



[Reformist Pezeshkian's Victory in the Iranian Presidential Election and Its Potential Foreign Policy Implications](#)

Iran's reformist candidate has beaten the odds to become the ninth president of the theocratic nation, and many are pensive about what this could mean. On the surface, the 69-year-old heart surgeon appears to possess a desire to move the country forward in the right direction, but by and large, most experts contend that there is little hope for any form of widespread change emanating from Tehran. The truth of it is that Iran will remain an example of extreme theocratic rule for the foreseeable future, but it is unlikely to grow even more authoritarian in nature. Pezeshkian campaigned on a platform of economic growth, which may indicate new grounds to negotiate as he seeks to reduce the sanctions placed on Iran as a result of the continued development of nuclear arms and its support of militant groups.

Despite the hope that Pezeshkian's election may bring, expectations must be adjusted for what changes are likely to happen in the nation. President Pezeshkian must still defer to Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei who has control and the final say over most aspects of the country's governance. Khamenei would likely pose heavy opposition to any more liberal-leaning change Pezeshkian or the average citizen of Iran may wish to enact. Historically, Khamenei has favored extremely conservative policies and hardline presidents who are willing to push them. However, Khamenei has had to contend with growing public discourse around his governance, and the oppressive nature of the regime. Considering Pezeshkian's predecessor's hardline views on foreign relations, the economy, and the use of the Iranian morality police, it should come as no surprise that many in the country have signaled a desire for a change of course with their vote.

Pezeshkian himself has signaled a desire for change. He has been outspoken about "ending Iran's isolation," bringing "unity and cohesion," and has made remarks about the need for "constructive relations with the West." Pezeshkian has also signaled a desire to return to the original Iran nuclear deal. Should this be the case, there will be a much higher chance that the United States and Iran can engage in constructive dialogue. These stances, combined with his criticism of the morality police, set him apart from his electoral opponent Saeed Jalili. Pulling in just over 46% of the votes cast, the ultraconservative Jalili failed to garner the voter turnout that was anticipated. Jalili, who previously held the position of Iran's top nuclear negotiator, was running on a platform that seemed to pay an ode to how the Taliban have chosen to govern Afghanistan. Bearing this in mind, it is easy to see why he failed to capture the majority vote from a citizenry who, in 2022, took to the streets in massive numbers to protest the death of Mahsa Amini – who died in police custody after being detained over allegedly improperly wearing her head covering. The protests that resulted from this came after years of deteriorating women's civil rights and a restless middle class that continues to express distaste for the regime. One of the most prevalent pieces of evidence of this unrest can be seen in the 4.2% of ballots that were left blank, voided, or cast for other candidates during the recent election.

Iranian President-Elect Pezeshkian is the first reformist to hold office since the political faction left power back in 2005. In the nearly 20 years since, Iran has seen many conservative hardliners in office who have left lasting impacts on the country's political landscape. The mix of successes and failures of ultraconservative governance has led to doubling down on nuclear arms development, sponsoring militant groups, and stiffening security forces to clamp down on civil unrest. There has also been considerable economic expansion, middle-class development, and

an increasingly large role in global affairs. Considering how the major reformist movement during 2009's presidential election ended in months of repression, mass round-ups, and eventually executions, the election of a reformist candidate may have come as a significant shock for many in the country. Pezeshkian may also present a major opportunity for the Iranian government to regain some of its legitimacy, which it has undoubtedly lost in the eyes of those who have been negatively impacted by 20 years of hard-right leadership.

If we were to judge Pezeshkian by his words alone, there would be cause for a great deal of optimism for Iran's near future, especially when one considers that Iran will likely be seeing a change in the most powerful seat in the country (the Supreme Leader) in the coming years. However, skeptics argue that Pezeshkian may very well be a reformist in words alone and that he has historically held an unwavering loyalty to Iran's Khamenei. Despite having served in Iran's last reformist leader's cabinet as Minister of Health, he has not been shy about his role in the suppression of women's rights and establishment of Iran's theocratic regime, while also supporting the cavalcade of hard-right policies that have been enacted during his time in government. For meaningful change to occur and progress to be made by Iran's new president, it will first have to pass muster from Iran's Supreme Leader, the Majles, and the Guardian Council. However, if Pezeshkian "walks like he talks," there may yet be hope for some positive change in Iran.