

Versione Italiana

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Historian Siavush Randjbar-Daemi, Assistant Professor in Modern History of the Middle East at St Andrew's University in Scotland

Who was Raisi and what did he represent for Iran?

Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's eighth president, elected on August 3, 2021, was a very controversial figure who was different from his predecessor Rouhani, a puritanical hawk completely loyal to Supreme Leader Khamenei who did not achieve particular success in his three years as president. The economic situation has been negative, one of the reasons why a large part of Iranian society has deserted the polls. About ten days ago there was the second round of the parliamentary elections, a sort of run-off, and in Tehran just eight percent of eligible voters actually voted. Much of the disaffection is due to the population's discontent with the economic situation, as well as from the "Woman, Life, Freedom" women's revolt after the killing of Masha Jina Amini in September 2022

(accused of having improperly worn the veil, she was arrested by the morality police and died following being beaten) and the protests across the country. Raisi has never been in favor of a dialogue with the demonstrators, much less any easing of the very strict rules regarding the headscarf. Even in recent weeks, in the days in which Iran was reacting to the Israeli attack on the Consulate in Damascus, the authorities continued a hard line and tough tactics towards women who courageously took to the streets without veils. All this has created a lot of hatred which was mainly expressed towards Raisi via social media: after his death we saw fireworks in Iranian Kurdish cities.



Ebrahim Raisi

We witnessed the great contrast between the establishment during the funeral ceremonies in Tabriz and the celebrations by the population.

Raisi will be buried in Mashhad, the holy Iranian city where the eighth Shiite imam is buried, considered a great honor. The state funeral will be held on the 22nd - we will see which representatives of foreign states will participate in the ceremony. (Iran has been subject to sanctions by the European Union since 2011 for violation of human rights, in addition to those of the United States. One of the causes of the crash of the Bell-412 helicopter carrying President Raisi and the Foreign Minister could be poor maintenance due to sanctions - Ed.)

The hard core that remains faithful to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is strong. They are a few million people, perhaps fewer than those who followed the funeral of the dissident

Ayatollah Montazeri in 2009. However, even within the regime there is growing disappointment for the serious economic situation and Raisi's foreign policy: his government was made up of people who were not top level: they are not high-ranking technocrats, but rather second-tier people from the point of view of managing politics and economy, internal security and so on. This government is unlikely to survive the next elections.

So what are the predictions for the presidential elections to elect Raisi's successor?

These elections are being called in a hurry. It is a very strange and unprecedented fact that less than forty days (June 28) after such a shock, the people are called to vote: this type of timing is not normal. The various potential candidates must decide if they will campaign very soon. On May 30 a five-day window opens during which those who want to apply present themselves at the Ministry of the Interior with their documents, certify that they are of Iranian nationality and origins and are registered as candidates. There are no primaries or nominated party lists. This process will happen quickly, after which there will be the process of screening the candidates by the Council of Guardians of the Constitution (twelve members) which naturally will exclude many. Here the various branches of the regime will have to decide whether they want continuity with Raisi by electing another conservative hawk to power or whether, considering the bad economic situation, Iran's international isolation and the difficulties of regional policies due to the intense confrontation with Israel could encourage the candidacy of someone who is at least capable of re-establishing the diplomatic dialogue undertaken by Hassan Rouhani (president from 2013 to 2021) together with then Foreign Minister Zarif. Much depends on the signals from Khamenei (the Supreme Leader) if he agrees to give space to the moderate element of the regime, which was severely blocked three years ago.



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei with Ebrahim Raisi

Ayatollah Khamenei is 85 years old and his real health condition is unknown.

Sure, we don't really know how he is doing. In any case, the new elected President will be in office for four years, and if there is a change in the person of the Supreme Leader Khamenei, we'll need to see whether the moderate element is able to propose itself.

Rumors had it that President Raisi himself was about to become Khamenei's successor, and as far as a newly elected representative currently in the conservative area is concerned, there is no possible successor to the deceased president in sight. The president could be a layman, and have a double mandate, that is, four years plus four as has been the case up to now, but if Khamenei were to pass away in the next decade, a layman would not be able to take his place. Among the clerics today I don't think anyone can replace Raissi, and even Khamenei's son is a name that appears among the possible suitors. We cannot talk about the succession of the Supreme Leader without falling into a rhetorical, risky and premature exercise. It is an unpredictable process, as there is no longer, as there was in the 1980s, the figure of the leader *in pectore*.

What are the country's problems?

Mainly how to deal with the multiple crises, the economic one first and foremost. The decline in the quality of life in recent years is very evident, not only due to the sanctions, given that, for example, oil revenues under the Raisi presidency were higher than those of previous years. Iran sells oil, sells it badly in secondary markets, India and China, and has problems repatriating the proceeds, but there is a lot of money circulating in Tehran. The problem is that the country is gripped by an autarchic economy, with excessive liquidity, wealth concentrated in the hands of the nouveaux riches, and very extensive corruption in a closed economy. Moreover, there is no interest among these social sectors in ending this closure which allows them to accumulate wealth. The skyrocketing corruption is also documented institutionally, and there are courts with public sessions where astonishing amounts of money are talked about. Recently, one of Khamenei's most trusted clerics, who leads the Friday prayers in Tehran, was accused with documentation of misappropriation of very expensive land. A large part of the population judges the political elite to be corrupt, disconnected from society.



Ebrahim Raisi's Funeral

On an international level, the country's position is very complex: the front with Israel has not been resolved, and relations with the surrounding countries are terrible. With the West they are equally bad, and Iranian citizens in Europe are also grappling with serious problems, for example with banking transactions. The two fronts, internal and external, are coming to a boil. Internally, the segment of society made up mainly of young people no longer recognizes itself in the ideals of revolution, war, and puritanism. Those born in the 2000s have no memory of this mythology of the Islamic Republic. Ruhollah Khomeini, the fundamentalist Shiite leader of the country in 1979 after the expulsion of Shah Pahalavi, is an obscure and old figure.

At the moment, the repression after the riots following the death of Masha Jina Amini prevents any type of demonstration: many have been seriously injured and many have died. The opposition is extremely fragmented. Abroad we have the descendants of the Shah, the old left, Mujaheddin, and monarchist fringes with extremely anti-democratic ideals, and this lack of cohesion benefits the regime. There is no coherent program, no alternative to the Islamic Republic with a clear program. Meanwhile, there is a further internal problem relating to ethnic minorities, who have been treated very badly by all regimes for a century now. The fact that opposition centers exist especially in Kurdistan and Balochistan is indicative, even if these centers remain isolated.

This is the crossroads Iran has reached: the Islamic Republic will decide whether to continue the line taken during the three years of Raisi's presidency or whether it will initiate a change that is necessary for its survival, turning to a moderate hierarch to defuse the various internal and external crises.

Translation by Paul Rosenberg

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