



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

The new president of Iran between a crisis of legitimacy and a change of state policy



The new Iranian president, who will take office tomorrow, will convey Tehran's establishment's long-term vision for resolving the country's numerous internal issues and external crises.

The winner of tomorrow's **election** will represent the future direction of the theocratic regime under Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, even though the Iranian president does not determine the principal directions of state policy.

Masoud Pezeshkian, a cardiac surgeon, health minister during the time of reformist President Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), and two-time presidential candidate in 2013 and 2021, is entering the second round with slightly more support than seven days ago (42.5%).

He is often referred to as a "reformist" candidate, but a more accurate term for Mr Pezeshkian would be "moderate." He is not from the circle of clerics, but from academia and the civil service. Nevertheless, he belongs to the political establishment, in which he has held high positions.

Pezeshkian was one of only six candidates approved for the presidential candidacy by the Guardian Council, a 12-member body (six clerics and six judges) directly controlled by Ali Khamenei.

This body, which considers candidates' suitability in relation to the fundamental principles of the Islamic revolution, rejected no fewer than 74 candidates.

A critic of inner oppression and seclusion from the world

However, Mr Pezeshkian's assumption of the presidency would mean a significant softening of the extremely conservative and extremist foreign policy of the country's leadership.

In this respect, it would be a shift compared to the term of the previous president, Ebrahim

Raisi, a conservative cleric and protégé of Ali Khamenei, who died in a helicopter crash.

Pezeshkian, a former deputy speaker of parliament, was a strong supporter of the 2015 nuclear deal and is now an advocate of Iran opening up to the world, including the West. He also opposed the authorities' brutality during civil protests in 2009 and 2022.

Pezeshkian believes that the lives of ordinary people are "miserable" due to the long-standing sanctions as well as the poor management of the oil business

He is even more in favour of internal reforms, as he believes that the lives of ordinary people are "miserable" due to the long-standing sanctions as well as the poor management of the oil business.

"Why don't you tell the people at what rate you are selling the country's oil?" he asked during the campaign.

Saeed Jalili, a hardliner and hawk of the Tehran regime, stands opposite him. The country's former chief negotiator in the nuclear deal is still a staunch advocate of non-cooperation with the West while at the same time expanding Iran's nuclear capabilities.

He is furious at countries that impose sanctions on Iran, but argues that Iran should pay no attention to them because there are "more than 200 countries" with which it can successfully cooperate.

Mr Jalili came in second in the last round of voting with 38.6% of the vote, but in Friday's duel he will surely be able to count on the votes of failed candidates who, like him, are hard-liners.

Fear of a poor turnout

What undoubtedly worries the regime even more than the outcome of the election itself is

the record low voter **turnout** of 39.92%, the lowest in a presidential election since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

This confirms the clear downward trend in civic participation, a sign of their distrust in the establishment and apathy towards any potential change in the elections.

A low turnout in the first round last week broke a negative record that had persisted since the last presidential election (48%), in which Ebrahim Raisi won.

Only 41% of Iranians filled out their ballots in the parliamentary elections in March, 1% fewer than in the previous elections in 2020, confirming the trend of declining voter turnout.

From election to election, the regime has consistently struggled with low legitimacy

Given the strong state control over election data, these figures are probably even lower in reality. Supreme Leader Khamenei's insistence that citizens should go to the polls is particularly impressive.

"People's participation is part of the essence of the state, and the continuation of the existence of the Islamic Republic and its status in the world is tied to people's participation", said Khamenei ahead of the presidential election.

From election to election, the regime has consistently struggled with low legitimacy. Last week's turnout of just 24 million voters out of a total of 60 million is just the latest in a series of alarms.

Will the apathetic wake up?

If Mr Pezeshkian wins on Friday, it will be an even bigger problem for the establishment, not so much because of the policies he has announced but because his victory will only be

possible with a higher turnout.

Pezeshkian's success will mean that he has motivated former abstainers with his calls for change, so the difference between the previous low turnout and the forthcoming turnout in the second round will highlight the ratio between the number of regime opponents and that of staunch supporters of the regime.



Masoud Pezeshkian announced that he would ask Supreme Leader Khamenei to participate in the principal directions of foreign policy - Ali Khamenei

There is speculation that allowing Pezeshkian's candidacy was actually a manoeuvre by the regime to solve the chronic problem of abstention and increase voter turnout by having him appear on the ballot.

However, it ignores the fact that the regime would be taking too great a risk in this way, thereby encouraging the softening of its own policies, a course of action for which it is clearly unprepared.

If Mr Pezeshkian wins and the theocratic authorities can de facto influence such an outcome, it will mean that they have opted for the "necessary evil" and installed a moderate critic, but still a loyalist, at the top of the system.

The arrival of this ethnic minority member in the presidential office could potentially mark the beginning of a correction of certain state policies, particularly internal ones, aimed at reducing the repression and economic misery of the majority of the population.

Mr Pezeshkian also announced that he would ask Supreme Leader Khamenei to participate in the principal directions of foreign policy, which are normally outside the powers of the president.

If he is allowed to do so, given his background, the most significant change could be the softening of Iran's tough stance on the development of the nuclear programme, i.e., the reactivation of the frozen agreement with the West.