

How a stage-managed presidential race deprives Iranians of a chance for change

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LONDON: More than three decades ago, Ebrahim Raisi made a name for himself overseeing the summary execution of thousands of Iranian political prisoners – an act considered one of Tehran's first crimes against humanity.

Now, the religious hard-liner turned prosecutor is running for president of the Islamic Republic, and experts have warned that a flurry of disqualifications have effectively left the infamous jurist out in front in a one-horse race.

In what is set to be one of the country's most restricted elections ever, June 18 will see Iranians go to the polls to vote for Hassan Rouhani's replacement.

Last week the Guardian Council (GC), a body beholden to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, announced the list of state-sanctioned presidential candidates.

IRAN'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

The Guardian Council has approved just 7 candidates to run in the June 18 contest

Authorized candidates



Ebrahim Raisi
Ultraconservative
Head of Judicial
Authority



Saeed Jalili
Ultraconservative
Former nuclear
negotiator



Mohsen Mehralizadeh
Reformist
Former
vice president



Mohsen Rezaei
Ultraconservative
Secretary of the
Expediency Council



Alireza Zakani
Ultraconservative
Lawmaker



Abdolnasser Hemmati
Reformist
Central bank
governor



Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi
Ultraconservative
Deputy parliamentary speaker

*Candidates approved by the Guardian Council, non-elected body which oversees elections

Main candidates rejected



Mahmoud Ahmadinejad
Populist
Former president



Eshaq Jahanguiri
Reformist
Vice-president



Ali Larijani
Moderate conservative
Former parliamentary speaker

Source: Iran Ministry of Interior

ARAB NEWS

Of the nearly 600 candidates that applied to run in the election, a huge proportion of them – some 585 people – were disallowed by the GC, including such well-known political figures as former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Ali Larijani, a former parliamentary speaker and Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander.

Only seven candidates now remain: Secretary of the Expediency Council Mohsen Rezaei; former nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili; deputy parliamentary speaker Amir Hossein Ghazizadeh Hashemi; former vice president Mohsen Mehralizadeh; central bank governor Abdolnasser Hemmati; lawmaker Alireza Zakani; and

Raisi, the Islamic Republic's chief justice.

Mirko Giordani, founder of strategic advisory group Prelia, says the unexpected disqualification of Ali Larijani – previously seen as the only viable alternative to Raisi – has reduced the presidential election to a “one-horse race” in Raisi's favor.

“Larijani was in the conservative camp, but he's turned more moderate in recent times. He was poised to be the only possible contestant to Raisi – and, even then, the latter was supposed to win,” Giordani told Arab News.

The lineup is now so uncompetitive that incumbent Rouhani and even Raisi himself have both appealed for a wider variety of candidates.



Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on May 27, 2021 addressing parliament members via video connection during an online meeting in the Iranian capital Tehran, who urged Iranians to ignore calls to boycott next month's presidential election, after several hopefuls were barred from running against ultraconservative candidates. (AFP)

“Usually, Iranian elections are characterized by their strong turnout – around 70 percent – but current numbers are expected to be around 50 percent. That's going to be a huge blow in terms of legitimacy,” Giordani said. “Even if Raisi does clinch the election, there's going to be a lot of questions asked.”

During his time as an Islamic Republic insider, presidential favorite Raisi has overseen a catalogue of human rights abuses that have shocked Iranians, rights groups and the international community.

Among those he has condemned to death is champion wrestler Navid Afkari for his alleged role in anti-government protests. His killing in late 2020 sparked global outrage and protests from world sporting bodies – including the Olympics.

Perhaps his most heinous crime was his direct involvement in the “death commission” that ordered the execution of thousands of political prisoners in 1988. Dubbed a crime against humanity by Amnesty International, Raisi, then a deputy prosecutor for Tehran, oversaw the sham trials that condemned thousands to death.



Supporters of Iran's former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad gather outside the Interior Ministry headquarters in the capital Tehran on May 12, 2021. In what is set to be one of the country's most restricted elections ever, June 18 will see Iranians go to the polls to vote for Hassan Rouhani's replacement.
(AFP/File Photo)

“Groups of prisoners were rounded up, blindfolded and brought before committees involving judicial, prosecution, intelligence and prison officials,” Amnesty International reported. “These ‘death commissions’ bore no resemblance to a court and their proceedings were summary and arbitrary in the extreme.

“Prisoners were asked questions such as whether they were prepared to repent for their political opinions, publicly denounce their political groups and declare loyalty to the Islamic Republic. Some were asked cruel questions such as whether they were willing to walk through an active minefield to assist the army or participate in firing squads.

"They were never told that their answers could condemn them to death."

The exact number of people Raisi put to death is unknown, but estimates range from 1 to 3,000 in the summer of 1988 alone. Other perceived dissidents faced torture and harassment.

"Many of those allegedly involved in the 1988 killings still hold positions of power," Amnesty said, with Raisi arguably being the most prominent. Now, with the assistance of the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, he is on the path to the presidency.

"The regime is basically picking who is going to be the next president by disqualifying so many of the candidates who stood for election," Meir Javedanfar, Iran lecturer at IDC Herzliya and a former BBC Persian reporter, told Arab News. "The chances of an upset, or anyone else winning, are low."



Head of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps Hossein Salami leaves after delivering a speech during a march to condemn the ongoing Israeli air strikes on the Gaza Strip, in the capital Tehran's Palestine square, on May 19, 2021. (AFP)

For Javedanfar, Raisi is the regime's continuity candidate.

"A Raisi presidency will mean continuation of Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign policy, which means acrimonious relations with America; continued support for Iranian presence in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Yemen; continuing the resistance economy.

"I also think that we're going to see a crackdown on existing liberties, for example on social media. I'm even worried that a Raisi government could

implement a national intranet.”

An intranet would allow Tehran to tightly control the flow of online information in and out of Iran by effectively cordoning off the Iranian cybersphere.

“The Islamic Republic is concerned about the dissemination of Western ideas among Iranians, especially feminism. Raisi would be the person to do this,” Javedanfer said.

Giordani says a Raisi presidency is likely to focus heavily on rooting out corruption, a trait that he says was a hallmark of the conservative’s tenure in the country’s controversial judiciary.



People, mask-clad due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic, walk beneath a billboard depicting the Islamic Republic founder Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (R) and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei (L) at Enghelab Square in the centre of Iran’s capital Tehran on May 16, 2021. (AFP)

Ali Alfoneh, a senior fellow at the Washington-based Arab Gulf States Institute, believes the focus on corruption has always been highly selective – and political.

“Raisi dedicated his tenure as chief justice of Iran to engaging in a selective fight against corruption,” Alfoneh told Arab News. “Selective because Raisi, for the most part, targeted his political opponents and their close relatives.”

Alfoneh also believes, despite the media attention that the conservative-

leaning list of presidential candidates has invited, the “hard-line” and “reformist” distinction is a misnomer that does not accurately depict Iran’s murky politics.

“The hard-line-softline dichotomy in Iranian politics is totally false,” said Alfoneh. “Due to the lack of formal political parties with written party programs, the ruling elites of the Islamic Republic organize in fluid networks around leader figures to secure personal gains.”



This handout picture provided by the office of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on May 27, 2021 shows members of Iran’s parliament saluting him via video connection during an online meeting in the Iranian capital Tehran. (AFP)

Therefore, “personal gains, rather than ideology” are “the organizing principle of Iranian politics.”

Alfoneh shares Giordani’s view about the June 18 election’s distinct lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the Iranian public.

“The ruling elites of the Islamic Republic are subjected to a permanent purge, and over the years, the regime has become less representative of Iran’s population,” he said.

“This has already caused problems for a regime, which, for all its authoritarianism, is sensitive to public opinion.”

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Sat, 2021-05-29 16:20

CAIRO: The Suez Canal Authority has quickly dealt with a sudden failure in the engines of container ship the Maersk Emerald – one of the ships crossing the canal – during its transit within the northern channel.

The Maersk Emerald container ship, flying the Singapore flag, is 353 meters long and 48 meters wide. It has a draft of 15.50 meters and weighs 146,000 tons.

The ship ran aground after a sudden failure in its engines and steering devices.

Osama Rabie, chairman of the authority, said that teams were swiftly dispatched to carry out rescue and flotation work using four locomotives, led by the locomotive Baraka 1 with a force of 160 tons.

The ship resumed its passage through the canal after the malfunction was addressed.

"It is now in the waiting area in the Great Lakes so its technical condition may be checked," Rabie said.

Navigation movement in the canal was not affected, as the route of the northern channel was diverted to pass through the eastern channel to cross the New Suez Canal, said the chairman.

These measures prove the importance of the New Suez Canal in improving navigation safety and the ability to face emergencies, he added.

Rabie sent a message of reassurance regarding the regularity of navigation in the canal. He emphasized that the authority possesses the rescue expertise, infrastructure, and technical insurance capabilities necessary to deal with emergency issues, especially after the launch of the New Suez Canal project and the development projects for the establishment of garages on the new waterway.

The Suez Canal enjoys a unique strategic position in the maritime community.

It is the most important navigational facility to serve the global trade movement, as evidenced by the global interest in the grounding of giant container ship Ever Given, which the authority also managed successfully.

Rabie said that the Suez Canal Authority intends to complete the ambitious development project to maintain the leading position of the canal.

He stressed that the New Suez Canal is one of the most important pillars of the project to develop the Suez Canal area and transform its surroundings into a global economic zone that enjoys all the elements of an attractive investment hub.



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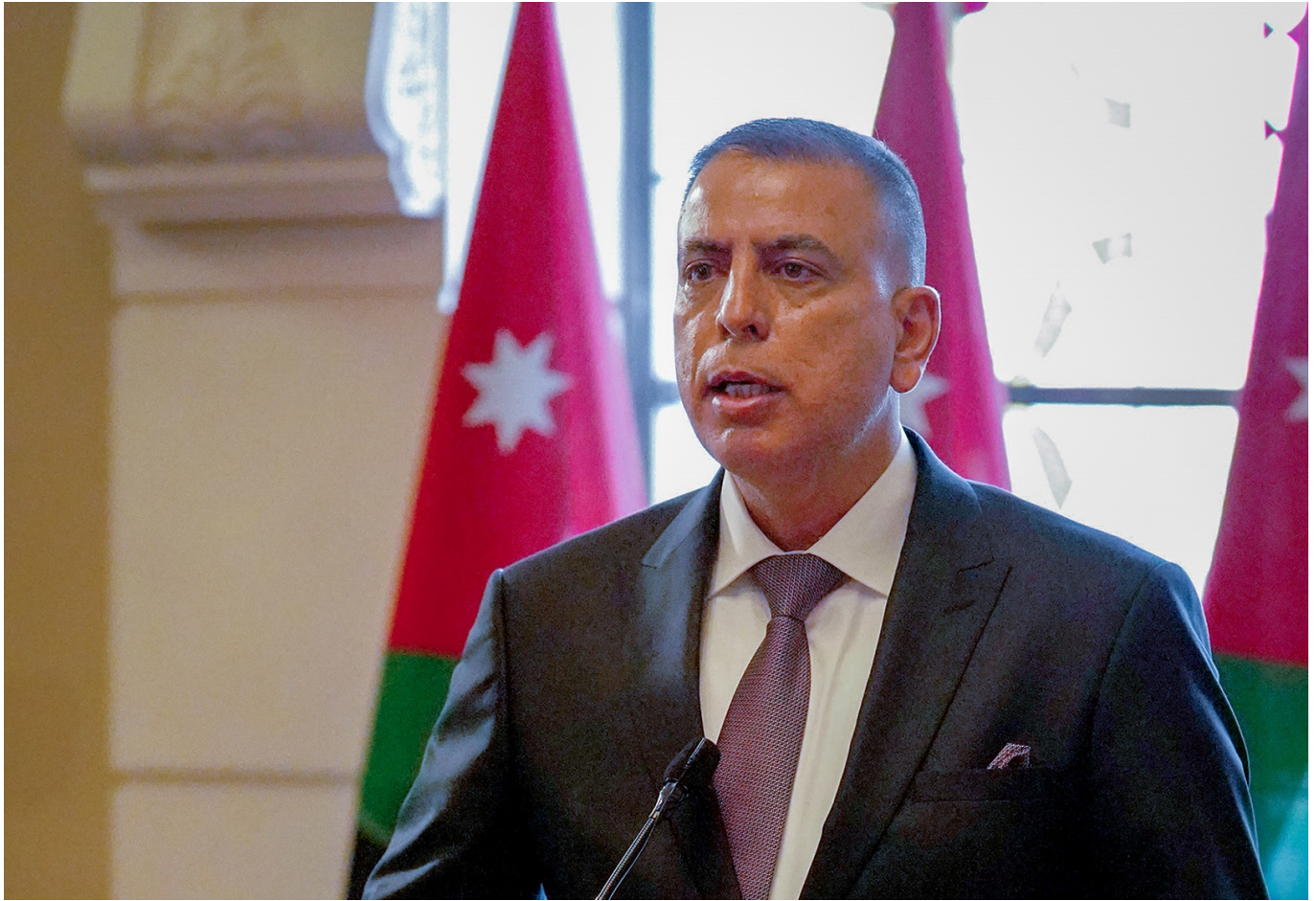
Sat, 2021-05-29 15:43

DUBAI: Jordan's minister of interior warned against unauthorized gatherings and demonstrations which threaten the national cohesion, state news agency Petra reported.

"[In] recent days we have witnessed practices and gatherings that undermine

the cohesion of the Jordanian national fabric, peace, community and security,” Mazen Al-Faraya said.

The minister said security forces will reinforce the rule of law.



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By NOHA ELHENNAWY | AP

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CAIRO: Securing Libya's southern borders is a priority for the country's

transitional government as it aims to stem the flow of illegal migrants setting off from its shores, Libya's interim foreign minister said Friday. Najla Al-Manqoush made the statements in a press conference following meetings with Foreign Minister of Italy Luigi Di Maio, his Maltese counterpart Evarist Bartolo and European Commissioner for Neighborhood and Enlargement Oliver Varhelyi who visited the country Friday, along with Libya's Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.

"The whole problem starts in the south," Al-Manqoush said, adding that Libya would need additional resources from the EU to tackle this problem.

Since the election of Libya's new interim government in February, a series of senior European and American diplomats have visited the North African country, placing their faith in the new Libyan administration that is expected to lead the nation through general elections in December 2021.

Many European leaders are also hoping that the new government could prove more effective than its predecessors in cutting off the smuggling routes that migrants have used to first enter and cross Libya, before setting off for Europe. Italy and other European governments have faced criticism at home for their handling of the migrant issue.

"We talked about how to strengthen our partnership on fighting illegal migration and monitoring water borders by adopting short-term as well as long-term strategies," Italy's Di Maio said.

Libya has experienced years of conflict and chaos since a NATO-backed uprising toppled longtime dictator Muammar Qaddafi in 2011. The uprising divided the oil-rich country between a UN-supported government in the capital, Tripoli, and rival authorities based in the country's east. Each were backed by armed groups and foreign governments. But an October cease-fire has stopped most of the violence, and stipulated that all foreign mercenaries should leave.

For almost a decade, war-torn Libya has been the dominant transit point for migrants fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East and aspiring to settle in Europe. Smugglers often pack desperate families into ill-equipped rubber boats that stall and founder along the perilous central Mediterranean route.

In recent years, the EU has partnered with Libya's coast guard and other local groups to stem such dangerous sea crossings. Rights groups, however, say those policies leave migrants at the mercy of either the sea or Libya's armed groups, with many ending up confined in squalid detention centers rife with abuses.

According to the International Organization for Migration's Missing Migrants project, at least 612 people are known to have died or gone missing in the Mediterranean so far this year. That's significantly higher than during the same time period last year, when 278 died or disappeared. Attempts to cross the sea often increase in the warmer summer months.



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[UN report supports claims by Turkish mafia boss over drug scheme](#)

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Fri, 2021-05-28 18:07

JEDDAH: A UN report appears to confirm allegations made by an exiled Turkish mafia boss about government involvement in an international cocaine trafficking scheme.

According to Sedat Peker, who lives in Dubai, the son of Turkey's former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim frequently traveled to Caracas in January and

February to design a new trade route for drugs after nearly five tons of cocaine were seized last year by Colombia.

The UN report, which was released in February, said that drug dealing around the world took on new methods by using personal protective equipment as a cover to facilitate trafficking.

Yildirim denied Peker's claims and said that his son, Erkan, traveled to personally deliver COVID-19 tests and protective equipment to those in need. "It is an insult to link us with drugs," Yildirim, who is now the deputy leader of the ruling Justice and Development Party, told reporters in Istanbul on May 23.

But there has been skepticism about his remarks as Venezuela had a low number of COVID-19 cases at the time of his son's visit.

Journalist Cuneyt Ozdemir also revealed an official tweet from the Turkish embassy in Caracas from Dec. 7, 2020 that showed the son posing with the delegation that went to Venezuela as part of an official visit.

Prof. Sevil Atasoy, a Turkish member of the UN International Narcotics Control Board, said the February report showed how the pandemic had changed the illegal drug trade.

"They began using the mail or postal services, even protective masks, gloves and disinfectants to give the impression that they were trading medical equipment rather than drugs," she said.

The report said the largest quantities of opiates were seized in Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Turkey.

"The Balkan route, which passed through Iran, Turkey and the Balkan countries on the way to destination markets in western and central Europe, remained the main route for the trafficking of opiates originating in Afghanistan," it added.

Turkey's opposition parties have put the government on the spot for its account on trade relations with Venezuela since last year, suggesting that these ties might serve as a cover for facilitating drug dealing.

The breakaway DEVA party, founded by Turkey's former economy tsar and President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's former confidant Ali Babacan, recently asked the government about the reason for lifting the tariff imposed on cheese from Venezuela, following Peker's claims that Turkey was part of a significant cocaine trafficking scheme from the South American country.

Last August Turkey allowed, through a presidential decree, the import of food products, including all kinds of cheese, from Venezuela with a zero customs tariff.

The decision followed the visit of the country's foreign minister to Venezuela a week before, while the decree was criticized by Turkish agriculture sector representatives at the time who said it would damage the industry.

The main opposition Republican People's Party also asked the Turkish trade minister which politicians and their relatives were involved in cheese imports from Venezuela.

Peker is an ally-turned-foe of the government and an infamous organized crime boss who fled the country ahead of a criminal investigation into him.

He has been releasing bombshell videos on YouTube for the past few weeks that have shaken domestic politics and leveled serious accusations against current and former politicians and bureaucrats associated with the government.



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