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Report on the 2024 Iranian Presidential Elections

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Newly Elected President

Masoud Pezeshkian has been elected as the new president of Iran. Known for his reformist stance, Pezeshkian previously served as a health minister and has been a long-serving member of parliament. Born in 1954 in the city of Mahabad, in the north-western province of West Azerbaijan, Pezeshkian is of mixed Azeri-Kurdish heritage and grew up speaking both languages. This linguistic and ethnic background has given him broad appeal among Iran's ethnic minority groups, which constitute more than a third of the country's population of 89 million.

Pezeshkian studied medicine before the 1979 Islamic revolution and, as a young doctor, organized medical assistance for wounded soldiers during the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s. He later specialized in cardiac surgery after the conflict. In 1994, he faced a personal tragedy when his wife and son were killed in a car crash. Choosing not to remarry, he raised his daughter and two remaining sons on his own.

Pezeshkian rose through the political ranks in the early 2000s, serving as health minister during the second term of reformist President Mohammad Khatami's government from 2001 to 2005. He has represented the north-western city of Tabriz in parliament since 2008 and served as a deputy speaker from 2016 to 2020. Following the crackdown on unrest after the disputed 2009 presidential election, Pezeshkian drew attention for his criticism of the government's treatment of protesters, which sparked backlash from Iran's hard-line politicians. His most loyal supporters were shocked that he had made it past the Guardian Council when Mr Pezeshkian's name was confirmed on the ballot four weeks ago.

Debate on Policy Shift

The core debate surrounding Pezeshkian's election is whether his presidency will lead to a genuine shift in Iran's policies or if the expectations of reform and moderation are misleading, given the significant influence of the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, over Iranian politics.

Context of the Elections

The elections in Iran were criticized for not being free or fair, leading to a significant number of Iranians choosing not to participate. The US State Department spokesperson stated, "We have no expectation these elections will lead to fundamental change in Iran's direction or more respect for the human rights of its citizens" (Iran International, 2024c). Additionally, several Iranian opposition figures have urged Western powers not to engage with the new government, with Iran's exiled Prince Reza Pahlavi referring to the election as a "fraudulent" attempt to legitimize the regime's dictatorship (Iran International, 2024b).

Potential for Policy Shift

Pezeshkian's election is seen by some as a potential catalyst for moderation in Iran's foreign and domestic policies. His administration is expected to prioritize diplomatic efforts to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which could lead to the easing of economic sanctions and improved relations with Western countries (Iran International, 2024a; IRIS, 2024). However, Pezeshkian's post-election speech thanked Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, acknowledging that his victory was facilitated by Khamenei's support, indicating a close alignment with the Supreme Leader's policies (IranWire, 2024).

Despite predictions from several Western news outlets that Iran's new president, Masoud Pezeshkian, would "soften" the Islamic Republic's "absolutist foreign policy," one of his initial actions in office was to reaffirm Tehran's full support for its Lebanese proxy, Hezbollah. In a message to Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah on July 7, Pezeshkian emphasized that Iran "has always supported the resistance of the people in the region against the illegitimate Zionist regime," asserting that this position is "rooted in the fundamental policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the ideals of the late Imam Khomeini, and the guidance of the Supreme Leader" (BBC, 2024). He expressed confidence that Hezbollah and Iran's other regional proxies "will not allow [Israel] to continue its warmongering and criminal policies against the oppressed people of Palestine and other nations in the region," and he called for a "divine victory for the heroic resistance fighters." During the final round of the presidential election on July 5, Pezeshkian, who is associated with the regime's so-called "reformist" faction linked to former President Hassan Rouhani, emphasized that any rapprochement with Western nations would not extend to Israel.

Influence of the Supreme Leader

Ayatollah Khamenei's ultimate authority over key aspects of Iran's domestic and foreign policies remains a significant factor. During his election campaign, Pezeshkian pledged to implement the policies set by Khamenei, and in one of the televised debates, he insisted that the U.S. must fulfill all its commitments for Iran to return to the JCPOA (Iran International, 2024c). This alignment suggests that Pezeshkian may be constrained by the Supreme Leader's overarching control, and any apparent shifts in policy may be superficial, with the fundamental strategic direction of Iran remaining unchanged (Iran International, 2024b; IranWire, 2024; IRIS, 2024).

Pezeshkian's background and previous political positions suggest that while he has a history of advocating for reform, his ability to enact substantial changes will be heavily dependent on the Supreme Leader's approval. This raises questions about the extent to which Pezeshkian can implement his policy agenda independently (IranWire, 2024).

Impact on Proxies and Regional Influence

Pezeshkian's administration is expected to adopt a less aggressive policy towards regional proxies. While maintaining support for allied groups in countries like Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen, the new leadership may emphasize diplomatic solutions and negotiations over military engagements. This shift could lead to decreased regional tensions and a potential realignment of Iran's strategy towards supporting proxies. However, substantial changes in this area will likely depend on the responses and policies of other regional and global actors (Iran International, 2024c).

Conclusion

Masoud Pezeshkian's election as Iran's president brings with it hopes for moderation and a shift towards more diplomatic and economically focused policies. However, the substantial influence of the Supreme Leader casts doubt on the extent of these potential changes. The core debate centers on whether Pezeshkian can navigate the political landscape dominated by the Supreme Leader to implement meaningful reforms or if his presidency will be marked by continuity rather than change.

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