

## Iran on the threshold of Pezeshkian's presidency

ARVAK Center comment, 28.07.2024<sup>1</sup>

05.07.2024 according to the results of the second round of the extraordinary elections, the “*reformist*” Masoud Pezeshkian became the new president of the Islamic Republic of Iran. His candidacy was supported by 53,7% of the voters who participated in the second round. According to the Iranian constitution, Pezeshkian must be approved for the new post by the *Supreme Ayatollah* (or Rahbar – the supreme leader of IRI) 30 days after the first round of elections.

Pezeshkian's “*conservative*” rival, Saeed Jalili, did not contest the vote count and accepted his opponent's victory. However, there was still some tension in Iran's domestic political arena over the election process and, consequently, the outcome. In particular, Rahbar expressed dissatisfaction with the record-low voter turnout in the first round and ordered a government investigation into the matter. The fact is that Iranian dissident circles, including the Shah's Pahlavi family, representatives of the *Alliance for Democracy and Freedom of Iran*, and other opposition activists, qualified the low voter turnout as a victory of the free-thinking masses over the “*regime*”. Rahbar strongly disagreed with this assessment, but the investigation he initiated shows that there is a certain amount of anxiety in the country's top political circles. At the same time, both during and after the elections, there has been an ongoing controversy in the country over the attempts of conservative forces to use administrative levers to create unequal conditions of struggle for the reformists led by Pezeshkian. In particular, former Minister of Culture and Islamic Guidance Ayatollah Mohajerani openly accused interim President Mohammad Mokhber of contributing to Sayyid Jalili's election campaign instead of fulfilling his direct duties and maintaining neutrality.

Nevertheless, there was no doubt in the country that Ali Khamenei would confirm Pezeshkian as president, thus demonstrating to the international community and the Iranian public the Islamic Republic's commitment to the principles of democracy and freedom of choice. As early as July 22, 2024, *Fars News Agency* was the first to announce that Pezeshkian's confirmation ceremony would take place on the 7 *Mordad*, 1403, which corresponds to July 28, 2024, according to the Gregorian calendar. The inauguration was to be held two days later.

In general, the process of the last Iranian elections was perceived by international observers and political circles in the context of Iran's traditional political struggle between conservatives and reformists over the past quarter century. Ostensibly, it was primarily the preferences of Iranian citizens in favor of these two political forces that determined the election results. However, the circumstances that influenced the course of the elections should be sought on a slightly different level. We are talking about the ethnic factor, or to be more precise, the origin of one of the candidates – Masoud Pezeshkian. Pezeshkian, who won the last election, considers himself a full-blooded Mekhabadi Turk (there is information that, even though, his mother is of Kurdish descent), tries to speak only in his native Turkic

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 26.07.2024.

dialect among his relatives, and emphasizes the importance of his ethnicity. In general, figures with Turkic roots are a widespread phenomenon in Iranian politics, law enforcement structures, the military and the clergy. According to some reports, the country's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself is a Khorasani Turk. However, in the state structure of post-revolutionary Iran, ethnicity has never been considered a prevailing feature or a factor influencing the political and ideological content of the theocratic system. Masoud Pezeshkian was almost the first prominent Iranian politician of Turkic–Azerbaijani origin to openly demonstrate reverence for his national roots, which ultimately could not but be reflected in the results of the recent elections.

Even if we consider Pezeshkian's efforts not to emphasize his ethnic origin in the electoral struggle (he positions himself as a convinced Iranocentrist, committed to the preservation of the existing state system with the condition of liberalization and partial softening of the existing order in the country), his electorate has significantly expanded largely due to the previous experience of popularizing his national roots. Moreover, it should be emphasized that this circumstance has had its impact not only on the sentiments of Iran's Turkic-speaking voters, but also on other national minorities in the country. In this regard, it is quite significant that in both rounds of the elections, the residents of the province of Sistan and Baluchistan, who have no ethnic commonality with the Iranian Azerbaijanis, but are known as ardent supporters of their national identity, voted in favor of Pezeshkian by a large margin, rejecting both Iranian theocratism and the nominal titular status of the Persian (Farsi) roots in the foundations of the current Iranian statehood. All in all, the data published by the IRI's CEC, and the accompanying ethnographic maps show that Jalili was predominantly favored by the residents of central and northeastern regions of Iran, while Pezeshkian was favored by the population of the northern and southeastern provinces. Moreover, in terms of percentage, Jalili received the most votes in Qom *ostan* (south of Tehran), while Pezeshkian received an almost crushing 80-90% of the votes in Ardabil, East Azerbaijan and West Azerbaijan *ostans*, as well as, with slightly lower numbers, the provinces of Kurdistan and Kermanshah. If one compares these data with the maps of ethnic settlement of the entire territory of the IRI, it will become clear that the electoral votes in Iran were distributed almost entirely in accordance with the demographic composition of the country. Thus, the Farsi-speaking *ostans* voted for the election of Saeed Jalili as president, while the Turkic-speaking, Kurdish-speaking regions and several other areas inhabited by other national minorities favored the victory of Masoud Pezeshkian.

Given this fact, it becomes clear that the division of candidates strictly according to the principle of “*reformist-conservative*” should be considered an artificial narrative when applied to the Iranian reality. And it only acquires meaning, and a very conditional one at that, if we look at the political processes taking place in Iran through the prism of ethno-national movements and processes. This suggests that the narrative of reforms in the country and partial liberalization of the order is of overwhelming interest to the national minorities of the Islamic Republic, mainly from the point of view of possible softening of the ethno-national policies of the central authorities, enlargement of the language rights, decentralization of the country, and other similar initiatives. State-wide reforms, that the

representatives of the conventional liberal wing of the Iranian political elite are constantly talking of, are of interest to Turks, Kurds, Baluchis, Arabs and other minorities only to the extent that they can contribute to the granting of broad rights to these peoples, who consider themselves underprivileged in the process of building the current Iranian statehood.

Broadly speaking, the course and results of the Iranian elections show that the struggle was not so much between ideological respectives offering (???) different models of foreign policy behavior, economic structure, and social and legal relations in the state, but between segments of the electorate divided along the ethnic lines. In this respect, a rather unique situation emerged in which candidates competed on the level of ideological views about the future of an indivisible Iran, while the public's preferences were determined solely by the ethnic origin of their opponents. In this light, Pezeshkian celebrated his victory not because he presented the electorate with a convincing program for the modernization of the country, but because the electorate itself provided him with the necessary votes from below, based on the factor of his ethnicity. It should be noted that Tehran was the only part of the country where Pezeshkian won convincingly despite the predominance of the Farsi-speaking population (which determined the result of the elections throughout the country). And this is explained by the fact that only in the Iranian capital the struggle of the candidates among the Iranian progressive youth concentrated here was perceived in accordance with the formula "*reforms against conservatism*", regardless of the ethnic origin of the opponents – Iranian Azeri Pezeshkian and Mashkhad-born Persian Jalili.

Nevertheless, the outcome of the election was unexpected for the Iranian elite. Moreover, as far as the Iranian press is concerned, Pezeshkian's convincing victory came as a surprise even to him. The Iranian electorate voted according to its own logic, which was in fact minimally influenced by the political technologies of the opposing parties.

Perhaps this is why Iranian pro-government media hastily began to publish materials about Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's alleged sympathy for Masoud Pezeshkian and the latter's reverence for Rahbar. Information is actively circulated in Iran that despite his affiliation with the reformist wing, Pezeshkian has never been considered a radical supporter of secular ideology, that as a committed Shiite Muslim he is a member of the country's top clergy, and that his service in the IRGC during the Iran-Iraq war played an important role in his biography.

The attempt to portray Masoud Pezeshkian as a political figure with strong ties to the highest echelons of Iran's theocratic system is obviously conditioned by the need, on the one hand, to deprive his electorate of excessive expectations of radical changes and, on the other hand, to moderate the reformist mood of the newly elected president himself. According to Yuri Lyamin, an expert on Iran at the *Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies (CAST)*, the reformer Pezeshkian will be limited in terms of independence, and all of his reform initiatives in both foreign and domestic policy will face a tough test in front of three conservative-controlled bodies – the country's parliament, the Council of Constitutional Elders, and, finally, Rahbar himself, who has the right to stop any presidential initiative. Pezeshkian will have to negotiate with all these forces. And he is unlikely to oppose this

situation, since he has already passed the “filter” of the conservative-controlled Guardian Council, which allowed him to participate in the presidential elections.

Experts at the *Soufan Center*, an American think tank, also agree that Pezeshkian will be deprived of much autonomy. In their opinion, Pezeshkian’s election came as a real surprise to the conservatives led by Supreme Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the IRGC. The fact is that the Guardian Council, fearing the victory of the reformists, deprived Eshaq Jahangiri, the most popular representative of this wing in Iran, of the right to participate in the electoral race. It was decided to allow Masoud Pezeshkian, who was not well known or respected in society, to participate in the presidential race instead. However, the little-known Pezeshkian quickly began to collect votes. On the other hand, the conservatives feild by nominating five candidates in the first round, thus atomizing their electorate. And the second round, for various reasons, did not help Jalili, who remained in the race, to collect all the votes of the conservative electorate in his favor.

Apparently, the main miscalculation of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and the radical party behind him was the unwillingness to allow Eshaq Jahangiri to participate in the elections as a representative of the reformists. Had he been allowed to run, a significant portion of the ethnic Turkish, Kurdish, and Baluchi vote would not have gone to the reformists. The minority electorate, which voted based on nationality, would not have been as active for the ethnic Persian Jahangiri. Therefore, there was a known vote ratio that many outside observers interpreted as a victory of the reformists over the conservatives. In fact, as shown above, this result was largely due to the national factor.

At the same time, considering the very flexible system of governance in Iran, which has so far made it possible to maintain relative stability in the multiethnic country, it cannot be ruled out that the authorities themselves deliberately made a political combination to nominate a person who openly speaks about his national roots to the second position in the state system. Perhaps the reason for this was the desire to defuse the atmosphere of protest among the country’s national minorities and thus prevent the processes from escalating into an uncontrollable stage of unrest based on national separatism. In this case, the attempts of well-known external forces to use the "*Azerbaijani factor*" to divide the country, where the first and second leaders are ethnic Turks, will lose their effectiveness noticeably. Moreover, in this way it is possible to change the algorithm of the emerging confrontation in the Iranian society, replacing the agenda of ethnic contradictions with a purely political rivalry between moderate reformists and conservatives, which is a much more favorable form of maintaining the balance of power in the country for the Iranian centrist theocratic regime.

Anyhow, Masoud Pezeshkian will have to play by the rules set by the conservative party in power in the country, which oversees the main spheres of the country’s life and the entire foreign policy case. This is even more doubtful since the candidate who won the election has already outlined the contours of his future steps in a series of statements that are fully in line with the views of Rahbar, the IRGC and the entire conservative regime. Thus, Pezeshkian rebuked Europe for rejecting dialogue with Tehran under US pressure (denunciation of the Nuclear Deal) and for having contributed to the hardening of its position, from which it no longer intends to retreat. In another statement, Pezeshkian emphasized that Iran is ready to

be friends with any country in the world except “*Zionist Israel*”. He described Russia and China as friends of Iran with whom his country is ready to deepen its strategic partnership. He considered Iran itself as an indivisible power whose authority and greatness should be recognized by all international actors and neighbors.

From all these statements it can be concluded that the new president will work in accordance with the tasks set by Khamenei and his entourage, trying to preserve the line followed by his tragically deceased predecessor, Ibrahim Raisi. According to the experts of the *Russian Council on Foreign Relations*, Pezeshkian may be given a limited opportunity to make “cosmetic repairs” to the country’s internal system of governance (liberalization of the *hijab* rule, revision of the functions of the “morality police”, introduction of education in the languages of ethnic minorities, etc.), but no one will ever allow him “breaking the basic accepted norms of life in this country over a knee”. In foreign policy, he will have absolutely no autonomy, and if he tries to establish relations with the West, it means that this will be the will of Khamenei and his radical-conservative party. At this stage, however, it is expected that Pezeshkian will pursue an agenda of pressure on Israel, seek a respectful Western attitude toward Iran and its interests, continue to prepare a strategic rapprochement treaty with Russia, and facilitate the process of deepening multilevel cooperation with China and India.

In this light, the discussions about the “factor of Pezeshkian’s ethnicity” that intensified during the election process are practically meaningless. Pezeshkian roots, which were enthusiastically discussed in the Turkish, Azerbaijani and partly in Iranian Turkic press, do not play a role in the adjustment of future Iran–Turkey and Iran–Azerbaijan relations. On 17.07.2024, in an interview to domestic journalists, President R. Erdogan mentioned Pezeshkian’s ethnicity, but at the same time he made it clear that the Iranian president is attentive to all nationalities and represents the interests of all peoples of his country. Erdogan could not afford any other interpretation, because he knows the limits of what Tehran will allow. The Azerbaijani leader I. Aliyev, as far as can be judged from open sources, did not mention Pezeshkian’s roots at all. In fact, this is a *taboo* subject in the context of complex political relations between Tehran and Baku, and Aliyev is hardly ready to manipulate this fact. In general, Azerbaijani experts say that at this stage Pezeshkian’s ethnicity can, perhaps, be considered an additional condition for establishing a trustworthy dialogue with Aliyev, but no more than that. Azerbaijani experts point out that Supreme Ayatollah Ali Khamenei himself is an ethnic Turk, but nevertheless he is very cautious and even suspicious of Azerbaijan. Baku recognizes that Tehran is interested in special relations with Yerevan, and Pezeshkian will not change the course of Iran’s smooth relations with Armenia. Baku takes note of the fact that few years ago Pezeshkian, then a member of parliament, declared that “*Karabakh belongs to Azerbaijan*”, while now he says that the territorial integrity of Armenia will be a priority issue for his administration. Pezeshkian said this personally on 06.06.2024 during a telephone conversation with N. Pashinyan after receiving his congratulations on his election.

Thus, Masoud Pezeshkian’s ethnicity, which became a determining factor in the presidential election, has no implications for Iran’s foreign policy, while at home it will play a

role only within the framework defined by the country's conservative theocratic regime. Certainly, Pezeshkian will be given some space to implement some of the reforms he conceived and proclaimed during the election campaign to significantly defuse the atmosphere of dissatisfaction with the government on the part of both national minorities and public circles seeking liberalization of the state system. However, he will not be permitted to fundamentally change the system. Pezeshkian himself will not seek it, because in that case he will have to confront this very system, which is deeply rooted not only in religious traditionalism, but also in Persian nationalism and the millennia old civilizational foundation of Iran.

Significant changes in the Iranian system can only be expected from the figure who embodies it. This figure is Rahbar, the supreme spiritual and political leader of the country. In Iran, as well as in the world, it is well perceived that the future of the country now depends not on the president who has already been elected for the first term, but on the person who is brought up by Rahbar and the Supreme Council under him for the transition of power of the Supreme Ayatollah. In this sense, the political weight and influence of the late Ibrahim Raisi was unquestionable in Iran, not because of his presidential position, but mainly because he was considered the main and strongest candidate for election as the next Supreme Ayatollah. Until a few months ago, Iranian elites and society had a vision of their country's future, at least in a 20-year perspective. The fate of the state was predictable. After Raisi's death, however, the country was plagued by uncertainty and disorientation of the conservative circles, which was reflected in the results of the presidential elections. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is in his old age (he is 85 years old), but a new consensus successor has not yet been found, and this the point that is creating the most intrigue in and around the IRI, rather than the outcome of the presidential election.