Iranian presidential election of 2021

Located in the furthest eastern point of the middle east lies the Islamic Republic of Iran. The country that was once Persia underwent a PR rebranding in 1935 and asked for nations to refer to them as "Iran" as they stepped into a new age. The following 44 years would be filled with international dealings and conflicts with the Soviet Union and The British government. This Iran, though it had issues, was worlds away from the Iran that would come in 1979. "The 1979 revolution toppled Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a secular monarch allied with the West. It led to the formation of the Islamic Republic headed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, a Shi'ite cleric" (Reuters, 2019).With the Imperial State of Iran gone, it was time for a new constitution outlining the new government structure. The current political system of the Iranian government includes an executive branch, the president, and his cabinet; there is a parliament composed of the judiciary, and the Supreme Leader is at the top of the political order. Although charged with making domestic and foreign decisions, the president is ultimately accountable to the direction of the Supreme Leader – Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who will remain in the role until death or if he becomes too ill to rule (Gharagozlou). The election itself might seem typical on the surface; all Iranians over 18 can cast one vote in Iran every four years, but the process of becoming president is uniquely Iranian.

Leading up to the 2021 Presidential election, the Guardian Council, a 12-member council charged with vetting legislation and overseeing elections, chose seven out of 592 volunteered candidates to run for president. Since the council is a panel of six senior clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six Islamic jurists, most candidates selected were conservatives hoping to dethrone reformist President Hassan Rouhani. (Gharagozlou) Elected in 2013, Rouhani represented his party, the Moderation and Development Party, on the second-highest seat in the country. The Moderation and Development Party "is a centrist political party in Iran founded in 1999. The party was a part of the modernist right, the moderate reformist, and the technocrat factions of Iranian politics, with most of its supporters coming from the upper-level bureaucracy, industrialists, and managers." (Moderation, 2023) Championing modernization and economic growth, Rouhani and his party kept themselves busy with international relations claiming to try to simulate Iran's economy. In contrast, Ebrahim Raisi, one of the seven chosen candidates to run for president, had made “anti-corruption the central career theme. In 2019, he said, "We will not only cut off the fingers but chop off the arms of the corrupt." He has called for more government financial support for the poor and advocated a so-called resistance economy. "The approach that [says] we should wait for foreign investment and for foreigners to resolve our issues is wrong," he said during his first run for the presidency in 2017" (The Iran Primer, 2022). Along with economic uses, Raisi's outlook on social issues reflected that of the Supreme Leader and resonated with other "principlists" loyal to the early ideals of the 1979 revolution including segregation of the sexes. In 2014 future President stated that "preventing the mixing of men and women in the office environment is for men and women to be able to provide better services to the people, and this is a good move to create a suitable working environment and effort for women," he has also called a hijab, or modest dress, for women part of "our national law and culture" (The Iran Primer, 2022).

Heading into the thirteenth election since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, it was clear that the winner would embody these principlists' ideas. The selection of presidential candidates through the Guardian Council process guarantees the election of the Supreme Leader's choice, and that choice was Ebrahim Raisi. For now, men and women over 18 can participate in the election process; that means over 59.3 million of Iran's 85 million people can cast ballots. (Reuters, 2019) The polls open from 7 am till midnight, and each individual ballot must be counted by hand. Because of the manual counting, the election's final result is often unknown for a few days after. If no candidate can claim at least 50 percent of the vote, there will be a run-off between the two candidates with the highest number of votes the Friday after the initial election. There was no need for a run-off in the case of the 2021 election, "the 60-year-old [Ebrahim Raisi] won almost 18 million of the nearly 29 million ballots cast...But many reform-minded Iranians refused to participate in an election widely seen as a foregone conclusion. Overall voter turnout was 48.8% – the lowest since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979" (CNN 2021). The Iranian public was encouraged by those not in conservative parties to vote to place pressure on the "rigged election." Both global and domestic activists would go on to publicly accuse Iran's clerical establishment of cherry-picking the next President in a poll designed to "further entrench the power of the country's hardline clerical rulers, despite the public's calls for reforms" (CNN 2021) When asked about former President Hassan Rouhani, newly elected Raisi stated, "This (outgoing administration) is like a goalkeeper who lets in 17 goals… and then says without me it would have been 30 goals" (The Iran Primer, 2021) But who was Ebrahim Raisi, and how was he going to be a better defender for Iran?

Born in 1960, Ebrahim Raisi was raised by a clerical family at the site of Iran's holiest Shitte shrine in Mashhad. He was 19 when he got his first taste of politics when he participated in the Iranian Revolution. He would carry the same viewpoints from 1979 to his presidency in 2021. After the revolution, he studied at a seminary in Qom, the center of Shiite learning. Later he received a doctorate in Islamic jurisprudence and law from Shahid Motahari University in Tehran. Dressed in his black turban, denoting descendants from the family of the Prophet Mohammed, Raisi would start his career in the 1980s as a prosecutor and was appointed deputy prosecutor general of Tehran in 1985 (The Iran Primer, 2021). The next chapter of the future President's life would haunt him on the global stage for years to come. Before his attempts and eventual success of the presidency, "Raisi is best known for his role in the so-called "death commission" that ordered the extrajudicial executions of between 4,000 and 5,000 political prisoners in 1988, according to Amnesty International. "Thousands of political dissidents were systematically subjected to enforced disappearance in Iranian detention facilities across the country and extrajudicially executed pursuant to an order issued by the Supreme Leader of Iran and implemented across prisons in the country. Many of those killed during this time were subjected to torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment," it said. Raisi was reportedly one of the commission's four members” (The Iran Primer, 2021). During the summer of 1988, Raisi publicly claimed that all those working against the government were "condemned to execution" for "waging war on God." This event would be a sneak peak to how he would run the country one day.

Raisi also attacked women and girls and still speaks out against women's equal rights today. During his time as head of the Judiciary, there were 30 women executed that the public knows of. At least 1,620 lash sentences were handed out to 24 women during his tenure. These women were from a broad social spectrum: from labor and student activists to athletes, journalists, lawyers, and street protesters (NCRI, 2021). These women are tortured in the same style as the victims of the death commission.

Since Raisi stole the presidency, life has become highly oppressive to women in Iran. Harsh "modesty laws'' have been set in place and enforced by "morality police" for years but recently have become a global topic following the death of Mahsa Amini. Mahsa was a 22-year-old Kurdish woman who was killed in police custody in September. She was allegedly arrested for improper wear of her headscarf and was said to have died after falling ill. It was clear the government murdered this young girl while detained for having loose stains of hair showing under her headscarf (Tanis). The women in Iran were enraged by the wrongful death of their sister and took to the streets, the media, and the internet. For all of Ebrahim Raisi's evils, the women have brought global attention to the horrors of living under his rule. Since the protest broke out, there has been international support showing women cutting their hair in the street to symbolize the hair that got Mahsa Amini killed. Raisi's government spent no time pushing back and carrying out attacks on schools for girls. The fight for equal rights for women in Iran will continue as long as women are in the country. Still, with the skewed election process set in place by the Iranian constitution, it is unlikely any real change will come for its people. As for other countries, many will publicly criticize Iran's treatment of women, but it is also unlikely any foreign government will step in with real aid.

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