



Low Voter Turnout in Iranian Elections 2021

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Elections of 2021 had the lowest voter turnout since the Iranian revolution in 1979. The turnout was considerably low as compared to the previous elections of 2017 which Mr. Raisi had lost. Ebrahim Raisi, a conservative, principlist and former Chief justice was elected as the new president of Iran. 590 applicants registered for elections, only seven were selected. Not even a single woman was among them.¹ The world already thinks that Iranian political system is not democratic. There were plenty of reasons for the low turnout while internationally it was just considered one. Low turnout made the 2021 elections suspicious and definitely affected its credibility.

The winning candidate, Ebrahim Raisi, had been an important personality in Iran and is quite famous internationally as well. He is a part of the Popular Front of Islamic Revolution Forces. His victory really affects the relations of Iran with US and European nations as he is as an individual directly under US sanctions for committing human rights abuses. He was a part of the death committee which executed the political prisoners. While giving a lecture at a university in 2018, Raisi spoke up about it. He noted that he was “not the head of the court” in 1988 and therefore not responsible for the sentences.² US and European states have been vocal against him and have accused him multiple times for various humanitarian crimes. He has been criticised for his role in killing thousands of political prisoners. Of the more than 59 million eligible voters only 17.9 million voted for Raisi, which is an absolute minority, a 48 percent turnout compared with around 70 percent in past presidential elections.³ Not only the majority stayed home on election day—around 3.5 million of those who casted their votes were void ballots.⁴ Iranian election’s turnout clearly depict that Iranian voters rejected the elections.

The picture being depicted internationally is that Iranians have had enough of the draconian laws over them and know that their votes won’t control who gains the office and that is why Iranians did not participate in the elections. This may be a political reason but focusing merely on this is just being narrow. It has a lot more to it than just a political reason.

The most significant reason for low turnout was the disqualification of two most prominent and popular candidates. They were the ones who were a significant challenge to Raisi and they were disqualified – former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former

Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani.⁵ Personalities that could have given tough time to Ebrahim Raisi were removed one way or another. This created some serious doubts about the legitimacy of the elections and obviously the people who supported them or were to vote for them avoided further participation in the elections.

Another reason was that the Supreme leader of Iran Ali Khamenei had shown some preference to a presidential candidate or to the most powerful candidate of the four, Ebrahim Raisi. International media especially, prior to the elections highlighted the situation. Ebrahim Raisi, Khamenei's preferred candidate for the presidency of the ruling religious fascism, is the henchman of the 1988 massacre, murderer of the Mujahedin-e-Khalq, and one of the worst criminals against humanity.⁶ Some people are even predicting that Ebrahim would most probably become the supreme leader of Iran in the future. Ali Khamenei had also served as two-time president of Iran the only difference is that he did not lose any presidential election unlike Ebrahim Raisi. The supreme leader's support to Raisi while totally disregarding concerns and opinions of the masses didn't sit well and approximately half of the population chose not to participate in it.

Additionally, economic conditions of Iran served as a significant underlying reason behind low voter turnout. Iran is going through a lot especially when it comes to economy, which is trembling. Towards the end of the 2010s, the regime's economists acknowledged that it had lost a decade, many opportunities vanished, and many economic threats happened. In Iran, under the mullahs' regime, "the lost decade" means over 50% inflation rate, 3.5 quadrillion tomans of liquidity, high unemployment rate, and zero economic growth.⁷ Iran's problem today are the sanctions it faces. It has negatively affected it. Iran is isolated in the world. The reinstatement of US sanctions in 2018 - particularly those imposed on the energy, shipping and financial sectors in November 2018 - caused foreign investment to dry up and hit oil exports. The sanctions bar US companies from trading with Iran, but also with foreign firms or countries that are dealing with Iran.⁸ Previous governments are to blame in this scenario as their policies and strategies were not according to the dynamics of Iran. Iran if wants its economy to flourish has to do something about it.

Iranian budget was allocations over the years played an important role for low turnout. Iranian government had continued to decrease its spending on healthcare, education and development while increasing the budget for military. In an economic situation where many people are living below the poverty line and most of the population is facing worst financial crises these measures only make the matters worse. Even though increasing military budget is also essential for Iran due to its relations with other countries in order to fight internal and external threats but that this is having a negative influence as the common man has to pay for it.

Another noteworthy driver behind low voter turnout is the outbreak of global pandemic, i.e., COVID-19. Iran was one of the most badly affected by pandemic. Its healthcare system collapsed. Deaths were uncontrolled and many died due to lack of basic medical equipment and medicines. Due to sudden rise and spread of pandemic Iran had to utilize capital fixed for other sectors which caused further problems. The presidential election is expected to witness a low turnout due to public disillusionment and the widespread disqualification of reformist and moderate candidates, as well as the pandemic.⁹ COVID-19 pandemic was used as an excuse by Iranian authorities to hide other significant factors which contributed to low voter's turnout. Imam Khamenei in his speech said, "They (west) really hoped that the people's participation would be about 20-25%."¹⁰ Despite the coronavirus – according to experts' calculations, at least 10 % of those who did not participate did not do so because of the coronavirus.¹¹ Taking this into consideration, then the overall participation rates will be about 60 %, which is a good participation rate.¹² This was not the first time. In 2020 parliamentary elections same storyline was narrated.

Low turnout in presidential elections in Iran highlights that the people are not really interested in political system anymore mainly due to the idea that their opinion and vote does not matter as much as it should. This was not unexpected and the Iranian Supreme leader as well as the Guardian Council was aware of it due to the fact that the Supreme Leader not only encouraged the participation of people but also declared it *Haram* to put blank or void votes. A country that is under such influence of the Supreme leader still did not really show up depicts that maybe things are changing in Iran. This is not a good omen for Iranian political system or the clergy. The economic conditions of Iran are really important in this instance as the people are increasingly following below the poverty line and really struggling to let the ends meet. COVID-19 really exposed the condition of healthcare system in Iran. The increased military spending further added fuel to the fire as other ministries and departments are being obviously neglected. The sanctions further worsen the situation. The new president of Iran, Ebrahim Raisi has a lot of problems waiting for him in line. His tenure would play a significant role for the future of Iran.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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