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POST-RAISI IRAN: LEADERSHIP TRANSITION, POLITICAL CONTINUITY, AND THE CONSTRAINTS OF REFORM UNDER MASOUD PEZESHKIAN

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamics of leadership transition and political continuity in post-Raisi Iran following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi in May 2024, focusing on the rise of Masoud Pezeshkian and its implications for domestic and foreign policy. The study aims to assess the extent to which Pezeshkian's reform-oriented agenda may shape policy change within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach based on document analysis, the research draws upon academic literature, policy reports, public opinion surveys, and reputable news sources to analyze the dynamics of political transition in post-Raisi Iran. The findings suggest that although Pezeshkian advocates greater political openness, economic reform, and diplomatic engagement, his ability to implement substantial changes remains constrained by Iran's political structure, particularly the authority of the Supreme Leader and other unelected institutions. Consequently, the transition reflects both elements of change and continuity within the Iranian political system. In foreign policy, opportunities for diplomatic engagement and regional cooperation coexist with structural limitations that restrict major policy shifts. The study concludes that leadership change in Iran does not necessarily translate into systemic transformation, as institutional constraints continue to shape the direction and scope of reform. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of political transition, institutional continuity, and reform prospects in contemporary Iran.

Keywords

Post-Raisi Iran; Leadership Transition; Political Continuity; Reform Constraints; Masoud Pezeshkian.

Resumo

Este estudo analisa a dinâmica da transição de liderança e da continuidade política no Irão pós-Raisi, na sequência do falecimento do Presidente Ebrahim Raisi em maio de 2024, centrando-se na ascensão de Masoud Pezeshkian e nas suas implicações para a política interna e externa. O estudo tem como objetivo avaliar em que medida a agenda orientada para as reformas de Pezeshkian poderá moldar a mudança política no âmbito do quadro institucional da República Islâmica do Irão. Recorrendo a uma abordagem descritiva qualitativa baseada na análise de documentos, a investigação baseia-se na literatura académica, em relatórios políticos, em inquéritos de opinião pública e em fontes noticiosas fidedignas para analisar a dinâmica da transição política no Irão pós-Raisi. Os resultados sugerem que, embora Pezeshkian defenda uma maior abertura política, reformas económicas e envolvimento

diplomático, a sua capacidade de implementar mudanças substanciais continua a ser limitada pela estrutura política do Irão, em particular pela autoridade do Líder Supremo e de outras instituições não eleitas. Consequentemente, a transição reflete tanto elementos de mudança como de continuidade no seio do sistema político iraniano. Na política externa, as oportunidades de envolvimento diplomático e cooperação regional coexistem com limitações estruturais que restringem grandes mudanças políticas. O estudo conclui que a mudança de liderança no Irão não se traduz necessariamente numa transformação sistémica, uma vez que as restrições institucionais continuam a moldar a direção e o âmbito da reforma. Esta investigação contribui para uma compreensão mais profunda da transição política, da continuidade institucional e das perspetivas de reforma no Irão contemporâneo.

Palavras-Chave

Irão pós-Raisi; Transição de liderança; Continuidade política; Limitações às reformas; Masoud Pezeshkian.

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Introduction

The tragic death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash in May 2024 marks a significant turning point in Iran's recent history. As a key figure in the nation's political landscape, Raisi was a prominent conservative cleric and jurist whose presidency was defined by his unwavering ideological convictions, strong grip on domestic affairs, and a nuanced approach to foreign relations. His leadership impacted many facets of Iranian life, influencing economic strategies, social policies, international relations, and nuclear negotiations (Rauf, 2024). With his unexpected passing, Iran now faces the critical challenge of transitioning to new leadership, a shift that will undoubtedly affect the country's direction in the years to come.

In exploring the effects of leadership transitions within authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes, previous research has underscored the crucial role that individual leaders play in shaping policy directions and national priorities (Yazdani, 2019, p. 473). The literature concerning Iran's political landscape highlights the interplay between the presidency and the Supreme Leader, as well as the significant influence of key institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and the Guardian Council (Forozan & Shahi, 2017, p. 69). Furthermore, scholars have delved into the ideological rifts among conservatives, reformists, and moderates, examining how these factions compete for power within Iran's distinctive theocratic-republican hybrid system (Ghobadzadeh & Rahim, 2016, p. 457).

Ebrahim Raisi's presidency has garnered significant attention from scholars and policymakers alike, primarily due to his initiatives aimed at strengthening Iran's economy in the face of stringent sanctions. His administration is also characterized by conservative social policies and a resolute position on the nuclear agreement. Research indicates that Raisi closely aligns with the vision of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, a relationship that carries important implications for both domestic governance and Iran's international relations (Forough, 2021, p. 3).

This study aims to investigate the complex effects of Ebrahim Raisi's death on Iran, focusing on a pivotal research question: To what extent can Masoud Pezeshkian introduce policy changes in post-Raisi Iran under the constraints of the Islamic Republic's political system? The underlying hypothesis suggests that this transition will bring both continuity

and upheaval, mirroring the entrenched tensions and dynamics within Iran's political framework.

The primary goal of this research is to conduct a thorough analysis of the political landscape in Iran following Raisi's leadership. This entails examining both the immediate and long-term ramifications of the leadership change on domestic policies, such as economic management, social reforms, and human rights concerns. Furthermore, the study will assess how the new leadership may address Iran's foreign policy challenges, particularly regarding the nuclear agreement, regional conflicts, and relationships with major global powers. Through this exploration, the study aims to project the future direction of Iran's political and policy landscape while also considering the wider implications for stability in the region and beyond.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach based on document analysis to examine the dynamics of leadership transition, political continuity, and the constraints of reform in post-Raisi Iran. The study focuses on the emergence of Masoud Pezeshkian as president and assesses the extent to which policy change is possible within the institutional framework of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Data were collected from a wide range of secondary sources, including academic journal articles, books, policy reports, official government statements, public opinion surveys, and reputable international news sources published between May 2024 and July 2025. These sources were selected to provide comprehensive insights into Iran's political developments following the death of President Ebrahim Raisi and the subsequent election of Masoud Pezeshkian.

The study applies thematic analysis to identify and examine key themes related to leadership transition, political continuity, institutional constraints, reform prospects, and foreign policy orientation. Particular attention is given to the role of major political institutions, including the Supreme Leader, the presidency, and other influential actors within Iran's political system, in shaping the scope and limits of policy change.

To enhance the validity of the findings, data triangulation was conducted through the comparison of multiple sources, including academic literature, policy analyses, survey findings, and official statements. This approach allows for cross-verification of information and contributes to a more balanced and reliable interpretation of contemporary political developments in Iran. Rather than predicting future developments with certainty, the study seeks to evaluate possible political trajectories and reform prospects under Masoud Pezeshkian based on available empirical evidence and relevant theoretical perspectives.

Leadership Transition, Hybrid Political Systems, and Institutional Constraints on Reform in Iran

According to Huntington (1991, p. 48), transitions in leadership frequently lead to political instability, stemming from shifts in the legitimacy of authority and rivalries among

political elites. This transitional period can significantly impact political stability, particularly in authoritarian regimes that rely on internal agreement and control of power. In Iran, the succession from one leader to another involves critical institutions like the Guardian Council and the Assembly of Experts, which play a vital role in shaping future policies. The death of Raisi presents an opportunity for various political factions to vie for influence over state policy, potentially resulting in efforts to consolidate power or escalating internal tensions (Shahi, 2024).

Linz and Stepan (1996, p. 29) highlight that the stability following a transition largely depends on how well political institutions can adapt to change and maintain their cohesion. In Iran's context, a significant challenge lies in how these institutions can navigate leadership transitions without undermining political stability. Such changes often serve as pivotal moments for authoritarian regimes, where the capacity of political elites to adapt and achieve internal consensus can significantly influence future policy directions (Harris, 2017, p. 36). In light of these factors, power transition theory offers a valuable framework for examining the political consequences of leadership changes in Iran and for making policy predictions amidst the current complexities of its internal politics (Yeşiltaş, 2024).

In the realm of power transition theory, it's crucial to recognize that the process of leadership change encompasses both internal dynamics and external responses to that change (Ehteshami & Molavi, 2013, p. 16). With regard to post-Ebrahim Raisi Iran, the reactions of regional neighbors and global actors will significantly impact the nation's stability and the direction of its foreign policy. Strategic and diplomatic shifts from surrounding countries, as well as influential powers like the United States (US) and the European Union (EU), are likely to affect Iran's internal political landscape. Consequently, power transition theory offers not only a lens through which to analyze domestic political dynamics but also enhances our understanding of the intricate interplay between internal and external factors in the pursuit of regional and global stability (Elias, 2024).

Iran's political system stands out due to its unique blend of theocracy and republicanism. As noted by Levitsky and Way (2012, p. 38), this configuration is classified as a hybrid political system, merging aspects of both democratic and authoritarian regimes. While it permits a degree of political competition, overarching control remains vested in central authorities. Such hybrid systems are marked by elections that, while competitive, are not entirely free and fair, coupled with restricted civil liberties (Mufti, 2022, p. 247). This theoretical framework underscores the interplay between formal and informal institutions that contributes to the stability and legitimacy of the regime, simultaneously allowing for limited political opposition.

In the context of Iran, this theory sheds light on the distribution of power among various institutions, including the President, the Supreme Leader, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). It also offers insight into the political dynamics that emerge following the death of Ebrahim Raisi. Officially, Iran is characterized as an authoritarian state infused with elements of an Islamic republic led by clerics. This political architecture features a robust authoritarian framework alongside institutions like elections and parliament, which provide a semblance of legitimacy within a constrained environment. Leadership transitions, particularly those following Raisi's death, illustrate how these institutions adapt and shape the internal political landscape. The future trajectory of

Iran's foreign and domestic policies is significantly influenced by the interactions between these elements and the resulting power dynamics among political elites (Ali et al., 2024, p. 107).

According to Levitsky and Way (2012, p. 51), hybrid political systems create intricate dynamics where various political factions vie for influence. In the context of Iran's leadership transition, conservative, reformist, and moderate factions will significantly impact the direction of policy following President Raisi's tenure. The competition among these groups may lead to shifts in policy or even internal conflicts, depending on how they manage the power transition. Moreover, key institutions such as the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Experts, and the Supreme Leadership play a crucial role in shaping both policy and political dynamics in Iran. Their influence in orchestrating leadership transitions and balancing power among political elites is instrumental in determining the nation’s political stability and the trajectory of future policies.

The theory of hybrid political systems not only sheds light on the characteristics of the Iranian regime but also enhances our understanding of the challenges and opportunities that arise in maintaining political stability amidst ongoing leadership changes (Vakil, 2013, p. 62). Individual leaders play a crucial role in shaping policy direction and ensuring political stability within authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes. This theory posits that in systems characterized by weak or underdeveloped political institutions, the traits and actions of individual leaders can significantly affect outcomes. Wright and Escribà-Folch (2012, p. 294) suggest that the personalization of power in these regimes may lead to instability, particularly when there is no established mechanism for succession. While charismatic leaders or those with a compelling vision can bring about transformative policy changes and alter the internal political landscape, their departures often generate uncertainty during leadership transitions.

A comprehensive understanding of political change in post-Raisi Iran requires an examination of the doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), which constitutes the constitutional and ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic. According to Mahdavi (2023, pp. 89–94), Velayat-e Faqih places ultimate political and religious authority in the hands of the Supreme Leader, who occupies the highest position within the Iranian political system. This arrangement distinguishes Iran from conventional presidential systems because elected institutions operate within boundaries established by the Supreme Leader and other unelected bodies.

The authority of the Supreme Leader extends beyond symbolic leadership. As noted by Nazif and Darivand (2024, pp. 134–138), the Supreme Leader exercises significant influence over national security, foreign policy, military affairs, and the appointment of key officials. The Supreme Leader also maintains authority over major institutions such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the judiciary, and state broadcasting organizations. Consequently, the Iranian president functions within a political framework where ultimate decision-making authority remains concentrated in unelected institutions.

Studies by Mulaee and Moradkhani (2020, pp. 505–510) and Abbasi Fard et al. (2015, pp. 54–58) further demonstrate that although the president is responsible for administering government affairs and implementing policies, the office does not possess unrestricted authority to initiate fundamental political reforms. Presidential initiatives

frequently depend on the approval or acquiescence of the Supreme Leader and other powerful institutions. This institutional arrangement creates significant constraints on policy innovation and reform.

These structural realities are particularly relevant in assessing the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian. Although Pezeshkian is widely associated with reformist and moderate political currents, his capacity to introduce substantial domestic and foreign policy changes is likely to be conditioned by the broader institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, leadership transition alone should not be assumed to produce systemic political transformation.

The concept of Velayat-e Faqih thus provides an important analytical lens for understanding the coexistence of political change and continuity in post-Raisi Iran. While electoral outcomes may alter political rhetoric and policy priorities, the enduring influence of unelected institutions continues to shape the direction and limits of reform within the Iranian political system.

Individual leaders can influence policy priorities, political discourse, and governance strategies, particularly during periods of political transition. However, in hybrid political systems such as Iran, the impact of individual leadership is mediated by institutional structures and power relations. As Salami (2024) argues, leadership change may create opportunities for policy adjustment, but the extent of transformation depends on the broader political environment in which leaders operate.

In the case of Masoud Pezeshkian, the key analytical question is not merely whether he possesses reformist intentions, but rather the extent to which such intentions can be translated into policy outcomes within the constraints imposed by Iran’s political system. This perspective highlights the importance of examining both agency and structure when assessing the prospects for political reform, policy continuity, and foreign policy adjustment in post-Raisi Iran.

Politics, Economy, and Social Discontent in Iran

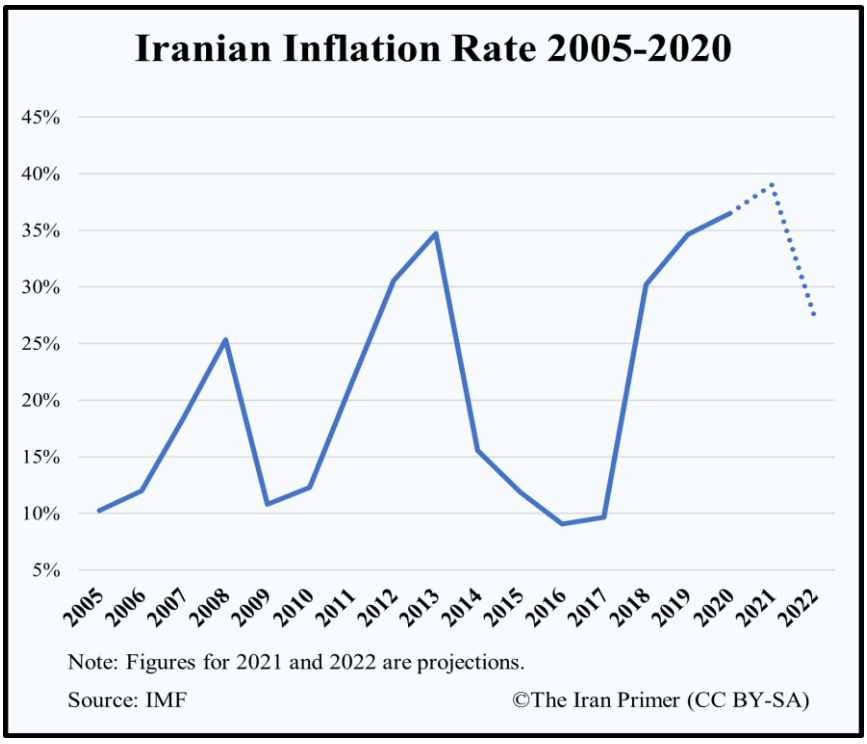
Prior to Ebrahim Raisi's death, Iran's political climate was marked by significant internal strife and external pressures. Serving as President since August 2021, Raisi encountered sharp criticism both domestically and internationally, as his administration was characterized by conservative and authoritarian policies (Sood, 2024). Furthermore, Iran's relations with Western nations, particularly the United States, remained fraught due to ongoing tensions surrounding its nuclear program. The negotiations concerning the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached an impasse, leading to heightened economic sanctions that profoundly affected the daily lives of Iranian citizens (Bazoobandi, 2024).

Economically, Iran was grappling with a dire situation before Raisi's death. The sanctions imposed by the United States and its allies severely impacted the national economy, resulting in soaring inflation, increasing unemployment rates, and a plummeting currency. Despite possessing substantial oil and gas reserves, Iran's capacity to export and capitalize on these resources was greatly hampered by international restrictions. Attempts by the government to enhance economic conditions through domestic policies

were frequently obstructed by corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies (Amuzegar, 2020, p. 17).

To offer a clearer perspective on Iran's economic landscape over the past two decades, the accompanying charts illustrate key indicators: the Iranian Inflation Rate from 2005 to 2020 and the Iranian Unemployment Rate throughout the same timeframe. These metrics shed light on the economic obstacles and trends that have significantly influenced the nation's financial stability and labor market.

Figure 1. Iranian Inflation Rate Trends: 2005-2022



Source: IMF: Iran's Economy Grew in 2020. https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/apr/21/imf-iran%E2%80%99s-economy-grew-2020

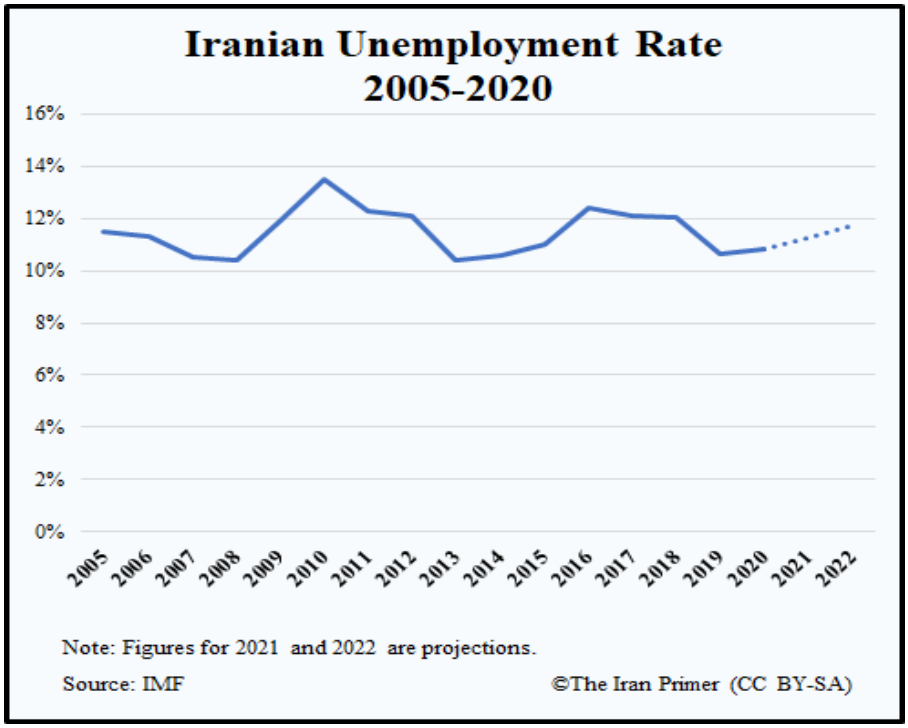
The chart in Figure 1 depicts the inflation rate in Iran from 2005 to 2020, along with projections for 2021 and 2022.

Data from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) reveals notable fluctuations throughout these years, with the inflation rate peaking at approximately 35% in 2013 and again in 2019, periods characterized by economic instability. In contrast, the inflation rate reached its lowest points in 2016 and 2017, falling below 10%.

The projections suggest that inflation will remain high in 2021 before experiencing a sharp decline in 2022, highlighting the volatility of Iran's economy, which is shaped by

both internal policies and external sanctions. Meanwhile, Figure 2 illustrates the changes in Iran's unemployment rate from 2005 to 2020. The data reveals significant variability, including a peak around 2008, likely due to the impact of global economic conditions. This was followed by a relatively stable period between 2009 and 2014, and further fluctuations that peaked again in 2018. Projections for 2021 and 2022 indicate a slight rise in unemployment, underscoring persistent economic challenges and the necessity for targeted policies to enhance employment opportunities in the country.

Figure 2. Trends in Iranian Unemployment Rate: 2005-2022

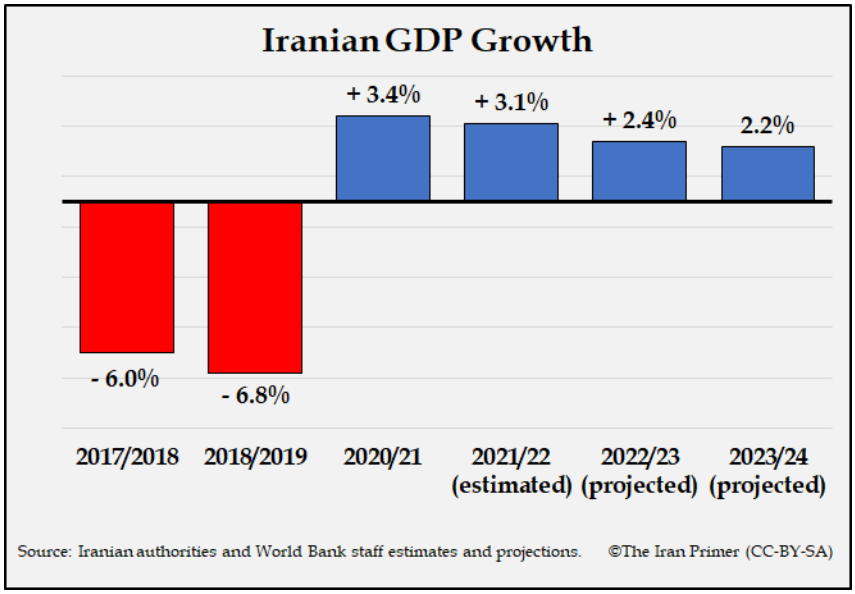


Source: IMF: Iran's Economy Grew in 2020. https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2021/apr/21/imf-iran%E2%80%99s-economy-grew-2020

Together, these statistics illuminate the severe economic issues facing Iran and the urgent need for effective policy responses.

To further contextualize Iran's economic challenges and recovery path, the subsequent chart outlines the country's GDP growth from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024, showcasing periods of significant contraction followed by gradual stabilization and projected growth.

Figure 3. Trends in Iranian GDP Growth: 2017/2018 to 2023/2024

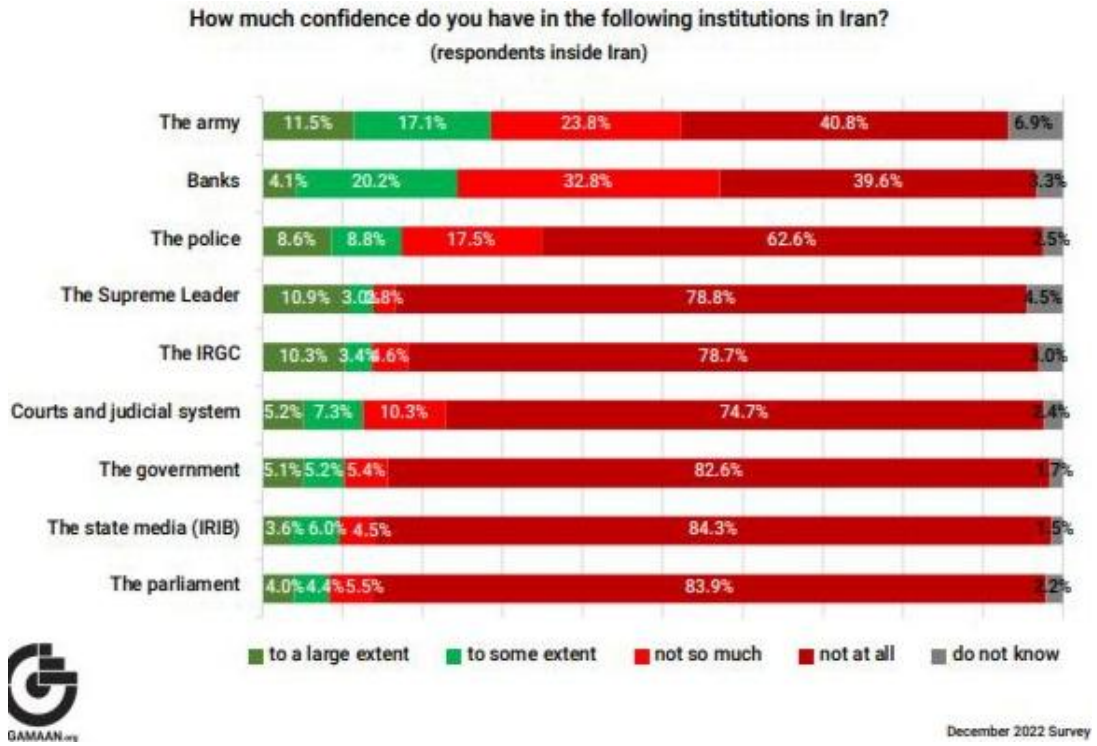


Source: World Bank: Iran's Slow Recovery. https://iranprimer.usip.org/index.php/blog/2022/jan/10/world-bank-irans-slow-recovery

The chart depicts the growth of Iran's GDP from 2017/2018 to 2023/2024, revealing a notable contraction of -6. 0% in 2017/2018, followed by a deeper decline of -6. 8% in 2018/2019. This downward trend was reversed with a recovery marked by positive growth rates of 3. 4% in 2020/2021 and an estimated 3. 1% in 2021/2022. Going forward, growth is anticipated to continue, albeit at a slower pace, with projections of 2. 4% in 2022/2023 and 2. 2% in 2023/2024. This suggests a gradual stabilization of the Iranian economy after the significant downturns experienced in the preceding years. In essence, the chart reflects a period of economic recovery for Iran, following the pronounced GDP contractions of 2017/2018 and 2018/2019. The positive growth rates from 2020/2021 onward imply concerted efforts toward economic stabilization and gradual improvement, though the slower projected growth rates for the upcoming years highlight ongoing challenges and a cautious recovery path.

Beyond economic concerns, Iran's social landscape has been marked by complex challenges. Public discontent with the government has grown, driven by dire economic conditions and political repression. Widespread protests have erupted, calling for change and better living standards. Issues surrounding human rights, particularly women's rights and freedom of expression, have garnered attention both domestically and internationally. The COVID-19 pandemic has further strained the already fragile health system and exacerbated economic hardships faced by the populace (Takian et al., 2020). Additionally, survey data reflecting public trust in Iran's institutions offers crucial insights into the broader socio-political context from which these sentiments emerge.

Figure 4. *Public Confidence in Iranian Institutions: December 2022 Survey Results*

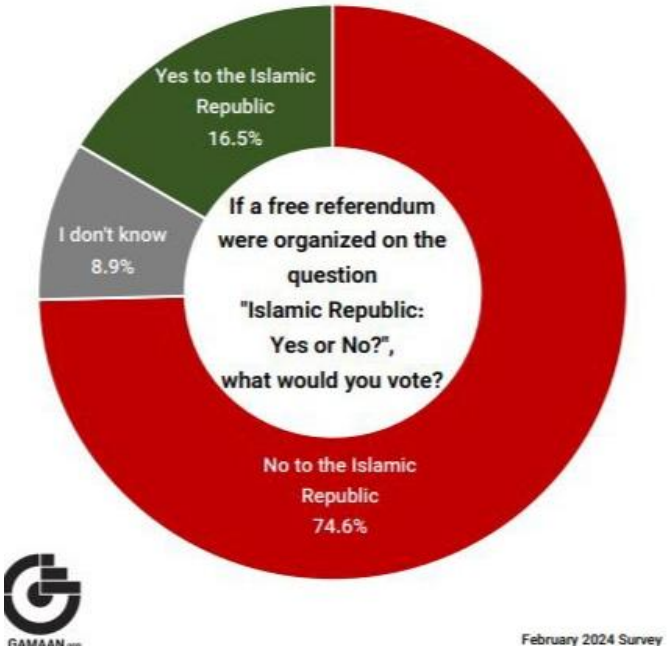


Source: Ammar Maleki & Pooyan Tamimi Arab, Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2022 Nationwide Protests (February 2023), The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), p. 19. https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GAMAAN-Protests-Survey-English-Report-Final.pdf

The survey results from December 2022 reveal a striking lack of public trust in various institutions across Iran. The government, state media (IRIB), and parliament are at the forefront of this distrust, with over 80% of respondents indicating they have no confidence in these entities. This highlights a significant crisis of faith in the fundamental pillars of governance and information in the country. Even the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), typically viewed as central figures of the Iranian state, face substantial skepticism, as nearly 79% of respondents express a complete lack of confidence in them. While the army and financial institutions perform slightly better, they still experience considerable distrust; approximately 41% of those surveyed do not trust the army, and about 40% extend the same sentiment to the banking sector. Similarly, both the police and the judicial system receive dismal confidence ratings, reflecting a pervasive dissatisfaction and skepticism among the Iranian populace toward key institutions that underpin the state's functionality.

This widespread erosion of trust points to deep-rooted issues within Iran's socio-political landscape, likely driven by economic difficulties, governance problems, and ongoing political turmoil. The subsequent Figure 5, titled "Public Opinion on the Islamic Republic: February 2024 Referendum Survey," provides additional insights into the prevailing public sentiment regarding the broader political system in Iran.

Figure 5. *Public Opinion on the Islamic Republic: February 2024 Referendum Survey*

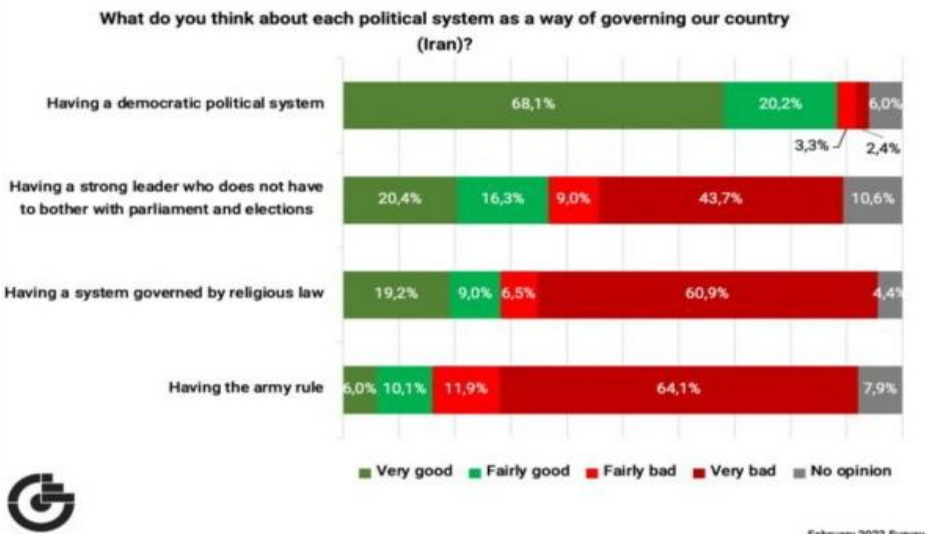


Source: Ammar Maleki, Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2024 Elections (February 2024), The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), p. 4. https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/GAMAAN-Elections-2024-Survey-Report-Final-English.pdf

The results of the February 2024 survey reveal a strong sentiment among the Iranian public regarding the Islamic Republic. The data indicates that an overwhelming 74. 6% of respondents would choose "No" if a free referendum were held on the future of the regime. This substantial majority points to widespread dissatisfaction with the current political landscape, reflecting deep-rooted grievances and a strong desire for meaningful change among the Iranian populace. In contrast, only 16. 5% of those surveyed expressed support for retaining the Islamic Republic, while 8. 9% remained undecided. This suggests that a minority either supports the status quo or is uncertain about potential alternatives. These findings underscore a pivotal moment in Iranian politics, where the prevailing unrest could spur demands for reform or possibly a shift to a new form of governance. The significant number of opponents poses potential challenges for the ruling regime as it seeks to maintain its legitimacy and control. Moreover, the undecided group, though smaller, represents a crucial demographic that could influence the outcome of any future referendum or political transition. Overall, the data highlights a palpable tension within the country, as a considerable portion of the population clearly favors moving away from the current Islamic Republic system.

The survey results from 2022 can further elucidate the reasons behind the majority's desire for changes in Iran's domestic political framework.

Figure 6. *Public Opinion on Different Political Systems for Governing Iran: February 2024 Survey Results*



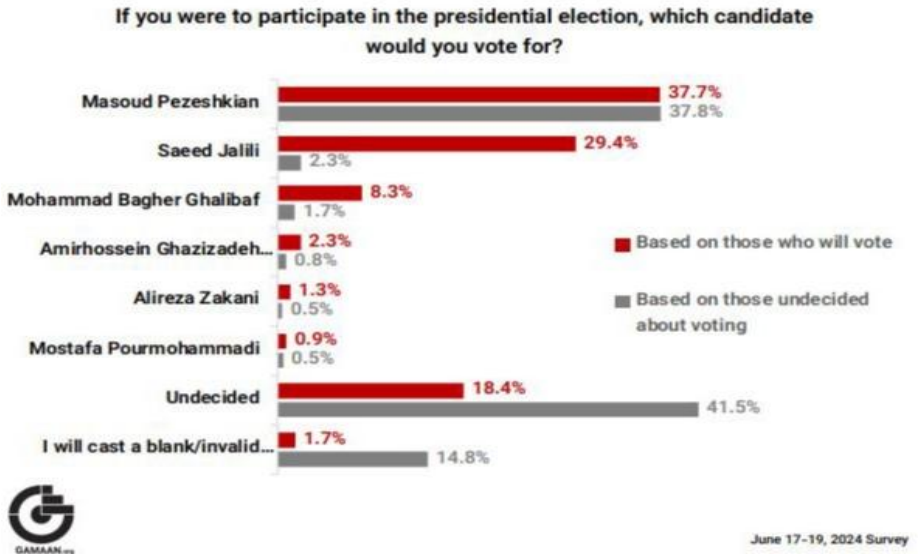
Source: Ammar Maleki, Iranians' Attitudes Toward Political Systems: A 2022 Survey Report (March 2022), The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), p. 5. https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/GAMAAN-Political-Systems-Survey-2022-English-Final.pdf

The chart illustrates the findings of a survey conducted in February 2023 in Iran, which explored public opinions on four distinct political systems for governance: democracy, a strong leader unimpeded by parliamentary processes, a system governed by religious law, and military rule. The survey indicates a clear preference among Iranians for a democratic political system over authoritarian leadership, theocracy, and military governance. This support for democracy reflects a yearning for political freedoms, representation, and accountability. Conversely, the significant opposition to religious and military rule highlights concerns over authoritarian governance, restrictions on personal liberties, and potential abuses of power. These insights are vital for grasping public sentiment in Iran, offering valuable context for policymakers contemplating reforms or adjustments to the political structure.

In addition, examining the various survey results, it's evident that Iran was grappling with serious challenges even prior to Raisi's passing. Politically, the nation faces the formidable task of navigating tensions with Western countries while simultaneously addressing domestic calls for reform. Economically, tackling inflation, unemployment, and the effects of international sanctions remains a critical priority that demands innovative and coordinated strategies. Socially, the government is under pressure to respond to societal demands for freedom and human rights amidst the ongoing repercussions of the pandemic. Addressing these multifaceted challenges necessitates strong and responsive leadership to steer Iran toward stability and progress (Mehrabi, 2024). Given these ongoing challenges, it is essential to gauge public preferences

regarding potential leadership candidates in the wake of Raisi's death. The subsequent polling data on public opinion concerning Raisi's successor will provide valuable insights into the leadership qualities and policy objectives that the Iranian populace desires.

Figure 7. Voter Preferences for Iran's Presidential Election: June 2024 Survey Results



Source: Ammar Maleki, Iranians' Attitudes Toward the 2024 Snap Presidential Election (June 2024), The Group for Analyzing and Measuring Attitudes in IRAN (GAMAAN), p. 5. https://gamaan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/GAMAAN-Survey-Report-Snap-Elections-2024-English.pdf

The chart presents the results of a survey on voter intentions for the presidential election in Iran, scheduled for June 2024. From the survey, Masoud Pezeshkian emerges as the frontrunner, garnering 37. 7% of the intended votes, followed closely by Saeed Jalili, who secures 29. 4%. Other contenders, including Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Amirhossein Ghazizadeh-Hesani, trail behind with significantly lower support, obtaining 8. 3% and 2. 3%, respectively. Notably, a considerable share of respondents—41. 5%—remain undecided on their candidate choice. Pezeshkian, a reformist politician and former Minister of Health, likely resonates with voters who prioritize social reforms and healthcare initiatives. Conversely, Jalili, recognized for his hardline stance and his former role as Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council, appeals to those who favor a robust foreign policy and stability in security matters. Meanwhile, Ghalibaf brings his experience as the former Mayor of Tehran and Commander of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps Air Force, emphasizing a leadership style centered on urban governance and infrastructure development. Other candidates, including Amirhossein Ghazizadeh-Hesani, Alireza Zakani, and Mostafa Pourmohammadi, despite their political backgrounds, have yet to gain substantial traction among voters. The significant level of uncertainty among the undecided electorate underscores the volatile nature of the current political

landscape, indicating that the candidates' campaigns will be critical in shaping the pending election outcome.

The survey results indicate that Masoud Pezeshkian's ability to generate the highest level of voter interest can be attributed to several pivotal factors. As a reformist politician and former Minister of Health, Pezeshkian has established a track record that resonates with many voters who are eager for social reform and enhancements in public health. His experience in the health sector has likely earned him a reputation for both competence and dedication to essential services, which are critical concerns for a large segment of the electorate. Moreover, Pezeshkian's experience in government positions him as a candidate with the expertise needed to navigate Iran's intricate political landscape and implement effective policies. His talent for articulating a clear vision for the future of Iran, along with his reformist credentials, allows him to distinguish himself from other candidates who may appear more traditional or conservative (Toossi, 2024). In summary, Masoud Pezeshkian's appeal stems from his reformist agenda, demonstrated leadership in health administration, and alignment with the progressive values of a significant portion of voters. Collectively, these elements contribute to his robust performance in the voter intention survey.

Iran Political Dynamics after Raisi's Death

The passing of President Raisi has elicited a range of responses from the various political factions and elites in Iran. As a conservative cleric, Raisi had become a key player in Iranian politics, particularly viewed as a potential successor to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. His death has created a power vacuum, presenting an opportunity for different factions to vie for influence and to shape the future political landscape of the country (Doucet, 2024). Immediately following his death, political factions—including both reformists and conservatives—began strategizing for the upcoming presidential elections, set to occur within 50 days. The reformist faction sees this moment as a chance to revive their stalled agenda, aspiring to bring about significant changes in Iran's domestic politics and international relations. They are working to rally support from citizens yearning for transformation and are reaching out to moderate groups to solidify their standing (Shahi, 2024).

Conversely, conservative and ultra-conservative factions are keen to uphold the status quo. They have leveraged Raisi's death to reiterate the necessity of adhering to the core tenets of the Islamic Revolution and shielding the nation from foreign interference. These factions stress the importance of stability and national security, persisting with stringent policies towards Western nations. Hardline groups, such as the Paydari Front, are also maneuvering to capitalize on the political void to bolster their influence (Jacinto, 2024). Moreover, clerical groups and military elites, particularly the IRGC, play a crucial role in the leadership succession process. Mohammad Mokhber, the interim president, has strong ties to the IRGC, suggesting that the military's influence over the government may increase. This underscores the IRGC's profound sway over Iranian politics, especially during times of crisis (Azimi, 2024).

During the transition period, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) adopted a cautious approach. They recognized that such times of change can lead to uncertainty, a

situation that could be exploited by both domestic and foreign adversaries of Iran. In this regard, the IRGC plays a crucial role in safeguarding the electoral process, ensuring that there are no interferences or threats from within the country or outside it. Therefore, they advocate for a swift and efficient succession process to maintain a strong, coordinated government. The IRGC often leverages its influence and networks to support candidates it believes are best equipped to uphold Iran's stability and security (Anvari & Goudarzi, 2024).

Within this succession framework, the ulama group wields significant influence. Members of the Expert Council, or Assembly of Experts, play a vital role in selecting the next supreme leader should the succession involve the position of Rahbar or Supreme Leader. However, in the case of the presidential position, they primarily serve as advisors and watchdogs over the morality of potential candidates. Additionally, the Guardian Council—a conservative body charged with overseeing elections and legislation—plays a key role in ensuring that the transition process aligns with their interests. Ayatollah Khamenei's influence as Supreme Leader remains prominent, and his approval will significantly shape the final decision regarding the new leader (Salami, 2024).

Following Raisi's passing, speculation about potential successors intensified. Among the names frequently mentioned is Mojtaba Khamenei, the Supreme Leader's son, who is believed to hold considerable influence behind the scenes. Nevertheless, his potential ascent could trigger controversy and public resistance, given his perceived lack of legitimacy and popularity. Other likely candidates include Ali Bagheri Kani, the chief negotiator in nuclear discussions, and Saeed Jalili, the former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council. Although these candidates are seen as hard-liners, they will face formidable economic and social challenges, including soaring inflation and widespread public dissatisfaction (Doucet, 2024). In summary, Raisi's death ushers in a new era in Iranian politics, characterized by various factions and elites vying to fill the power vacuum he left behind. The involvement of clerics and military figures in the succession process will be pivotal in determining the country's political trajectory, while the Iranian public remains watchful, hopeful for positive change in the future.

Implications for Iran's Domestic Policy

The 2024 Iranian presidential election, held following the death of Ebrahim Raisi, resulted in the victory of Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist politician and former Minister of Health. His electoral success reflected public support for a platform emphasizing economic reform, greater social openness, and improved international engagement. However, the significance of Pezeshkian's victory should be understood within the broader institutional framework of the Islamic Republic, where major policy decisions remain influenced by unelected institutions and the authority of the Supreme Leader. Consequently, while his election may signal changes in policy priorities, the extent of substantive policy transformation remains uncertain (Naji, 2024).

In the economic sphere, Pezeshkian has emphasized the need to address persistent challenges such as inflation, unemployment, and poverty through structural reforms. His policy agenda includes reducing Iran's dependence on oil revenues, encouraging economic diversification, and promoting investment in industrial and technological

sectors. He has also expressed support for greater diplomatic engagement as a means of mitigating the economic impact of international sanctions. Nevertheless, the implementation of these policies will depend not only on executive leadership but also on broader political support and external conditions. Therefore, the prospects for economic reform should be viewed within the constraints imposed by both domestic political institutions and the international environment (Toossi, 2024).

In social and cultural affairs, Pezeshkian has advocated greater protection of individual rights and broader public participation in social and political life. His public statements have emphasized the importance of women's participation in politics and the economy, as well as the need to create a more open environment for public dialogue. However, efforts to expand civil liberties and relax restrictions on media and internet access may encounter resistance from conservative actors and institutions that continue to play a significant role in regulating Iran's sociopolitical sphere. As a result, the realization of these objectives remains contingent upon the broader balance of power within the Iranian political system (Geranmayeh, 2024).

Regarding human rights and civil liberties, Pezeshkian has expressed support for greater accountability, judicial transparency, and legal protections for citizens, including ethnic and religious minorities. He has also criticized certain forms of political repression and called for reforms aimed at strengthening public trust in state institutions. While these positions suggest a reform-oriented approach, translating such commitments into concrete policy outcomes may prove challenging given the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic and the influence of security and judicial institutions. Consequently, any assessment of future human rights reforms should take into account both the opportunities created by Pezeshkian's presidency and the structural limitations within which it operates (Toossi, 2024).

The election of Masoud Pezeshkian therefore represents an important moment in Iran's political development, but it should not automatically be interpreted as a precursor to systemic political transformation. Although his administration may introduce new policy priorities and pursue selective reforms, the scope of change is likely to be shaped by the broader institutional framework of the Islamic Republic. This suggests that post-Raisi Iran is characterized by a combination of leadership transition, policy adjustment, and political continuity rather than a fundamental restructuring of the existing political order.

Implications for Iran's Foreign Policy

The 2024 presidential election in Iran marked an important political transition following the death of Ebrahim Raisi and the election of Masoud Pezeshkian. His electoral victory reflected public support for a platform that emphasized diplomatic engagement and a less confrontational approach toward the international community. Nevertheless, the implications of this leadership transition for Iran's foreign policy should be assessed within the broader institutional framework of the Islamic Republic, where key strategic decisions remain subject to the influence of the Supreme Leader and other powerful state institutions.

Pezeshkian has expressed support for improving relations with neighboring countries and strengthening regional cooperation. His public statements have emphasized dialogue and diplomacy, particularly with Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, following recent efforts to reduce regional tensions. He has also indicated the importance of maintaining constructive relations with Iraq and Syria, countries that continue to occupy a significant place in Iran's regional strategy. However, the extent to which these diplomatic initiatives can be translated into substantial policy changes will depend on broader strategic considerations and the preferences of key political institutions within Iran (Hosseini, 2024).

Foreign policy under Pezeshkian may also influence discussions surrounding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Iran's relations with major powers such as the United States, Russia, and China. Pezeshkian has signaled support for diplomatic engagement aimed at addressing the economic consequences of international sanctions and reducing tensions with Western countries. At the same time, significant obstacles remain, including mutual distrust between Iran and the United States and the broader geopolitical dynamics shaping regional security. Furthermore, Iran's strategic partnerships with Russia and China are likely to remain important components of its foreign policy, reflecting long-standing economic, political, and security interests rather than the preferences of any single administration (Vaez, 2024; Byman, 2024).

Pezeshkian has also emphasized the importance of active participation in international and regional organizations, including the United Nations (UN), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC). These priorities suggest an interest in expanding Iran's diplomatic engagement and strengthening its international presence. Nevertheless, Iran's positions on major regional issues, including support for the Palestinian cause and broader regional security concerns, continue to be shaped by enduring strategic principles that extend beyond presidential leadership. Consequently, any changes in foreign policy are likely to reflect a combination of policy adjustment and institutional continuity rather than a fundamental reorientation of Iran's international posture (VOA News, 2024).

The presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian may create opportunities for diplomatic engagement and selective policy adjustments in Iran's external relations. However, leadership transition alone does not necessarily imply a significant transformation of Iran's foreign policy. The direction and scope of foreign policy change will continue to be influenced by the institutional structure of the Islamic Republic, the authority of the Supreme Leader, and broader regional and international dynamics. Therefore, post-Raisi Iran is more accurately characterized by a combination of diplomatic adaptation and political continuity than by a complete departure from existing foreign policy orientations.

Challenges and Prospects Facing Iran under the Leadership of Masoud Pezeshkian

Pezeshkian's election heralds the potential for significant shifts in Iran's policy landscape. However, he will encounter formidable challenges that will test his leadership in navigating this complex nation. Among these hurdles are economic difficulties, the need for structural reforms, social and cultural issues, human rights concerns, and intricate

international relations—particularly regarding tensions with neighboring countries and the complicated dynamics with the West.

Iran's economy has faced immense strain due to international sanctions over the past few decades. Pezeshkian is tasked with the difficult mission of stabilizing the economy, curbing inflation, and generating employment opportunities. Immediate economic reforms are essential to attract foreign investment and boost domestic productivity, all while addressing the fundamental needs of society. To tackle these economic issues effectively, Pezeshkian recognizes the necessity of implementing structural reforms, including enhancing the banking system, reducing reliance on oil revenues, and bolstering the private sector. However, achieving these reforms will require considerable political courage and consensus among various political factions, a daunting challenge amid Iran's prevailing polarization (Mehrabi, 2024).

As a more moderate president, Pezeshkian is also expected to advocate for changes in social and cultural policies. Issues such as freedom of speech, women's rights, and family law reform resonate deeply within Iranian society. Despite the widespread hopes for progress, Pezeshkian must confront influential conservative groups that significantly impact Iran's political and social landscape. Additionally, Iran has long faced international criticism regarding its human rights record. Pezeshkian will be under pressure from both domestic and international communities to ameliorate this situation. Initiatives aimed at enhancing civil liberties and respecting individual rights could play a crucial role in mitigating Iran's international isolation and improving its global standing (Toossi, 2024).

In the realm of international relations, Pezeshkian faces significant challenges, particularly with Western nations. Reviving the nuclear agreement (JCPOA) and easing tensions with the United States are critical priorities (VOA News, 2024). Success in these diplomatic endeavors would yield economic benefits and bolster regional stability. Moreover, Iran's relations with its neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, remain fraught with tension. Pezeshkian must strive to enhance these relations through dialogue and diplomacy. Building stronger regional alliances will be pivotal in reducing tensions and fostering cooperation in areas such as security and economic development (Tasnim News, 2024).

The 2024 war between Iran and Israel, triggered by an Israeli attack on the Iranian Embassy in Damascus, has exacerbated tensions across the Middle East, intensifying aggressive rhetoric between the two nations. This conflict has profoundly affected regional stability and diplomatic relations, particularly with neighboring countries. As a result, Iran's ties with its neighbors, especially Saudi Arabia, have grown increasingly strained. Traditional skepticism from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states towards Iran has led them to reinforce their alliances with the United States and Israel in response to perceived threats (Haid, 2024). In this context, the diplomatic and dialogue efforts of Iranian officials like Pezeshkian will be critical in alleviating these rising tensions.

From an internal political standpoint, achieving domestic stability is crucial for the effective leadership of Pezeshkian. He must skillfully navigate the diverse political factions—from reformists to conservatives—to foster an environment that supports the implementation of vital policies. Building a national consensus will be essential in addressing both internal and external challenges. Additionally, Iran is grappling with

significant environmental issues, including drought, air pollution, and land degradation. Prioritizing sustainable environmental policies will be essential for Pezeshkian to maintain ecological balance and secure long-term prosperity for the Iranian populace (Ozyakar, 2024). Despite these hurdles, Iran benefits from its abundant natural resources, particularly oil and gas. The effective and efficient management of these resources could significantly drive economic growth. However, to ensure sustainable economic stability, it is imperative to diversify the economy and reduce reliance on the oil sector. Under Pezeshkian's leadership, innovation and technology can serve as catalysts for Iran's economic advancement. Investments in education, research, and technological development will enable Iran to compete globally and create high-quality job opportunities for its youth (Elias, 2024).

On the international front, as a key player in the Middle East, Iran holds an important position in regional organizations like the OIC and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Pezeshkian has the opportunity to enhance Iran's standing in these organizations by adopting a more inclusive and cooperative foreign policy. The ongoing Iran-Israel conflict could also serve as a catalyst for Iran to forge new alliances and strengthen regional cooperation. For instance, Iran may benefit from improving relations with countries that share its interests in countering Israeli and U. S. influence in the region. Furthermore, this conflict has the potential to encourage regional nations to pursue peaceful solutions through international forums like the UN and the OIC (Byman, 2024). In summary, the long-term outlook for Iran under Pezeshkian's leadership will heavily rely on the country's capacity to embark on bold and effective reforms. If successful, Iran has the potential to evolve into a more stable and influential economic and political power both regionally and globally.

Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which Masoud Pezeshkian can introduce policy changes in post-Raisi Iran within the constraints of the Islamic Republic's political system. The findings suggest that Pezeshkian's presidency may create opportunities for policy adjustment in both domestic and foreign affairs, particularly in areas such as economic management, diplomatic engagement, social openness, and administrative reform. However, the scope of these changes should not be overstated, as the Iranian political system is characterized by a complex institutional structure in which elected officials operate alongside powerful unelected institutions.

A key finding of this study is that post-Raisi Iran reflects a combination of leadership transition and political continuity. While Pezeshkian has articulated reform-oriented positions and demonstrated a willingness to pursue greater engagement with both domestic constituencies and the international community, the implementation of substantial reforms remains subject to significant institutional constraints. The authority of the Supreme Leader, the influence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the role of the Guardian Council, and the broader framework of Velayat-e Faqih continue to shape the direction and limits of policymaking in the Islamic Republic.

Therefore, leadership change does not necessarily produce systemic political transformation in Iran. Although presidential elections may alter policy priorities, political

rhetoric, and governance approaches, the institutional architecture of the Islamic Republic continues to place ultimate authority in the hands of the Supreme Leader and other unelected bodies. As a result, political change in post-Raisi Iran is more likely to take the form of gradual policy adaptation rather than fundamental structural reform.

The study thus concludes that the presidency of Masoud Pezeshkian represents both an opportunity and a limitation. It offers the possibility of selective reforms and diplomatic recalibration, while simultaneously illustrating the enduring resilience of Iran's political institutions. Understanding this interplay between leadership agency and institutional constraint is essential for assessing the future trajectory of Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy in the post-Raisi era.

Future research may further examine how Pezeshkian's policy initiatives evolve over time and how interactions among elected and unelected institutions influence the prospects for reform and political continuity in Iran.

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