

# Look Right: Iranian President Raisi Appoints a Government

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**The proposed government of incoming Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi reflects a significant change in the political balance of power in the executive branch, and heralds a return to hardline control over all branches of government. The government's composition indicates Raisi's intention of taking a tougher line than the previous government in both internal affairs and foreign policy, although overall strategy in Iran is in the hands of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. While like previous administrations Raisi's proposed government comprises mainly technocrats with extensive academic education, all of the designated ministers are identified with the conservative camp, and at least some of them adhere to radical and anti-Western ideology. The government's hardline make-up, the President's loyalty to the Supreme Leader, and his good relations with the Revolutionary Guards are likely to prove useful in winning more support and cooperation from the other political power centers. It is doubtful, however, whether this will be enough to achieve progress in solving Iran's fundamental problems.**

On August 11, 2021, incoming Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi presented his government for approval by the Majles (Iranian parliament). The conservative composition of the Majles is likely to smooth the way for parliamentary approval of most of the ministers, although it cannot be ruled out that the President will have difficulty winning parliamentary approval for all of the proposed ministers. In such a case, he will have to propose other candidates for ministers whose candidacy is not approved. The government's composition reflects a clear change in the political balance of power in the executive branch, and heralds a return to hardline control of all three branches of government in Iran: the cabinet, the Majles, and the judiciary. A majority of the ministers who served in the two cabinets of outgoing President Hassan Rouhani (2013-2017 and 2017-2021) were identified with the pragmatic camp, although they did not hold strongly reformist views. In contrast, all of the ministers proposed by Raisi are identified with the conservative camp, despite predictions in the Iranian media following Raisi's election that he would include ministers from

different factions in his cabinet, and perhaps even retain a number of ministers from Rouhani's cabinet.

Ministers who served in management roles in the two cabinets of former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2009 and 2009-2013) are prominent in the proposed cabinet. These include the designated ministers for the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, the Interior, Petroleum, Transportation, and Energy. At the same time, this does not mean that Raisi's government constitutes a direct continuation of Ahmadinejad's government. In contrast to Ahmadinejad, Raisi is considered a member in good standing of the Iranian religious establishment, and is not suspected of holding ideological and religious approaches that challenge the leadership of Ali Khamenei or the status of clerics. Furthermore, even the ministers who served under Ahmadinejad are not among the hard core of his associates who took his side in the severe political crisis that occurred between Ahmadinejad and the Supreme Leader in the last two years of his presidency. Like Rouhani's government, Raisi's proposed government includes no women. It is still unknown whether he plans to appoint women to senior government posts that do not require Majles approval, as did Rouhani, who preferred to avoid conflict with the conservative religious establishment in this matter by appointing women only as vice presidents.

As first vice president (which does not require Majles approval), Raisi appointed Mohammad Mokhber, who since 2007 has served as head of the Executive Headquarters of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO), a huge economic corporation subject to the Iranian Supreme Leader. The corporation controls dozens of companies and real estate worth tens of billions of dollars. One of the subsidiaries of this corporation developed the local vaccine against COVID-19 (COVIran Barekat).

The designated Minister of Foreign Affairs is Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, international affairs adviser to the speaker of the Majles and former deputy foreign minister for Arab and African Affairs, Ambassador to Bahrain, and a member of the Iranian team for negotiations with the United States on Iraq. Abdollahian's thorough knowledge of the Middle East and his command of Arabic will help President Raisi further his regional policy, particularly in view of Raisi's statements about taking action to strengthen Iran's ties in this theater and relieve tensions between Iran and its Arab neighbors. Abdollahian is regarded as very close to the Revolutionary Guards Qods force, and supports Iran's efforts to consolidate its regional influence. Iran is therefore not expected to change its regional policy, which is affected mainly by the national interests determined by the Iranian Supreme National Security Council. At the same time, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdollahian will presumably improve cooperation between the Ministry and the Revolutionary Guards, especially in comparison with the state of affairs during Rouhani's presidency. Under Rouhani and Mohammad Javad Zarif, his Minister of Foreign Affairs, there was often tension vis-à-vis the Revolutionary Guards. The appointment of Abdollahian, who has no

significant experience on the nuclear issue, bolsters predictions that the nuclear portfolio and management of the nuclear negotiations will return to the Supreme National Security Council, which was responsible for them before Rouhani's presidency. At this stage, it is unknown whether Raisi plans to replace Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani.

Raisi appointed cleric Esmail Khatib as Minister of Intelligence. Khatib served in intelligence and security positions in the Revolutionary Guards, the Ministry of Intelligence, the Office of the Supreme Leader, and the judicial branch. The designated Minister of the Interior is Ahmad Vahidi, a former commander of the Revolutionary Guards Qods force (1988-1997) and Minister of Defense in Ahmadinejad's cabinet. Vahidi has been wanted by Interpol since 2007 for his alleged involvement in the attack on the Jewish community building in Buenos Aires in 1994, in which 85 people were murdered. His appointment is a further expression of the securitization process in the regime's policy toward the population. The designated Minister of Defense is Mohammad Reza Ashtiani, who served as Deputy Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces. Like Rouhani, Raisi preferred to appoint a minister of defense from the ranks of the regular army (Artesh), rather than from the Revolutionary Guards. The appointment is a likely indication that despite his good connections with the Revolutionary Guards, Raisi seeks to preserve some degree of balance between the two main military organizations.

Like previous governments, Raisi's proposed government comprises mainly technocrats with extensive academic education. Most of the ministers have doctorates in fields relevant to their ministries' areas of responsibility, and some also have managerial experience in these fields. For example, designated Minister of Communication and IT Isa Zarepour, who has a doctorate in computer engineering, served in information and communications technology management positions in the judicial branch and in the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Designated Ministry of Roads and Transportation Rostam Ghasemi was Minister of Petroleum under Ahmadinejad and commander of Khatam-al Anbia, the huge economic corporation controlled by the Revolutionary Guards. Designated Minister of Petroleum Javad Owji was Deputy Minister of Petroleum and managing director of the Iranian National Gas Company in Ahmadinejad's cabinet. In addition to ministers with previous ministerial experience, Raisi appointed a number of ministers with no managerial experience on the national level, among them the designated ministers of Education and the Economy. The average age of the minister-designates is slightly over 50. It is clear that despite statements in the past two years by Iran's Supreme Leader about the need to form a "young and revolutionary government," given the substantial challenges facing Iran and in order to compensate to some extent for his own lack of ministerial experience, Raisi has preferred to appoint ministers with

previous knowledge and experience; most of his own previous positions were in the judiciary.

Some of the technocratic ministers maintain hardline ideology, and have expressed anti-Western views similar to those of Iran's Supreme Leader and the incoming President. For example, designated Minister of Health Bahram Einollahi, an ophthalmologist, previously opposed the purchase of vaccines against COVID-19 made in the United States and Britain. Designated Minister of Cooperation, Labor, and Social Welfare Hojjatollah Abdolmaleki is an ardent supporter of the idea of a "resistance economy" – increasing self-reliance and reducing economic dependence on the West. He opposed Iranian adoption of the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) regulations banning money laundering and terror financing.

Raisi's proposed government thus reflects a prominent change in comparison with Rouhani's government, especially in the political views of its ministers. The government's composition provides an initial indication that the new President intends to adopt a tougher line in both internal affairs and foreign policy. At the same time, overall strategy in Iran, especially in foreign affairs, is in the hands of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and the Supreme National Security Council. In any case, the incoming President will presumably prefer to focus on dealing with Iran's fundamental problems, mainly the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Inter alia, he will seek to expand his public support and improve his image as a hardline cleric, given the efforts to groom him as a possible successor to Khamenei.

The new President's loyalty and close association with the Supreme Leader, his good relations with the Revolutionary Guards, and the current hardline composition of the Majles are likely to help Raisi gain more support and cooperation from the other political power centers in the country. It is highly doubtful, however, whether greater coordination and cooperation among the ruling elite will be sufficient to enable the President to achieve progress in solving the economic and social distress of the Iranian people. Failure is likely to further aggravate the public's sense of despair and frustration, and to feed additional waves of popular protest, especially given that the hardliners now control all state institutions, and therefore have no political rivals to blame, as they did under the previous presidents.

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