

Iran's presidential elections head to a run-off amid escalating Mideast war

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Iran's presidential election will be decided in a run-off next Friday between a so-called "reform" candidate, Dr. Masoud Pezeshkian, and Saeed Jalili, a leader of the Principalist or "conservative" faction of the Islamic Republic's bourgeois-clerical political elite.

Pezeshkian favours renewed efforts to seek a rapprochement with Washington and the European imperialist powers, as was attempted under the administration of Hassan Rouhani, Iran's president from 2013 to 2021. He combines calls for a relaxing of clerical control over aspects of daily life and denunciations of widespread government corruption with the promotion of a neo-liberal, pro-market agenda aimed at boosting profits and investment at the expense of working people.

Jalili, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator between 2007 and 2013, was among the most outspoken opponents of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord, which US President Donald Trump repudiated in 2018 so as to initiate a new US drive to subjugate Iran through military pressure and by wrecking its economy. He is an advocate of the "economic resistance" policy currently favoured by the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, Ayatollah Khamenei. Among the Principalists, who are divided into multiple, competing factions, Jalili is considered among the most strident in his promotion of reactionary Islamic mores and the dominant role of the Shia clergy in political life.

In the first round of the presidential election held last Friday, Pezeshkian narrowly bested Jalili, winning 10.41 million votes (42.5% of votes cast) to the latter's 9.47 million (38.6%)

Bagher Ghalibaf, a former Tehran mayor and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps air force commander, and the current speaker of the Majlis (Iranian parliament), polled 3.38 million votes (13.5%).

Once the results were known, Ghalibaf immediately declared his support for Jalili in the run-off—constitutionally necessary as none of the candidates won a majority of the votes. The three other candidates authorized to stand in the election under a highly anti-democratic vetting process overseen by the Guardians' Council have also thrown their support behind Jalili. Two of them withdrew last Thursday before any votes had been cast. The third, Mostafa Pourmohammadi, won just 206,397 votes.

In a striking and highly significant indication of the narrowing popular support for Iran's bourgeois nationalist regime, overall voter turnout fell sharply despite a very public government campaign to encourage people to do their "civic duty" by voting. The Supreme Leader himself actively participated in this campaign.

Of the more than 61 million Iranians eligible to vote, less than 40 percent chose to cast a ballot on Friday, down 9 percentage points from the 2021 presidential election. That election was won by the Principalist cleric Ebrahim Raisi whose death with other leading

officials in a May 19 helicopter crash triggered the current election.

Prior to the 2021 election, turnout in an Iranian presidential election had never fallen below 50 percent, and in the three preceding elections in 2009, 2013 and 2017, it always exceeded 70 percent.

The sharp drop in turnout is an indication of mass disaffection with all factions of the political establishment—conservative and "reform"—and mounting social anger. Since the beginning of 2018, Iran has thrice been convulsed by mass nationwide protest movements fuelled by anger over social inequality, spiralling inflation, deepening poverty and the corrupt and repressive rule of the capitalist Islamic Republic.

All of these movements have been socially and politically heterogeneous, involving Iran's workers and toilers, but also more privileged middle-class layers, backed by sections of the bourgeoisie, who resent the crony capitalism of the Islamic Republic and the political privileges of the Shia clergy only because they represent obstacles to their own enrichment.

Under Raisi as under Rouhani, the rulers of the Islamic Republic used bloody repression to suppress the anti-government protests. Hundreds, including scores of minors, were reportedly killed during the three months of large-scale nationwide protests triggered by the September 16, 2022 death in police custody of Mahsa Amini, a young Kurdish woman arrested for not properly wearing the hijab.

The bourgeois clerical regime consolidated its rule by hijacking the mass revolutionary upsurge that overthrew the brutal monarchical dictatorship of the US-backed Shah in 1979 and savagely repressed the left and all independent organizations of the working class. For decades it has sought to balance between Iran's oppressed masses and the imperialist powers.

However, the crisis of world capitalism and the attempts of the imperialist powers, led by the United States, to reassert their global dominance through a violent re-division of the world and the seizure of resources, strategic territories, and pools of labour to exploit, make this balancing act ever more precarious.

On the eve of the election, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken imposed new sanctions on Iran in response, or so he claimed, to Iran's plans to augment its civilian nuclear program. Under conditions where the US and European powers are waging economic war on Iran and backing Israel to the hilt as it wages a genocidal assault on the Palestinians, Tehran has sought to pressure them to return to the 2015 agreement by increasing its enrichment of uranium and breaching other conditions of the accord.

Blinken punctuated his sanctions announcement with a threat of war, even a nuclear strike on Iran, declaring that US imperialism is "prepared to use all elements" of its "national power to ensure" Iran

never obtains a nuclear weapon.

The next day, Iran's UN mission issued a statement on X/Twitter warning that should Israel carry through on its threats to invade Lebanon, it would face an "obliterating war" and suggested Iranian-backed militias across the region would come to Hezbollah's defence.

The reality is that none of the factions of the Islamic Republic's bourgeois elite and clerical-political establishment have any progressive answer to the US imperialist war drive and the rampage of its Israeli Zionist attack dog.

While bitterly divided among themselves, their uniform response to mounting imperialist aggression is to intensify the exploitation and repression of the working class. Successive administrations, "conservative" and "reform" alike, have systematically gutted the little that remains of the social concessions granted to the working class in the immediate aftermath of the 1979 Revolution, implementing wholesale privatization and massive subsidy and social spending cuts.

Under Rouhani, with Khamenei's approval, the Islamic Republic agreed beginning in January 2016 to dramatically curtail its civilian nuclear programme, with the aim of opening Iran's abundant energy resources and working class to European and American imperialist exploitation. But the "investment boom" proved to be little more than a mirage. On assuming office at the beginning of 2017, Trump quickly served notice that he intended to sabotage the Iran nuclear accord as part of a still more aggressive America First global strategy.

In response, Rouhani aggressively wooed Berlin, London and Paris. But once Trump pulled the plug on the Iran accord, initiated his campaign of "maximum pressure" on Tehran, and threatened to use Washington's control of the global financial system to sanction any foreign companies that traded with Iran, the European powers quickly fell into line.

Rouhani's successor Raisi was ready to explore the possibility of reviving the nuclear accord, something Biden claimed to favour during the 2020 US election campaign. But to offset the ongoing brutal US-European economic sanctions, which among other things greatly exacerbated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Tehran continued at the same time to expand economic and strategic ties with both Russia and China.

Washington responded with increasing intransigence and in August 2022, some six months after the outbreak of the US-NATO-instigated Ukraine war, the on-again off-again nuclear negotiations started to completely unravel.

The US has welcomed the now eight-month-old Israeli war on Gaza as a means to pursue long-developed plans to reorder the Middle East under unbridled US domination by incrementally degrading the position of Iran and its allies and ultimately waging all-out war against them. Blinken and Biden have themselves repeatedly tied the expanding war in the Middle East and US imperialism's need to roll back Iranian influence to the NATO war against Russia and America's all-sided economic and military-strategic offensive against China, admitting, in effect, that the US and its allies are engaged in a global war for imperialist hegemony.

When Israel, as part of an escalating series of provocations, killed leading Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel by striking Iran's diplomatic mission in Syria, Tehran felt compelled to respond. But it signalled its first-ever direct military attack on Israel on April 13 well in advance and carefully calibrated it in the hopes of avoiding a wider war.

In the five televised debates held in the run-up to the first round of the presidential election, the "reform" candidate Pezeshkian repeatedly claimed he could resolve Iran's acute economic crisis by pursuing friendly relations with "our neighbours" and reviving the nuclear accord. His Principalist opponents, he claimed, "didn't let the JCPOA [the official name for the accord] succeed," preferring like Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu "to set it on fire." Needless to say, he offered no explanation as to how Iran could achieve such a rapprochement when the US and its European allies have made clear that their aim is to subjugate Iran and re-impose the type of neo-colonial regime that existed under the Shah.

While advocating conciliation with the imperialist powers, Pezeshkian advanced himself as the representative of "owners" and "company managers ... thirsty for the stability of a proper business environment" free "from government interference," and "stock market investors" angered by the depreciation of their shares.

Meanwhile, Jalili, who enjoys the not so subtle backing of Supreme Leader Khamenei, claimed he would put Iran on the path of 8 percent annual growth, but again without offering any viable path as to how this could be achieved.

In recent years the workers of Iran have shown great militancy, engaging in numerous strikes and protests. However, they have yet to find their independent political voice. That requires the building of a revolutionary Trotskyist party that will fight to infuse the growing movement of the working class with the programme of Permanent Revolution. The working class must rally all the oppressed toilers behind it in the fight for a workers republic and a Socialist United States of the Middle East against imperialism, and all factions of the Iranian bourgeoisie. Only the revolutionary unification of the workers of the region— Arab, Turkish, Kurdish, Iranian and Israeli—across all religious and ethnic divides, sweeping away the reactionary nation-state system the imperialist powers imposed on the region, can put an end to imperialist oppression and war and thus open the door to eradicating social inequality and fulfilling the social and democratic aspirations of all working people



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