continuation of the martyred president's path for the welfare and progress of the nation, utilizing the country's potential, particularly its young, revolutionary, and honest workforce.

Politically, the president is considered the second highest authority after the Supreme Leader in Iran. According to the constitution, the president is accountable to the Supreme Leader, which means that the president's foreign policy will be influenced by the Supreme Leader's guidance and ultimately align with his views and recommendations.

Although Pezeshkian has not detailed his foreign policy regarding Afghanistan, his stance can be inferred from his statements about Afghan refugees and regional relations. He highlighted the following points regarding Afghan refugees:

1. Border control and prevention of illegal immigration.
2. Refugee management: He acknowledged the significant contributions of Afghan brothers to Iran's economy and in wartime but emphasized the need for proper management of their presence in Iran.
3. Negotiating with European countries to accept a certain number of refugees or at least cover their costs in Iran. He stressed that the West should take responsibility for the situation in Afghanistan that forced millions to flee, and that Iran should not bear the consequences of others' policies.



Every country has the right to decide on the entry of illegal immigrants. From Pezeshkian's statements, it's evident that there won't be harsh measures leading to the expulsion of Afghan refugees. He believes that Afghan refugees have played a significant role in Iran's economic development. Therefore, systematic steps can be taken, such as making illegal entry into Iran more difficult while facilitating legal entry and registration, which could positively impact the country's economy.

Politically, Pezeshkian is expected to enhance interactions with neighboring and regional countries, as emphasized during his campaign. Given Afghanistan's proximity, significant attention will be given to this area. It is anticipated that Pezeshkian will continue Raisi's policies concerning the region and neighboring countries.

CONCLUSION

The passing of former Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi led to early elections, a scenario anticipated by the Iranian Constitution, which provides solutions under various articles to ensure continuity without destabilizing the system. Leadership changes for various reasons are common in any country, but these changes do not necessarily affect the pursuit of national interests. However, the methods and policies to achieve and maintain these interests may evolve.

With Raisi's passing and Massoud Pezeshkian's election as the new president, there is an expectation that while the core policies of deep regional engagement, particularly with neighboring countries like Afghanistan, will continue, Pezeshkian's administration may adopt a softer stance. This could facilitate the easing of U.S. sanctions or at least mitigate their impact, thereby paving the way for Iran's economic development.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Maintain and Strengthen Relations with Iran:** The Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should continue to preserve and enhance its relations with the new Iranian government. This includes creating legal frameworks for Afghan refugees to live in Iran and providing them with economic and educational opportunities.
2. **Leverage Relations with Key Allies:** To soften Western foreign policies towards Afghanistan, the Islamic Emirate should strive to build an axis of support involving Iran, China, and Russia, thereby strengthening relations with these key countries.
3. **Prepare for Unpredictable Events:** Similar to Iran, the Islamic Emirate should establish a fundamental document that anticipates and defines responses to unforeseen events. This will ensure stability and preparedness for similar situations in the future.
4. **Resolve Regional Issues:** The Iranian government should work towards resolving conflicts with all Islamic countries in the region and other nations with shared interests. This approach could open opportunities for establishing relations with Western countries.



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