



A Curtain-Raiser to the Iranian Presidential Election 2017

Dr. Asif Shuja *

The 12th presidential election is scheduled to be held in Iran on May 19, 2017. This election is fought under the backdrop of the nuclear deal between Iran and the world powers and this issue is expected to be central in the campaign. According to Iran's Ministry of Interior, total number of candidates registered for this presidential election was 1,636.¹ The Guardian Council had started the process of screening the candidates on April 16 and on April 20 it approved only six candidates to contest. According to Press Release² of Iran's Interior Ministry, these six candidates include Hassan Rouhani, Ebrahim Raeisi, Mohammad-Baqer Qalibaf, Mostafa Aqa-Mirsalim, Es'haq Jahangiri and Mostafa Hashemi-Taba. Out of 137 female candidates registered to contest this election, none of them were allowed.³

Hassan Rouhani is the incumbent President of Iran. He is also a member of the Assembly of Experts and the Expediency Council. He was earlier a member of the *Majlis* (Iranian Parliament) and the head of Iran's Supreme National Security Council. Ebrahim Raeisi is presently the custodian of Razavi Holy Shrines, an organisation that manages the Holy Shrine of Imam Reza, the eighth Shia Imam, in the city of Mashad. He had earlier headed the supervisory council at Radio and Television (Seda-Sima). He was also Iran's Prosecutor General and General Prosecutor for Clerics. He is a member of Association of Combatant Clerics in Tehran and has been a presiding member of the Assembly of Experts.⁴

Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf is presently the Mayor of Tehran. He is a former commander of Iran's Islamic Revolution Guards Corps' Air Force. He has also been the Chief of the national police and Commander of Iran's Khatam al-Anbya Air Defense Base. Mostafa Aqa-Mirsalim, is presently the head of the Islamic Coalition Party's Central Council. A conservative politician and

engineer, he served as Iran's Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance during 1994-1997. During 1981-1989, he was the advisor to the Iranian President Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei. Mostafa Hashemi-Taba had served as a Vice President under former President Ayatollah Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. He has also served as a Minister of Industries and as the Head of Iran's Sports Organization. Es'haq Jahangiri is presently the First Vice President. He was earlier the Minister of Mines, the Governor of Isfahan and a Parliamentarian.⁵

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who served Iran as President for two consecutive terms and his former aid Hamid Baqaei are among the two high profile candidates to be barred from running this election. Ahmadinejad and Baqaei have been facing lawsuits filed against them for 'administrative violations'⁶ during their tenures, and so far no final verdict has been made by the Judiciary.

In a meeting with Ahmadinejad on August 30, 2016, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had advised him not to contest this presidential election because his candidature would 'polarize'⁷ the Iranian society. Thereafter, on September 27, 2016, Ahmadinejad had sent an 'official letter'⁸ to the Supreme Leader assuring him that he would not contest election. However, he surprised everyone by registering as a candidate for this presidential election.

Disqualification of a former President from running for elections is not new in Iran. Hashemi Rafsanjani, who had served as Iran's President for two consecutive terms was barred from contesting in the previous election held in 2013. Similarly, Mohammad Khatami, who was also Iran's President for two consecutive terms, faced severe restrictions in his political life after leaving office. In a system closely controlled by the clerics, this appears to be an arrangement where a non-cleric may participate in the running of country's domestic and foreign policy for a certain period for expediency, but is not allowed to be deeply entrenched into the system to challenge the basic structure of the clerical system.

Live Presidential Debates

The process of three live debates featuring all candidates on live TV was initiated in Iran in the previous presidential election of 2013. This process has been continued in the 2017 presidential election. The three live TV debates for the 2017 presidential election were held in Persian language respectively on April 28⁹, May 5¹⁰ and May 12, 2017¹¹ and were broadcast on state television's *Channel 1*¹². News reports of all the three debates are available on the website of *Press TV*, respectively posted on April 28¹³, May 5¹⁴ and May 12, 2017.¹⁵

The analysis of the three presidential debates as presented in this Issue Brief is based on these three news reports of *Press TV*, an English news channel of Iran affiliated¹⁶ to the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB). Similarly, the viewpoints of respective candidates as mentioned in this Issue Brief have been presented in single quotes and are sourced from these *Press TV* news reports and are italicised.

As reported by *Press TV*¹⁷, during these debates the candidates outlined their plans to be pursued if elected. These debates are meant to cut the campaigning cost by the candidates. All three live debates were hosted by a ‘renowned Iranian television news host,’ Morteza Heidari. The focus of the first TV debate was social issues, the second debate focused on political issues while the third debate revolved around economic issues. The six candidates featuring in these debates included Hassan Rouhani, Seyyed Ebrahim Raeisi, Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, Es’haq Jahangiri, Mostafa Aqa-Mirsalim and Mostafa Hashemi-Taba.¹⁸

First Debate (April 28, 2017)

The first live debate¹⁹ lasting three hours, covered social issues such as settlement on outskirts of cities, social justice, youth marriage, cutting down on red tape, city traffic problems and environment issues in the cities. During this debate, Rouhani appeared defending his administration’s achievements and enumerating some of them. For instance, on tackling the settlement on outskirts and peripheries of Iranian cities, a growing problem for successive Iranian administration, Aqa-Mirsalim blamed it on ‘*lack of management of natural resources*’ and ‘*lack of attention to proper spatial planning*’ and added that ‘*correct water management would be the first step to reduce immigration from rural areas to cities.*’ To this charge, the incumbent Hassan replied that ‘*immigration to big cities is a major problem not only in Iran but in most countries*’ adding ‘*that unemployment and low income are major reasons behind immigration to big cities.*’ His views were echoed by Jahangiri who said that ‘*attention to immigrants to big cities must be the first priority in tackling their problems.*’ Amongst his achievements, Rouhani mentioned that his administration had ‘*reduced dependence on oil revenues to below 30 percent.*’ Amongst his other major achievements, Rouhani included creation of 700,000 jobs for women.²⁰

Raeisi appeared more poised and expressed his intellectual side to the general public. For instance, on the internal migration issue, Raeisi raised the point stating that ‘*the first priority is to have correct figures on immigration to big cities.*’ Similarly, responding to a question on social justice, Raeisi said that GINI Index ‘*shows class divide has increased in Iran*’ and suggested the tripling of subsidies to the lower classes. Similarly, the recipe of Raeisi to promoting youth marriage, a prominent social issue in current Iranian discourses, was promoting ‘*banking facilities, housing and employment.*’ Raeisi also emphasised the importance of e-governance which in his view ‘*would increase transparency and facilitate the administrative processes.*’²¹

During the debate, Qalibaf indulged in severely criticising Rouhani’s administration. In his turn, Rouhani denied his charges, including the one that Rouhani had promised to create four million jobs during the previous election campaign. This debate ended with heated exchanges between Rouhani and Qalibaf, who ‘*displayed a screenshot of the Iranian President’s website which he claimed confirms his remarks about Rouhani’s pledge during the previous campaign to create four million jobs*’ apart from dismissing many other claims of Rouhani to be untrue. During this debate Qalibaf also questioned the candidacy of Jahangiri as he was ‘*only registered to support Rouhani.*’ To this charge, Jahangiri said he ‘*took part in the presidential election as a representative of the Reformist camp.*’²²

Second Debate (May 5, 2017)

During the second live debate²³, the six candidates delved on further elaboration of their respective plans to implement if elected as president. The topic of the second debate included domestic and foreign policy as well as cultural issues. More specifically, the candidates debated issues such as scientific progress, interaction with critics, nuclear rights, foreign policy, defence and national security, apart from discussing Iranian-Islamic lifestyle. This debate saw all candidates endorsing the nuclear deal, but differing on the economic benefits received by Iran as a result of its implementation.²⁴

While delving on his plans to prevent the violation of Iran's nuclear rights, Raeisi said that the 2015 nuclear agreement or the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) '*must be respected by all involved parties*' and added that '*the incumbent president had promised that all sanctions would be removed after the JCPOA conclusion but this has not happened.*' He also said that '*the JCPOA has failed to end Iran's economic recession and remove all banking sanctions*' adding that '*all Iranian administrations must be committed to the nuclear agreement.*' Similarly, Qalibaf said '*the JCPOA has failed either to solve Iran's economic problems or improve people's livelihood.*' According to Aqa-Mirsalim, '*the nuclear agreement proved to the world that Iran does not seek to develop nuclear weapons.*'²⁵

At this point, Rouhani called for all the presidential candidates to '*clearly inform the Iranian people of their plans concerning the JCPOA and interact with the world*' and added that JCPOA had in fact '*led to the removal of all nuclear-related sanctions.*' He also emphasised that '*Iran would be exporting 200,000 barrels of oil per day if the JCPOA had not been reached.*' In support of Rouhani, Jahangiri said that '*the nuclear agreement was one of the greatest achievements in Iran's history*' adding that '*Iran's oil exports would have stopped if the deal were not reached.*'²⁶

On foreign policy issues also Jahangiri supported his government's approach of engaging in '*public diplomacy at the international level*' emphasising that '*Iran's soft power must increase in parallel with its hard power.*' Similarly, Rouhani said that '*his administration brought about the realization of the country's rights in the nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 group of countries through a powerful diplomacy.*' Hashemi-Taba was also supportive of Rouhani's approach saying that '*Iran can use its energy exports to cement relations with other countries*' and adding that '*exports are a major factor in implementing Resistance Economy.*' He further emphasised that '*necessary guarantees must be given to investors to attract investment.*'²⁷

Criticising Rouhani in the foreign policy realm, Qalibaf said that '*the 11th administration lacks coherence with regard to international trade*' as '*the country must use all forms of diplomacy in its interactions with others.*' Raeisi also said that '*Iran must pursue a strong economic diplomacy in its relations with other countries*' and '*stressed the importance of protecting the rights of the Iranian citizens in all countries.*'²⁸

On defence and national security, Rouhani hailed the record of his own administration saying that *'Iran is currently considered as a big power in the region and the world'* and added that *'the Islamic Republic's international standing has been greatly improved in comparison with the past.'* Similarly, Jahangiri said that *'Iran's culture was the most important source of the country's power.'* He said that *'president needs to have experience in dealing with domestic and international issues'* and also *'expressed disapproval of the fact that Iran's cultural power has not taken advantage of properly.'* Countering Jahangiri's claims, Raeisi said that *'the Iranian people's presence [in the political scene] was the most important component of national might.'* Aqa-Mirsalim also criticised Rouhani's government saying that *'the 11th administration reduced the research budget to below 0.5 percent.'*²⁹

During the second debate also Qalibaf continued with his aggressive stance. While emphasising that cultural issues were the root of economic issues in Iran, he said that *'the current officials in the education ministry cannot be relied upon to carry out their responsibilities.'*³⁰

During this debate, Aqa-Mirsalim, said that embracing criticism was the only way to success for any administration and criticised Rouhani's *'administration for failing to embrace criticism and insulting critics.'* To this charge, Hashemi-Taba appeared supportive of Rouhani's administration, saying that *'some media outlets have targeted the 11th administration with the harshest of attacks.'* Jahangiri also said *'everybody must welcome constructive criticism'* adding that *'the current administration was successful in handling critics and promoting social liberties.'* Like Aqa-Mirsalim, Raeisi also charged Rouhani's administration of attacking its critics.³¹

On the issue of promoting Iranian-Islamic lifestyle, a touchy subject among the clerics, Rouhani said that *'the Iranian people must choose between a totalitarian administration and an administration promoting freedoms'* adding that *'Iran's president belongs to all people.'* Jahangiri said that *'improving of lifestyles would reduce excessive use of the country's resources.'* Raeisi's view was that *'the optimal use of resources and the promotion of national unity are the major components of an Iranian-Islamic lifestyle.'* Qalibaf said that *'cultural affairs must be managed by cultural figures'* adding that *'cultural activities have greatly advanced in the capital in recent years,'* implying his own success as the Mayor of Tehran. Aqa-Mirsalim, in his turn, criticised Rouhani's government *'for failing to promote an Iranian-Islamic lifestyle.'* Responding to the criticisms of his government, Rouhani said that *'some candidates are giving empty promises on economic growth to the Iranians.'*³²

Third Debate (May 12, 2017)

In the third and final live TV debate³³ the six contestants were given an opportunity to elaborate on their respective economic plans for the country. More specifically, the issues covered during this debate included smuggling and imports, oil dependence, banking issues, domestic production, subsidies and economic growth.

All candidates were in favour of curbing smuggling and outlined their respective plans to fight this menace inflicting the Iranian economy. On this issue, Raeisi emphasised that the backbone of his anti-smuggling plan would be based on extensive research conducted in the Iranian universities. He also criticised Rouhani's government for not being serious in dealing with the smuggling of goods. Similarly, Qalibaf claimed that some cabinet ministers of Rouhani's government were engaged in illegal import of commodities to Iran. Defending his administration, Rouhani said that *'the first concern with regard to the smuggling is its root causes'* and added that *'the private sector's economic activities must be encouraged to reduce smuggling.'* Supporting his government, Jahangiri said that *'the judiciary has appeared weak in fighting the smuggling of goods'* adding that *'the current administration has taken serious measures to stop astronomical salaries.'* He also criticised Qalibaf by saying that the *'Tehran Municipality has not come clean on the selling of underpriced properties to certain people.'*³⁴

On the issue of reducing the country's dependence on oil, Rouhani claimed that *'his administration has managed to open Iran's export markets through the signing and implementation of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal'* and also pointed out that *'if the country does not exploit shared energy fields, the neighboring states will extract their oil reserves.'* In this regard, Jahangiri supported Rouhani's administration for 'considerably' reducing the export of raw materials. Raeisi's view on this issue was that *'building of refineries in various provinces would reduce crude oil sales.'* Similarly, Aqa-Mirsalim said that *'Iran must work with its neighboring countries to safeguard shared energy fields'* and criticised Rouhani's administration for failing *'to use the JCPOA to boost Iran's foreign trade.'* He also *'stressed the importance of the access to modern technology in order to improve exports.'*³⁵

The contestants also outlined their plans to solve the problems in Iran's banking system. Rouhani said that *'Iran's banking system needs fundamental reforms'* and added that his government *'has managed to double the capital of state-run banks to get more active in the economic sector.'* Supporting Rouhani on this issue, Jahangiri said that *'the previous administration had brought about the depletion of bank resources'* and informed that Rouhani's *'administration is implementing the development plan for banks to help them become active in production.'* Hashemi-Taba also supported Jahangiri's stance saying that *'the banking problems were handed down to the 11th administration by its predecessor.'* Raeisi retorted that *'the 11th administration blames its predecessor for all of the problems'* adding that *'the current administration has left the country in limbo for four years.'* Similarly, Qalibaf criticised the current government by saying that *'President Rouhani has failed in properly supervising and managing banks'* and added that *'the liquidity has tripled under the present administration.'* Joining on this issue, Aqa-Mirsalim said that *'banking system is currently based on usury'* and added that Rouhani's administration should have been more serious *'in dealing with the banking problems.'* Dismissing the charges levelled against his administration, Rouhani asked, *'why the judiciary has not dealt with financial problems caused by the previous administration'* and said that *'his administration has greatly reduced bank arrears and put banks back to the right course.'*³⁶

On the growth of domestic production, Rouhani said that *'production prosperity needs further investment and a proper use of technology.'* On this issue too he was supported by Jahangiri who said that *'the private sector is the key to production and investment in the country'* and added that Rouhani's *'administration has succeeded in bringing stability back to the Iranian economy.'* Hashemi-Taba's recipe for growth in domestic production included modernisation of the agriculture sector, export-oriented production, investment and reform of banking sector. Like before, the other three candidates, Qalibaf, Aqa-Mirsalim and Raeisi criticised Rouhani's administration for failing to improve Iran's domestic production. Qalibaf said that *'the current production problems are rooted in the mismanagement of the country's affairs,'* Aqa-Mirsalim said that *'many production problems are a result of the administration's inattention to the economic recession'* and Raeisi blamed that *'250,000 businesses shut down under the current administration.'* At the end of the discussion on Iran's domestic production, Hashemi-Taba appeared overtly defending Rouhani's approach to handling Iranian economy saying that *'country's industry will fail if it is not export-oriented'* and added that *'many businesses shut down due to the worn-out technology used in them.'* He also said that *'some media outlets undermine any step taken to attract foreign investment.'*³⁷

The next issue to be taken up in the third live presidential debate was subsidies. At this point, Hashemi-Taba, who was so far supporting Rouhani's administration indirectly, was found directly supporting Rouhani. Hashemi-Taba flatly said that *'the incumbent administration has been successful in containing inflation.'* Raeisi said that the policies of Rouhani's administration *'have led to increasing poverty inside the country'* adding that *'subsidies handed out to lower deciles must increase.'* Both Qalibaf and Aqa-Mirsalim joined him in criticising Rouhani's administration for failing to solve country's economic problems. Rouhani defended his administration by saying that *'some people are willing to revive methods used by the previous administration.'* As witnessed throughout the three live debates, Jahangiri continued to support Rouhani's administration and said that *'the existing problems are a result of wrong policies adopted by the previous administration.'* He also added that *'increasing cash handouts would destroy the country's economy.'* At this point, Raeisi challenged Rouhani *'to hold a one-on-one debate'* with him.³⁸

The last issue to be taken up in the third and final live debate was Iran's economic growth. By this time, two opposing camps clearly emerged out of the six presidential candidates. The broad basis of their respective unity was either supporting or opposing the incumbent administration. First camp appeared to be led by Rouhani and included Jahangiri and Hashemi-Taba. While Jahangiri emerged as a staunch supporter of Rouhani's administration, of which he was also a part, Hashemi-Taba was found giving explicit approval to Rouhani's policies on many occasions. The second camp appeared to be led by Raeisi and included Qalibaf and Aqa-Mirsalim. The basis of unity of this camp was primarily criticising Rouhani's policies and highlighting the failure of his administration. In this, Qalibaf was more vocal than Raeisi, with Aqa-Mirsalim following these two. Along the way, these candidates presented their respective plans for country's improvement.

This was clearly manifested on the issue of Iran's economic growth, the last issue of the debate. This session saw Qalibaf enumerating Rouhani's failures and outlined his own plans for improving the economic condition of Iran. Qalibaf said that *'Iran is facing full-fledged economic crisis'* adding that *'President Rouhani's administration has not been successful in solving the country's economic crisis.'* He said that *'tax evasion in Iran amounts to 40 percent'* and added that *'the creation of job opportunities is the most important step for boosting the economic growth.'* He vowed that *'his administration will certainly create five million jobs, including 1.5 million jobs for rural districts, if elected'* and said that *'prosperity of the housing sector and tourism are among his main plans'* adding that *'it is possible to increase the country's revenue 2.5 times.'*³⁹

Two days after doing this on live TV, Qalibaf announced⁴⁰ on May 15, that he was withdrawing from the presidential race and backing Ebrahim Raeisi. A day later, on May 16, Jahangiri also dropped out of the presidential race.⁴¹

Likely Winner

Majority of opinion polls⁴² project Rouhani as the leading candidate in the 2017 presidential election with Raeisi as the distant second. Also, these polls predict Rouhani falling short of garnering more than 50 per cent, which is required to avoid a run-off. Going by these indicators, a run-off is likely between Rouhani and Raeisi one week after the May 19 presidential election. However, the traditional method of determining the likely winner through opinion polls may not be the most effective way in case of Iran. This is because election processes in Iran are closely guarded by the clerical system, with the Guardian Council playing the most prominent role and the Supreme Leader being the final decision maker in case of any dispute.

This cleric system influences the result of elections right from the stage of finalisation of the candidates, through vetting by the Guardian Council. This process of vetting often incorporates the preferences of the Supreme Leader. For instance, in the upcoming presidential election 2017, Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei had 'advised' Mahmoud Ahmadinejad not to contest in this election. The Guardian Council subsequently disqualified him when he filed his nomination papers. It is easy to see that the constitutional qualification for contesting for presidential election in Iran remained the same when Ahmadinejad was disqualified during this year as it was when he was allowed to contest and win the two previous elections in 2005 and 2009.

Although the initial selection of candidates and final declaration of result is closely guarded by the clerics, the Iranian elections appear to be conducted in a fair manner. This provides the ruling elite an opportunity to keep a close eye on the popular sentiments and take subsequent decisions accordingly with minimal chaos. This is the secret of perpetuity of the clerical rule in Iran.

Another way of determining the most likely winner in the upcoming Iranian presidential election could be to take recourse in the prevalent precedence. Now, if we go by the precedence of

Iranian presidential elections, we will see that after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, all other presidents except the first two have served two consecutive terms. The tenures of first two presidents were short-lived. The first president Abulhassan Banisadr was impeached in 1981 and in the same year the next president Mohammad-Ali Rajai was assassinated. All subsequent presidents of Iran starting with Ayatollah Khamenei in 1981 have served two terms in office. Successive presidents being Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the current incumbent Hassan Rouhani. Effectively, no presidential candidate in the Islamic Republic of Iran has ever lost the election for the second term. This also indicates that Rouhani is the likely winner in the upcoming election.

However, taking into account the precedence of merely the presidential elections during this election would not suffice. This is because this election is being fought at a particular juncture in the history of Islamic Republic. There is a likelihood that the next Supreme Leader may be chosen during the tenure of the next president. Due to this reason, the precedence of choosing a Supreme Leader would also have to be taken into account while making an attempt to determine the likely winner of this presidential election.

In about three years time the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei would be an octogenarian. This could be a compelling reason for him to expedite the grooming of his likely successor. At the time of death of Iran's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, when his successor was being chosen by the Assembly of Experts, Khamenei was serving his second term as Iran's president. This position had greatly helped him not only in his elevation to the position of the Supreme Leader by the Assembly of Experts but also in terms of his acceptance by the people of Iran. The administrative skills that the position of president provided him to run the office of the Supreme Leader gave him the additional benefit. Currently, there are some indications of Khamenei's choice of Ebrahim Raeisi as his preferred successor. Amongst these, the most prominent indication is Khamenei's decision to appoint Raeisi as the custodian of Razavi Holy Shrines. Raeisi is also currently the member of the Assembly of Experts, the body tasked to choose the next Supreme Leader. One thing that Raeisi lacks is a popular public profile and proven administrative skills. If he is elected as the next president of Iran, he will get an enhanced public profile and necessary administrative skills making him more suitable to be elected as the next Supreme Leader and perform the functions of that office.

Although Khamenei has not publicly expressed his preference for any presidential candidate, his actions against Ahmadinejad and Rouhani, in addition to the developments leading up to the May 19 presidential election are favourable to Raeisi during this election. For instance, Ahmadinejad, who was hugely popular amongst the hard-liners, was first advised by Khamenei not to contest and was eventually disqualified by the Guardian Council. Similarly, just two days after the first presidential debate, Ayatollah Khamenei questioned Rouhani's claims pertaining to the dividends of the nuclear deal. On April 30, 2017, Khamenei said, "Some say since we took office the shadow of war has been faded away. This is not correct,"⁴³ adding, "It's been people's presence in the political scene that has removed the shadow of war from the country."⁴⁴

Again, just two days after the second presidential debate, Khamenei indirectly criticised Rouhani with a more serious charge, that of facilitating Western influence in the Iranian education system. On May 7, 2017 Ayatollah Khamenei said that Iran would not surrender to UNESCO's Global Education 2030 Agenda, saying, "The UNESCO 2030 education agenda and the like are not agendas that the Islamic Republic of Iran should have to surrender and submit to."⁴⁵ Announcing his decision against signing this document, Khamenei said "It is wrong, for instance, if we sign such an agenda and begin to carry it out secretly. I declare it is not, by any means, permitted."⁴⁶ While saying so, Khamenei was holding responsible a body chaired by Rouhani for taking this decision of adopting the UNESCO programme, a decision that was taken about two years ago.⁴⁷ Khamenei's choice of election time for such criticism can have negative effect on Rouhani's candidature. It may be mentioned here that in the Islamic Republic, right from the days of its first Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, any Western influence on the Iranian society and culture is an extremely unacceptable proposition. Criticism of such a serious nature coming straight from the Supreme Leader days before the election indicates volumes about Rouhani's chances of winning the second term.

While the above reasoning forms the core of argument that Raeisi could be a winner in the 2017 presidential election, there are also a few other peripheral indicators to the same. At a time when Iranian people are feeling cheated for not getting the economic benefits of the Iranian nuclear deal, Ahmadinejad, the champion of non-negotiation with the West, would have garnered huge public support. Now that Ahmadinejad has been ousted and Qalibaf has also withdrawn, Raeisi stands to benefit in this election through the consolidation of their potential votes.

Similar implications could also be drawn out of Khamenei's warning that he would not tolerate anybody interfering during this election. On May 10, Iran's Supreme Leader warned that any attempt to disrupt the elections would be dealt with seriously. Cautioning the candidates against any such moves or comments which might disturb Iran's security, Khamenei said, "Anybody wanting to take any measure against the country's security in the election will certainly receive a hard reaction and slap in the face,"⁴⁸ and added that the issue of "security is of great significance for the country, for the people, and consequently for me, and security must be fully maintained in the election."⁴⁹ As witnessed in 2009, there is a more likelihood of popular backlash if a conservative or hardliner candidate wins. Khamenei's warning could be read as an attempt to pre-empt any repeat of such a popular backlash in case Raeisi wins.

For Khamenei, it is important to preserve the clerical system in Iran, a system he has believed in and ruled for much of his life. It is natural that he would want to ensure the perpetuity of this system in his chosen way when he has a chance. Raeisi's victory as the president of Iran could provide him this opportunity. If Raeisi were his preferred successor then his victory in this presidential election would also be preferred by Khamenei. In the Islamic Republic of Iran, it is very rare that the preferences of the Supreme Leader are not met.

* Dr. Asif Shuja is Research Fellow with the Indian Council of World Affairs, New Delhi.
Disclaimer: Views expressed are of author and do not reflect the views of the Council.

End Notes

¹ *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, “Brief summary of presidential candidates’ backgrounds,” April 21, 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82500644/>, accessed on May 2, 2017.

² Cited in *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, “Brief summary of presidential candidates’ backgrounds,” April 21, 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82500644/>, accessed on May 2, 2017.

³ *The Guardian*, “Iran disqualifies Ahmadinejad from bid to regain presidency,” April 20, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/apr/20/iran-disqualifies-ahmadinejad-from-bid-to-regain-presidency>, accessed on May 3, 2017.

⁴ For a brief summary of candidates profiles, see *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, “Brief summary of presidential candidates’ backgrounds,” April 21, 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82500644/>, accessed on May 2, 2017.

⁵ *Islamic Republic News Agency (IRNA)*, “Brief summary of presidential candidates’ backgrounds,” April 21, 2017, <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/82500644/>, accessed on May 2, 2017.

⁶ *Press TV*, “Iran’s Interior Ministry announces final list of presidential candidates,” April 20, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/04/20/518818/Iran-Abbas-Ali-Kadkhodaei>, accessed on May 3, 2017.

⁷ *Al-Monitor*, “How Khamenei played his ace to sideline Ahmadinejad,” September 29, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/iran-mahmoud-ahmadinejad-reelection-bid-second-term.html>, accessed on May 3, 2017.

⁸ *Al-Monitor*, “Khamenei puts stop to Ahmadinejad’s return,” September 27, 2016, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2016/09/mahmoud-ahmadinejad-khamenei-candidacy-letter.html>, accessed on May 3, 2017.

⁹ *Press TV*, “Iran 2017 presidential candidates hold first live debate,” April 28, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/04/28/519772/Iran-presidential-election-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁰ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin second live face-off,” May 5, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/05/520669/Iran-presidential-election-live-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹¹ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin final live TV debate,” May 12, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/12/521610/Iran-presidential-election-debate-TV>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

¹² *Al-Monitor*, “Who was the winner of Iran’s first presidential debate?,” April 30, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/04/iran-april-28-first-presidential-debate-rouhani-jahangiri.html>, accessed on May 17, 2017.

¹³ *Press TV*, “Iran 2017 presidential candidates hold first live debate,” April 28, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/04/28/519772/Iran-presidential-election-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁴ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin second live face-off,” May 5, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/05/520669/Iran-presidential-election-live-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁵ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin final live TV debate,” May 12, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/12/521610/Iran-presidential-election-debate-TV>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

¹⁶ *BBC Monitoring*, “Guide to Iranian Media and Broadcasts,” retrieved from the website of *Arab Media & Society*, <http://www.arabmediasociety.com/UserFiles/DOCUMENTS%20Iran%20Media%20Guide.pdf>, accessed on May 17, 2017.

¹⁷ *Press TV*, “Iran 2017 presidential candidates hold first live debate,” April 28, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/04/28/519772/Iran-presidential-election-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁸ *Press TV*, “Iran 2017 presidential candidates hold first live debate,” April 28, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/04/28/519772/Iran-presidential-election-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin second live face-off,” May 5, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/05/520669/Iran-presidential-election-live-debate>, accessed on May 12, 2017.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Press TV*, “Iran presidential candidates begin final live TV debate,” May 12, 2017, <http://www.presstv.ir/Detail/2017/05/12/521610/Iran-presidential-election-debate-TV>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ *Press TV*, “Tehran mayor to quit Iran’s presidential race, backs Raeisi,” May 15, 2017, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/05/15/521967/Tehran-mayor-qalibaf-Raeisi->, accessed on May 16, 2017.

⁴¹ *Press TV*, “Iran’s first VP drops out of presidential race to back President Rouhani,” May 16, 2017, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/05/16/522119/Iran-Hassan-Rouhani-Eshaq-Jahangiri-presidential-election-withdrawal>, accessed on May 16 2017.

⁴² *Al-Monitor*, “Polls put Rouhani in lead with one week to go,” May 12, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iran-isha-ippo-polls-rouhani-lead-presidential-vote-2017.html>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

⁴³ *Quoted in Middle East Eye*, “Iran’s supreme leader dismisses Rouhani’s detente policy ahead of vote,” April 30 2017, <http://www.middleeasteye.net/news/irans-leader-dismisses-rouhanis-detente-policy-ahead-vote-995115390>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Official Website of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, “Iran won’t submit to agendas like UNESCO 2030: Ayatollah Khamenei,” May 7, 2017, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4796/Iran-won-t-submit-to-agendas-like-UNESCO-2030-Ayatollah-Khamenei>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ *Al-Monitor*, Khamenei increases pressure on Rouhani ahead of elections, May 8, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/05/iran-khamenei-criticism-unesco-education-program-rouhani.html>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

⁴⁸ *Quoted in Tasnim News Agency*, “Leader Warns Enemies of Iran’s Hard Response to Aggression,” May 10, 2017, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2017/05/10/1403784/leader-warns-enemies-of-iran-s-hard-response-to-aggression>, accessed on May 15, 2017.

⁴⁹ Ibid.