

14th administration: No time for trial and error



By Mehdi
Ebrahim
Staff writer

OPINION

Iran is gearing up for an early presidential election in less than ten days to choose a successor to president Ebrahim Raisi who died in a helicopter crash on May 19, with candidates locking horns on the campaign trail to make their way to high office.

The snap vote on June 28 comes as Iran is stuck at a critical juncture, grappling with a string of daunting challenges that must be tackled with utmost urgency before they spiral out of control and snowball into a Gordian knot.

First and foremost, the new president must try to mend bonds between the state and the public within the boundaries of law by winning the hearts of those who have turned their back on the government for any reason such as economic hardships or social and political concerns. The chief executive in question must also be able to forge strong relationships with other branches of power as well as political parties in order to pave the way for advancing his agenda smoothly and without hinderance. It is very important in Iran's intricate political system to bring onboard influential players and organizations to develop synergy between his government and these entities.

Draconian sanctions imposed by the United States and its Western allies have been a thorn in the nation's side for more than a decade, though they were eased temporarily after Iran and world powers clinched a nuclear deal in 2015.

The sanctions have targeted almost all economic sectors, with ramifications affecting other segments such as healthcare as they have made it hard to import much needed medicine for life-threatening diseases like cancer.

The petroleum industry, which serves as a lifeline for Iran, bore the brunt after sanctions came into force in 2018, pushing oil sales down to a rock bottom of 200,000 barrels per day. Although under Raisi's government oil exports bounced back to 1.6 million bpd, they have yet to reach the pre-sanctions levels that hovered around 2.5 million bpd.

Iran has learned how to circumvent sanctions but doing business under such circumstances is not a sustainable long-term solution. Moreover, it is not all about getting around sanctions. US-led embargoes have scared away foreign public and private investors. They have hindered the import of vital high-tech equipment and heavy machinery needed to maintain or expand the country's infrastructure.

The bans have also blocked Iran's access to the international banking system. This has caused extra costs for businesspeople to claim their money for trade as normal banking transactions are out of the question, forcing them to resort to alternative methods to collect it.

It must be the number one priority for the upcoming president to rid the nation of crippling sanctions once and for good while safeguarding Iran's interests. No one should be under the illusion that sanctions "have no impact" and that the country can continue functioning effectively while being subject to the "toughest ever" bans.

Other pressing matters include fresh water and energy shortages, inflation, liquidity, unemployment, immigration and an aging population.

Among them, the most burning issue is water scarcity. Iran is exhausting its ground water sources at an alarming rate. This could be a matter of life and death for a country with a dry climate. Ground water exploitation has already caused widespread subsidence which is absolutely irreversible. No water, no civilization.

Iran's next president is facing a flurry of uphill tasks and needs to make Herculean efforts to get them done. We Iranians need a veteran captain to steer the country through rough waters into safety. It is no time for trial and error and no country for a naive man.

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No US administration can hinder Iran's oil exports: *Owji*

Iranian Oil Minister Javad Owji said no administration in the United States can curb the Islamic Republic's oil exports and that the oil sales has "jumped" over the past three years despite US sanctions.

Owji made the statement while presenting a report on the country's latest status of oil and gasoline output during a plenary session at the Iranian Parliament on Wednesday, Press TV reported.

He said Iran's crude oil production increased by more than 1.4 million barrels through round-the-clock work and relentless efforts in the past three years, adding, "Despite more than 600 new sanctions on the export of oil and petrochemical products, today, we are witnessing a jump in the export of oil and collection of the country's arrears."

Owji asserted that the amount of Iran's oil exports has tripled compared to the beginning of the sitting administration in 2020 and the foreign exchange revenue has also increased.

Pointing to the fuel imbalance at the onset of the current administration, Owji said the Oil Ministry was taken over at a time that Iran's daily output stood at 2.1 million barrels and that the oil exports had reached its lowest rate in the past decade.

"We had about 87 million barrels of oil aboard tankers at sea, of which 30 million were heavy and extra heavy crude. We had no sales in heavy and



extra heavy oil at the beginning of the 13th administration," he said.

'Not even one cent in arrears'

The Iranian Oil Ministry also underlined in a statement on Wednesday that the administration of late president Ebrahim Raisi laid the ground for the sale of oil and gas without the JCPOA and the Western-led financial crime watchdog Financial Action Task Force (FATF).

"Today, crude oil and gas con-

densate shipments are exported to many countries, and at the apex of the sanctions, we do not even have one cent in arrears," the ministry said.

The US under former president Donald Trump reinstated crippling sanctions on Iran after unilaterally walking out of Iran's nuclear deal in May 2018, despite the Islamic Republic's full compliance with the terms of the 2015 deal between Tehran and world powers, known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

The administration of US President Joe Biden, which has claimed a diplomatic approach to Iran and efforts to return to the 2015 nuclear program, has not only failed to return to the agreement but has also tightened the sanctions regime against the Islamic Republic. Moreover, a bipartisan group of over 40 US House lawmakers has called on the Biden administration to "expeditiously implement" stringent new anti-Iran sanctions targeting the country's oil exports to China. The Iranian oil trade has al-

lowed "the country to raise over \$100 billion just since 2021," the bipartisan group of congresspeople led by Mike Lawler, Josh Gottheimer, and Jared Moskowitz argued in their letter.

"However, Iran does not act alone. China is the largest purchaser of Iranian oil, buying a significant majority of 80-90% of these exports. We have been clear that the US must act decisively to stop the Iran-China oil trade and eliminate this significant source of Iran's revenue," the letter added.

Iran's economy grew 4.5% in Q4 last year:

CBI



Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) to the base price (fixed prices in 2016) in the 4th quarter of the previous Iranian calendar year (March 21, 2023 to March 19, 2024) showed a 4.5% growth compared to the same period a year earlier, Central Bank of Iran (CBI) said in its latest report.

In addition, the country's economic growth without oil included in the mentioned period reached 3.9%, the report added, according to Tasnim News Agency.

The study of the investment situation in various economic sectors (to the fixed prices in 2016) clarifies that the "formation of the fixed gross capital" in the 3rd quarter of the last Iranian calendar

year surged 14.2% compared to the corresponding period in the previous year. The 4.5% economic growth signifies an upward trend in Iran's economic activities.

Meanwhile, the CBI chief Mohammadreza Farzin pointed to Iran's 5% economic growth rate in the past three years, as reported by the World Bank, saying it was the highest among regional and neighboring countries.

"Considering the recent average growth rate of the country, particularly in comparison to other countries in 2023, according to a recent report by the World Bank, Iran has the highest growth rate at 5%," he told reporters on the sidelines of a cabinet meeting on Wednesday.

Presidential candidates hone in on economy, sanctions



By Ebrahim
Beheshti
Staff writer

PERSPECTIVE

Iran's political atmosphere is abuzz with campaigns as the country braces for a major political event; the June 28 presidential election. With just a week left until election day, the six presidential hopefuls compete fiercely and present their programs. Campaigning headquarters have ramped up their efforts, and candidates are crisscrossing provinces, supplementing their TV campaigns with in-person visits. Social networks continue to reflect the competition between candidates and their supporters. The first televised election debate added excitement to the electoral atmosphere, and it is expected that today's second televised debate will further energize the election fervor.

So far, it seems that the economy, particularly tackling sanctions, has emerged as the most pressing issue among candidates. Conservative candidates are keen on continuing the policies of late president Ebrahim Raisi. They highlight various problems, including economic challenges and public welfare issues, attributing them to the Moderate government of Has-



san Rouhani. Some supporters and political analysts refer to a potential government of Masoud Pezeshkian as a third iteration of Rouhani's administration, supported by Reformists and Moderates.

On the other side, Masoud Pezeshkian and Mostafa Pourmohammadi have taken distinct positions, criticizing policies like Internet filtering and advocating for sanctions removal negotiations. Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign minister under Rouhani's government, has also entered the fray. Zarif, known for leading talks on 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) with world powers, has thrown his weight behind Pezeshkian, creating a polarized atmosphere around foreign policy and sanctions relief. Zarif's advice to Pezeshkian on a TV program has sparked a range of reactions. Pourmohammadi expressed solidarity by reposting a Zarif quote on his X account, while candidates like Mohammad

Baqer Qalibaf and Saeed Jalili have taken to task Zarif's positions.

Another recurring theme among candidates is the call for maintaining national unity and adopting interactive, rather than confrontational, approaches in the next government. They emphasize leveraging domestic elites to tackle existing challenges and adhering to high-level documents like the Five-Year Development Plan and general policies proposed by Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei.

However, as the competition heats up and candidates' positions become clearer, the society seems to be engaging more positively with the electoral process. Surveys suggest that voter turnout will be higher than in the last presidential election, particularly since all major political currents have fielded exclusive candidates, and no group has called for a boycott.