FOREIGN AND SECURITY POLICY 13.08.2021 | Rouzbeh Parsi

A grey eminence with a dark history

With new President Ebrahim Raisi and his cabinet, Iran's conservatives now hold all levers of power. This will complicate relations with the West

Speculation about the newly elected Iranian President Ebraihim Raisi's cabinet appointments have been running wild. While this is often the case with an incoming administration, the tenor and pitch is different this time.

As many view his election victory as more of a selection and a harbinger of darker times to come, few can confidently state what they think that actually entails. In short, for an apparatchik with decades long faithful service to the Islamic Republic, we know very little of Raisi's politics. And so perhaps people hope to glean some insight into the man and the course he intends to stake out by looking at his associates and soon-to-be ministers. But equally important will be what different groups believe that he owes them for their help in getting him the presidency – which piece of the political pie do they want in return?

The ministers proposed by Raisi on 11 August, who are still subject to parliamentary approval, are – as expected – from the conservative side of the aisle. That being said, it seems that Raisi has withstood the pressure from some of the more radical groupings. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, for instance, is set to become foreign minister. He has extensive experience working on Iran's relations to the Arab world within the ministry, both under former presidents Ahmadinejad and Rouhani. He will, however, probably strike a more defiant and rigid tone than his predecessor Javad Zarif.

Several of the cabinet ministers are affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards. That includes General Ahmad Vahidi who served as defence minister under Ahmadinejad and is now nominated to head the Ministry of Interior. The former head of Iran's national broadcasting company Ezatolah Zarghami (heavily criticised for the biased reporting of state TV) is set to become minister of Culture.

Raisi's conservative credentials

Raisi himself is undoubtedly well connected and belongs to the conservative field of Iranian politics. As a prosecutor in the 1980s, he was part of the committees that sentenced thousands of prisoners from the post-revolutionary power struggle to death in July and August 1988. This ties him to one of the darkest, and for that reason, defining chapters of the political elite.

Raisi is also married to the daughter of Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda, Friday Prayer imam of Mashhad and the Supreme Leader's representative in Khorasan province. In 2016 Raisi was appointed head of the powerful and wealthy Astan Qods Razavi foundation in Mashhad, which in the last decade has been transformed into a conglomerate of sorts. That appointment as well as the move to head the judiciary in 2019 were made by the Supreme Leader himself.

Raisi's complicity in the 1988 executions will also make his ability to interact directly with counterparts in the West very difficult.

In short, Raisi has an impeccable conservative credentials. But the problem is that there is no consensus of what constitutes conservative politics in Iran, nor is there any cohesion whatsoever within that political camp. While they may all agree on opposing the reformists and staying true to what they believe to be the core cultural and religious mores of the revolution, they don't agree on much else. The power plays between them is already evident in parliament (which they dominate) and the jockeying for taking over as mayor of Tehran.

Raisi's complicity in the 1988 executions will also make his ability to interact directly with counterparts in the West very difficult. This is exacerbated by the trial against another alleged participant in those events to begin in Sweden shortly. All of this makes his choice of foreign minister, his primary agent of interaction with the outside world even more consequential.

A country beset with problems

Raisi himself will have no respite despite being greeted as the comeback of the conservatives. He inherits the same basic structural problems that have confronted previous presidents: a malfunctioning economy and the difficult management of foreign relations, especially with the one country Iran officially does not have relations with: the United States. The Iranian economy is beset by corruption and a draconian set of sanctions

implemented by the Trump administration.

The Biden administration has kept these sanctions as leverage as it tries to return to the JCPOA while wresting new concessions from Iran. This tactic has turned out to be a strategic error since neither party is anywhere closer to returning to full compliance (Iran) or re-entering (United States). Whatever window the last six months of Rouhani's tenure presented, the Biden administration wasted it by trying to be too clever by half. Now it will have to contend with a conservative president with no foreign policy experience, but cushioned by a conservative narrative, long on revolutionary bravado of independence and self-sufficiency, yet short on actual realistic detailed ideas of how to move forward.

It is fairly reasonable, and far too easy, to be pessimistic about the prospects and value of reaching a lasting agreement with Washington after Trump. But so far the alternative proposed has been one of simply hoping for Russia and China to step up and buffet Iran. This is a huge overestimation of Iran's relevance for these countries. While it may play well to some constituencies in Iran – and it's definitely in harmony with the Supreme Leader's default position on relations with the West –, it does not amount to a viable policy.

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When things look very bleak in Iran the cold comfort of unitary rule (conservatives holding all levers of power) and the equivalent of Nixon going to China (conservatives cannot be called American tools and can hence strike an audacious deal) is conjured up. The compromise the Supreme Leader agreed to, however, was confined to the nuclear question, which some were hoping could pave the way for more.

The future of Iran-US relations

Irrespective of whether Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would have ventured beyond the JCPOA, Trump put an end to the question. To date, there is nothing to suggest that conservative thinking in Iran has evolved much further. They never trusted the US to begin with and Trump confirmed their suspicions. A painful compromise with the US will require overcoming this mistrust internally but also the US proving itself trustworthy.

Conversely, there is nothing to indicate that the Biden administration has evolved in its thinking on how to deal with Iran, nor does it have the

political mandate to ensure even a minimum of reliability in what it signs on to. In essence, this means that even if the US was to return to the agreement, it's uncertain that the Biden administration can obtain the kind of sanctions removal required by the agreement from Congress. This is crucial because, leaving aside the ideological enmity of Iranian conservatives, there are issues concerning national interest and security that cannot be bargained away.

In any case, Raisi has to resuscitate the Iranian economy. He will therefore continue on the path of going back to the Vision 2025 document from 2005; strengthen economic ties with non-Western countries and more crucially, the neighbourhood. While this may help the Iranian economy to muddle through, prosperity will require a non-US-based economic infrastructure, something that has not developed far enough to enable the necessary economic growth.

Therefore, Raisi has to choose between the ideological compromise (some kind of agreement with the US and EU) in order to jumpstart the economy, or an economic compromise (avoiding the political pitfall of detente with the US and bank on the economy recovering enough to keep the country afloat). Considering the general level of ineptitude and lack of political vision, the latter seems more in line with the inertia and inclination of the system he serves.



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