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Iran: 2021 presidential election



Summary

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Summary

Iran held a presidential election on 18 June 2021.

592 candidates registered to contest the election (552 male and 40 female), with the Guardian Council – Iran's top election watchdog – approving just seven candidates, none of whom were female.

The election campaign was dominated by the state of the economy, which had been suffering under sanctions reimposed by the United States in 2018 and further deteriorated as a consequence of restrictions imposed to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic.

As expected, Ebrahim Raisi won the election, securing a majority of the votes and thus avoiding a second poll.

1 Background

Presidential elections in Iran take place every four years and the winner is the candidate who receives more than 50 per cent of the votes. If no candidates achieve a majority in the first round, a second poll takes place.

There is a limit for presidents to serve a maximum of two consecutive terms.

On 24 August 2020 the Head of the National Electoral Headquarters, Jamal Orf, announced that the 2021 presidential election would be held on 18 June.

In an announcement on 20 October 2020 Guardian Council spokesperson Abbasali Kadkhodaei said that women would be able to register as candidates, adding that other arguments around the issue would need to be resolved on a gradual basis.¹ The current election law implies that the president must be a man and Iran has never had a female presidential candidate approved by the Guardian Council.

In a communique published on 5 May 2021, Iran's Guardian Council detailed new requirements for those wishing to contest the presidential election.

To qualify for registration, candidates must be aged between 40 and 75 and hold at least a master's degree or an equivalent. They must also have "a minimum of four years of managerial experience in the country". Ministers, governors general and mayors of cities with a population of more than two million were also eligible to register. In addition, senior military commanders with a minimum rank of major general also qualified.²

Registration was contingent on potential candidates providing police documentation certifying a lack of a criminal record.

These restrictions on who could stand meant many potential candidates were ineligible to contest the election and came in addition to an existing requirement that the president must be a Shiite Muslim, excluding minorities such as Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews and Baha'is.³

The five-day registration procedure launched on 11 May, with the Guardian Council reviewing the qualification of applicants from 16 to 25 May.

The final list of candidates was announced by the Interior Ministry on 25 May and the approved candidates then had 20 days (from 26 May to 16 June) to launch their election campaigns. No campaigning was allowed on 17 June, the day before the election.

¹ [2021 presidential election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 June 2021

² [2021 presidential election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 June 2021

³ [Iran's Presidential Election: What to Know](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2021

2 2021 presidential election

2.1 Candidates

592 presidential candidates registered to contest the election (552 male and 40 female). On 25 May 2021 Iran's Guardian Council – the constitutional watchdog that supervises elections and vets candidates for all elections – announced it had approved seven candidates.⁴

These were: Hojjat ol-Islam Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, the head of the judiciary; Mohsen Rezaei, the secretary of the Expediency Council; Saeed Jalili, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's representative to the Supreme National Security Council; Alireza Zakani, the head of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) Research Centre; Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi, first deputy Speaker of parliament; Abdolnasser Hemmati, the governor of the Central Bank of Iran and Mohsen Mehralizadeh, former vice-president.

None of the 40 women candidates were approved.

Those barred from running included Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri, former President Mamhoush Ahmadinejad and former speaker of Parliament, Ali Larijani.

On 16 June Saeed Jalili, Alireza Zakani and Mohsen Mehralizadeh withdraw from the race, leaving four candidates to contest the presidential election.

Below are profiles of the four candidates, listed in alphabetical order.

Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi

Dr Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi was born in 1971 in Fariman, Khorasan Razavi province.

He holds a doctorate in Medicine and is a consultant surgeon at Shahid Beheshti University of Medical Sciences, Tehran, specialising in ear, nose and throat.

Hashemi has been a Member of the Iranian Parliament since 2008, representing the Mashhad and Kalat constituency, and served as First Deputy Speaker from May 2020 to May 2021.⁵

⁴ [2021 presidential election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 June 2021

⁵ [Biography: Dr Seyyed Amirhossein Qazizadeh-Hashemi](#), BBC Monitoring, 3 June 2021

Abdolnasser Hemmati

Dr Abdolnasser Hemmati was born in 1957 in Kabudarahang, Hamadan province.

He attended the University of Tehran, gaining both a Masters and a PhD in Economics, and now teaches there as an associate professor of Economics. He has authored several books on economics.

On 25 July 2018 Hemmati was appointed Governor of the Bank of Iran and he served until May 2021, when President Hassan Rouhani's cabinet agreed to dismiss Hemmati. The cabinet said campaigning for the presidential election "prevents him from being sufficiently present in the Central Bank and fulfilling serious duties and responsibilities".⁶

During his tenure as Governor of the Bank of Iran, Hemmati faced a sharp devaluation in Iran's currency, US sanctions on Iran's banking sector – including sanctions on the central bank itself – and the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy.⁷

Ebrahim Raisi

Ebrahim Raisi was born on 14 December 1960 in Mashhad, north-eastern Iran.

At the age of 15 he began studying at the Islamic Seminary of Qom. He gained a Masters degree and Doctorate in Islamic Jurisprudence, with a specialism in Private Rights. Raisi completed his studies at the level of Islamic fundamentals and jurisprudence under the tutelage of Ayatollah Aqa Mojtaba Tehrani, Ayatollah Mar'ashi, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei and Ayatollah [Seyyed Mahmud] Hashemi-Shahrudi.⁸

Raisi joined the judiciary following the 1979 Iranian Revolution and has served as a prosecutor for most of his career.

He was one of four members of the special commission involved in the 1988 mass executions of political prisoners and dissidents while serving as deputy prosecutor of Tehran's Islamic Revolution Court.⁹

Raisi is a member of the powerful Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for appointing and removing the Supreme Leader. Indeed, as well as being the clear front-runner for the presidency, he is also viewed as a potential successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei.¹⁰

⁶ [Biography: Dr Abdolnasser Hemmati](#), BBC Monitoring, 16 June 2021

⁷ [Iran's presidential election: Who the candidates are](#), BBC News Online, 28 May 2021

⁸ [Biography: Hajjat ol-Eslam Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi](#), BBC Monitoring, 24 June 2021

⁹ [Iran's presidential election: Who the candidates are](#), BBC News Online, 28 May 2021

¹⁰ Ibid

Raisi has held several prominent positions in Iran and none of the other candidates enjoy such prestige and influence.

In the 2017 presidential election, Raisi was defeated by President Hassan Rouhani, gaining 38.5 per cent of votes against Rouhani's 57.1 per cent.

Raisi launched his 2021 election campaign with promises to counter the "despair and hopelessness"¹¹ caused by the economic hardship faced by Iranians. He enjoys broad support in the conservative camp and was widely expected win the presidency following the disqualification of other prominent candidates.

Mohsen Rezai

Maj Gen Mohsen Rezai was born on 1 September 1954 in Masjed-Soleyman, Khuzestan province.

He was educated at a technical college of the National Iranian Oil Company in Ahvaz, Khuzestan province, before enrolling at the Faculty of Mechanical Engineering at the University of Science and Technology in Tehran.

Prior to the 1979 Iranian revolution, Rezai was involved in guerrilla activities against the Shah¹². He later became a founder of the Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC), Iran's second military created shortly after the revolution.

He was appointed head of the IRGC in 1981 and led the group for most of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). In 1997, after heading the IRGC for 16 years, he resigned in order to continue his education. He later graduated from the University of Tehran with a PhD in Economics.

Since 1997 Rezai has served as Secretary of the Expediency Discernment Council, the advisory body that adjudicates in disputes over legislation between the Parliament and the Guardian Council.

A prominent conservative politician, the 2021 election is Rezai's fourth run at the presidency: in 2005 he withdrew his candidacy before election day; in 2009 he came third with 681,851 votes (1.75 per cent of valid votes cast); and in 2013 he finished fourth, securing 3,884,412 votes (10.6 per cent of the total votes cast).¹³

On 7 November 2007 Interpol issued a wanted notice in his name following an Argentine arrest warrant the previous year in connection to the 1994 bombing of a Jewish community centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina.

¹¹ Ibid

¹² [Biography: Maj Gen Mohsen Rezai](#), BBC Monitoring, 26 May 2021

¹³ Ibid

2.2

Election campaign

The election campaign ran from 26 May to 16 June and took place under the cloud of the coronavirus pandemic.

Covid-19 was a concern for voters as the pandemic continued to be a serious problem for Iran, which has the highest death toll in the Middle East.¹⁴ By 18 June 2021 (election day) there had been a total of 82,746 deaths from Covid-19, from a total population of 85 million.¹⁵ This represents 99.3 deaths per 100,000.

President Rouhani's office issued a series of Covid-19 health measures to be enforced during the election campaign.

All election gatherings, public speaking events and debates in a closed space (such as a mosque or a meeting hall) were banned, although debates were allowed to take place on state media networks. Gatherings in open spaces such as stadiums were allowed to take place on condition that social distancing guidelines and time limits were observed, and that masks were worn. The Interior Ministry also increased the number of polling stations in crowded areas and ensured social distancing within polling stations.¹⁶

Pandemic-related restrictions have increased economic hardships faced by Iranians and the most pressing domestic concern for voters was the economy. Sanctions reimposed by the United States after Iran left the nuclear deal in 2018 badly affected the Iranian economy, which shrank by nearly five per cent in 2020 and hasn't grown since 2017.¹⁷

Improving economic conditions were at the centre of each candidate's manifesto, with common themes including: lowering inflation; improving welfare and social justice through policies such as fighting corruption; creating jobs; narrowing the social gap; and providing affordable food, housing and healthcare.¹⁸

¹⁴ [Iran's Presidential Election: What to Know](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2021

¹⁵ [Worldometer: Coronavirus](#) [accessed 5 July 2021]

¹⁶ [Guide to Iran presidential election 2021: A one-horse race?](#) BBC Monitoring, 17 June 2021

¹⁷ [Iran's Presidential Election: What to Know](#), Council on Foreign Relations, 16 June 2021

¹⁸ [Iran's Presidential Election: Opportunity or Dead End?](#) Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 15 June 2021

2.3

Election results

On 23 June Jamal Orf, Head of the National Electoral Headquarters, announced the official results of the presidential election.¹⁹

A total of 28,650,505 valid votes were cast, with Ebrahim Raisi securing a majority of votes and therefore avoiding the need for a second poll.

Raisi has thus been elected president, as had widely been expected.

2021 presidential election results		
Candidate	No. of valid votes	% of valid votes
Ebrahim Raisi	18,021,945	62.90
Mohsen Rezaei	3,440,835	12.00
Abdolnasser Hemmati	2,443,387	8.52
Amir-Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi	1,003,650	3.50
TOTAL	24,909,817	100.00

Source: [2021 presidential election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 June 2021

A further 3,740,688 votes (13.05 of the total cast) were invalidated, a figure higher than any candidate – except for the winner – received.

At 48.3 per cent, voter turnout was the lowest since the foundation of the Islamic Republic in 1979.

President Rouhani expressed concern at the low turnout and insisted it should not happen again, calling on researchers and politicians to investigate the causes. At his weekly cabinet meeting, broadcast live by rolling TV News Network IRINN, Rouhani said:

Ballot box is important, vote is important. When the voter turnout gets a little bit colourless, we need to investigate and resolve the issue. This should not continue.

The voter turnout of 48% should happen once in our history. God willing, next time we will need to recover it. There was a problem and we need to resolve it.²⁰

¹⁹ [2021 presidential election results](#), BBC Monitoring, 29 June 2021

²⁰ [Low voter turnout must never repeat in Iran, Rouhani says](#), BBC Monitoring, 23 June 2021 [Source: Islamic Republic of Iran News Network, 23 June 2021]

In Iran's capital, Tehran, the turnout was even lower, at just 26 per cent.²¹

The BBC's Kasra Naji suggested the low turnout would undermine the legitimacy of the new government and that many Iranians viewed the election as "a brazen power grab by the hardliners who seem to have decided that they can never win free and fair elections."²²

For an overview of what Ebrahim Raisi's election could mean for the Iran nuclear deal, see [Iran's next President: Ebrahim Raisi and the Iran nuclear deal](#), Commons Library Insight, 22 June 2021.

²¹ [Iran elections: Only 26% turn out to vote in Tehran](#), BBC Monitoring, 20 June 2021 [Source: Donya-Ye Eqtesad website, 20 June 2021]

²² [Iran election: What to expect from a hardline president](#), BBC News Online, 18 June 2021

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