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Raisi's Election: Supreme Leader-President in One?

By Amin Saikal

SYNOPSIS

The election of Ebrahim Raisi to Iran's presidency narrows the dichotomy between two lines of authority in Iranian politics: one embodied by the unelected position of supreme leader and another by that of the elected president. The president and the Supreme Leader can now be expected to speak with one voice.

COMMENTARY

THE ELECTION of hardline cleric, Ebrahim Raisi, to the presidency of Iran has caused alarm in the West. It certainly poses major challenges but could also open opportunities for dealing with Iran more effectively.

His rise to the top position streamlines the bifurcated authority between the unelected Supreme Leader and elected president in the Islamic Republic, as the two men will now preach from the same pulpit.

Who is Ebrahim Raisi?

Raisi has had a controversial past. He has been intimately associated with the Islamic Republic since its inception in the wake of the 1978/79 Iranian revolution. That epochal event overthrew the Shah's pro-Western monarchy and enabled his chief political-religious opponent Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to establish his Islamic order.

Raisi bears the reputation of having been involved in the killing of thousands of political prisoners in 1978, which he claims was for the good of the Islamic Republic.

Yet, he has also been an ardent follower of Khomeini's two-pronged approach to Iran's transformation: jihadi (ideological and combative) to Islamise state and society, and

ijtihadi (reformative and pragmatic) to build a strong and defensible Islamic Republic, capable of resisting outside impositions and interventions.

Khomeini opposed the United States as the 'Great Satan' due to the superpower's past unsavoury involvement in Iran and ongoing hegemonic presence in the region. He called for resistance to the US, along with some of its regional allies (Israel in particular), not only ideologically but also pragmatically whenever required.

Instead, he urged his regime to look to the East, Soviet Russia, China and India, to counter the US, and showed no qualms over these powers' variance to his Shia Islamic disposition, despite having branded the USSR as a 'Lesser Satan'.

Reliving Khomeini's Jihadi-Ijtihadi Legacy?

Khomeini died in 1989. His successor Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has followed his jihadi-ijtihadi legacy. Khamenei has used his enormous religious authority and constitutional powers to be hardline on principles and flexible in tactics. For example, he backed the July 2015 multilateral Iran nuclear agreement – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – as an act of 'heroic flexibility' or pragmatism.

Raisi embraces the same tradition. He has reached the top through the judiciary, devotion to Khomeini's concept of Velayat-e Faqih (rule of the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist) and close links to Khamenei.

Prior to running for the presidency and coming second to moderate Hassan Rouhani in the 2017 election and then being appointed by Khamenei to the powerful position of Iran's Chief Justice, he was the custodian of the very wealthy Astan Quds Razavi Foundation (2016-19). He was also in charge of administering Imam Reza's shrine in the city of Mashhad, where he concurrently presided over one of the best libraries and museums in Iran.

As an author and researcher, I met Raisi a few years ago in Mashhad, a city of religious pilgrimage in northeast Iran. I found him to be hardline ideologically and distrustful of the US and its regional allies, but meanwhile very philosophical and engaging in discussing Iran's problems. Like Khamenei, he was sceptical of the US fully implementing the nuclear agreement.

But he could also see the need for ending the US sanctions and improving the living conditions of the Iranian people. He impressed me that, in tandem with Khamenei and many other conservative colleagues, including some in the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), he could be ijtihadi when the circumstances demanded.

Hence his declaration of support as president-elect for the current Vienna negotiations to reach an agreement with the US over the JCPOA and for improving relations with regional Arab countries.

Pragmatic Hardliner or Conservative Pragmatist?

Raisi is unlikely to engage in any structural reforms that could rock the conservatives'

hold on power or to show flexibility on Iranian national and regional security postures. But as Supreme Leader, he is as much interested in the survival of the regime and therefore prone to pragmatic actions.

A fundamental problem of the regime has been its bifurcation between the 'sovereignty of God', embodied in the Supreme Leader, and the 'sovereignty of people', reflected by the elected president. This has caused power struggles and policy confusion when someone from the ijthadi side has been elected to the presidency, as in the case of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and the outgoing Hassan Rouhani.

Raisi's election places just about all the top institutions of power under the conservatives' control, enabling them to focus on addressing domestic and foreign policy challenges without resistance from their reformist opponents. This does not provide a long-term solution to the Islamic Republic's ills but narrows the gap between the two lines of authorities for the time being.

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