

# Masoud Pezeshkian: President-Elect of Iran

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## Masoud Pezeshkian

Masoud Pezeshkian's victory in the Islamic Republic's July 2024 presidential contest came at the expense of more hardline candidates, appearing on its face to reverse the regime's [trajectory](#) under the late President Ebrahim Raisi. However, there are clear reasons why Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei may have chosen to elevate Pezeshkian through the regime's process of [electoral engineering](#). Namely, Pezeshkian's victory creates the [illusion](#) that elections under the Islamic Republic are akin to those in the West, will be leveraged to [undermine](#) unity between Europe and the United States against the regime, and ultimately may be exploited in pursuit of sanctions relief.

The [narrative](#) that Pezeshkian is a reformist was crafted by regime-aligned media shortly after he announced his candidacy. In turn, he was [lauded](#) by sympathetic international audiences as a "reformist" with a "solid reputation for being uncorrupted" and "an excellent chance of winning." Despite this discourse, Pezeshkian stands to offer little as president aside from the same type of [stylistic changes](#) seen under the last so-called reformists presidency – that of [Mohammad Khatami](#). Ultimately, Pezeshkian does not offer an opportunity for meaningful change within the Islamic Republic, making him a safe option for Khamenei to elevate in pursuit of his broader interests. Rather, he has centered his career around paying lip service to dissenting forces within Iranian society, while legitimizing the regime at every opportunity.

## Medical Career and Service in the Iran-Iraq War

Pezeshkian was [born](#) in 1954 in Mahabad, Western Azerbaijan, into Iran's [Azeri-speaking minority](#). During the early 1970s, he [served](#) his compulsory conscription in the pre-revolutionary Iranian military, most of which was spent in Zabul in southeastern Iran. He cites this experience as giving him an interest in becoming a doctor. As a result, he [began](#) his medical training at Tabriz University of Medical Sciences, [completing](#) a general course in 1985. This enabled him to work as a physiology instructor at the university concurrently with further studies. As a student after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Pezeshkian became an active [member](#) of the Islamic Students Association of the Medical College of Tabriz University and participated in ideological-religious training classes to "strengthen and unify the religious forces against the counter-revolutionary groups and their atheistic beliefs." In the following years, he [earned](#) qualifications in both general surgery and cardiovascular surgery. Pezeshkian is also a [veteran](#) of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88). During the 8-year conflict, he was [responsible](#) for sending medical teams to the frontline and simultaneously held both combat and medical positions.

After earning his surgical qualifications, Pezeshkian held a range of positions within the medical field throughout his career. This includes serving as head doctor at Shahid Madani Heart Hospital in Tabriz and as [chancellor](#) of the Tabriz University of Medical Sciences where he

[remains](#) on academic staff. Though Pezeshkian's medical qualifications provide him with the air of a [technocratic administrator](#), politics was his primary focus beginning in the late 1990s.

## Political Career

After receiving his qualifications and holding leadership positions in the medical field, Pezeshkian [entered politics](#) as the Deputy Health Minister during President Mohammad Khatami's first term. This period is one which Pezeshkian's international supporters point to as evidence of his reformist *bona fides*, repeating the [claim](#) that he sided with the students who [protested](#) for political change in 1999. However, there is little evidence that Pezeshkian acted on the student protestors' behalf. This is perhaps best demonstrated by his decision not to [resign](#), like other members of the cabinet, after Khatami [allowed](#) the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to lead a violent crackdown across university campuses.

Rather than depart from the administration, Pezeshkian received a promotion in Khatami's second term. Through the [support](#) of Khatami's influential brother, Reza, he was able to secure the post of Health Minister in 2001. Pezeshkian's tenure as Health Minister was marked by controversy. In one infamous public statement, he threatened to slap United States President Bill Clinton in the face, at a time when Khatami was ostensibly [seeking](#) to improve bilateral relations. Pezeshkian also faced [impeachment](#) due to issues regarding staff appointments, drug policies, medical tariffs, and foreign visits.

Three years after serving as Health Minister, Pezeshkian shifted his political ambitions and [ran](#) for a Tabriz-based parliamentary seat in 2008. Though this came during a period in which "reformists" were being marginalized within regime politics, Pezeshkian was allowed to take office. While in parliament, he established a profile as an advocate for the regime's so-called "moderate" faction who would stay firmly within the political bounds set by Khamenei.

One of Pezeshkian's first acts in this new office was to [defend](#) Salman Khodadadi an IRGC officer and member of parliament [accused](#) of committing acts of sexual violence. Khodadadi went on to [advise](#) Mohammad Javad Zarif, who is now one of Pezeshkian's most strident [supporters](#). In 2009, Pezeshkian [criticized](#) the crackdown against protestors following the [rigged](#) presidential election. However, rather than support the protests outright, he simply argued that the regime should be less violent in its repression.

After his re-election to parliament in 2012, Pezeshkian [registered](#) to be a presidential candidate in the 2013 race. However, he quickly [withdrew](#) in favor of former President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was rejected by the Guardian Council. Under these circumstances, Pezeshkian threw his weight [behind](#) Hassan Rouhani, who ultimately won the election after hardline factions failed to consolidate. Pezeshkian [supported](#) Rouhani's agenda in parliament, particularly his efforts to negotiate the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) between

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the Islamic Republic and Western states. Three years into Rouhani's term, Pezeshkian was re-elected again to parliament, allowing him to [ascend](#) to a leadership role as the body's Deputy Speaker in 2016.

After Rouhani's re-election, Pezeshkian maintained his position as one of the president's most vocal parliamentary supporters. He [advocated](#) for continuing negotiations to salvage elements of the JCPOA after the United States withdrew in 2018, in [contrast](#) with hardliners like Saeed Jalili. Ultimately, in Pezeshkian's [perspective](#), such negotiations are necessary in order for the regime to secure sanctions relief. Aside from adopting this stance, Pezeshkian remained in lockstep with more hardline regime officials on other key issues during Rouhani's second term. He vehemently condemned the US designation of the IRGC as a terrorist organization in 2019, [asserting](#) his "strong support for the IRGC" whilst calling the US "terrorists." After the IRGC was designated, Pezeshkian defended wearing IRGC fatigues in the Iranian parliament and [declared](#): "I would wear IRGC uniform again. If the IRGC didn't exist, the nation would be divided."

Pezeshkian also vocally [mourned the death](#) of Qassem Soleimani. During the widespread 2019-2020 protests, he [urged](#) the Iranian people to support the Islamic Republic against the United States, which he claimed was "standing with all their might to bring us to our knees." Instead of condemning the crackdowns, he once again [called](#) for the regime to take a more subtle, "transparent" approach to curtailing dissent.

In 2020, Pezeshkian lost his position as Deputy Speaker as more hardline factions [won](#) that year's parliamentary election. Having retained his seat, Pezeshkian [mounted](#) a presidential campaign in the following year on a [platform](#) of pursuing sanctions relief and the reintegration of the Iranian economy into the global financial system. However, he was not approved by the Guardian Council.

After the election of Ebrahim Raisi, Pezeshkian returned to acting as a safe "moderate" mouthpiece for the regime, the role he maintained under Ahmadinejad. He has wrongly received [credit](#) among international supporters for his "outspoken criticism" of harsh morality laws and repression against the "[Woman, Life, Freedom](#)" movement in 2022. This decontextualizes Pezeshkian's position on the issue. Rather than condemn the morality laws which led to the death of Mahsa Amini, he instead [argued](#) that the regime has been insufficient in "educating" women, which has caused them to not "comply with the regulations." He also turned the blame on protestors, [claiming](#) that they were beating police officers, forcibly removing hijabs from the heads of women, and burning the flag of the Islamic Republic. According to Pezeshkian, these crimes [occurred](#) at the behest of foreign influences to obstruct a proper investigation into Amini's death and cause a civil war. Pezeshkian also explicitly sided with the regime's suppressive machinery, [referring](#) to the police and Basij forces as "brothers," whilst pushing back against "insults to the Supreme Leader." It is worth noting that Pezeshkian has [proudly boasted](#) that he played a key role in enforcing the compulsory hijab and Islamic

dress code on women across hospitals and universities in the early years of the Islamic Revolution.

It is against this backdrop that Pezeshkian is seeking to advance his political career and pursue his presidential ambitions. In the years following the 2022 election, the regime has leaned into Pezeshkian's "reformist" profile. During the 2024 parliamentary election, Pezeshkian was initially [disqualified](#) as a candidate, but the decision was later reversed. Some have speculated that this occurred due to Khamenei's [machinations](#), which appears likely due to his [control](#) over the Guardian Council. Pezeshkian also broke with his former allies within the "reformist" faction, including Khatami, by [refusing](#) to [boycott](#) political participation – making a clear effort to legitimize a process marked by [electoral engineering](#).

After successfully being re-elected under these circumstances, Pezeshkian was positioned to run for president after the unexpected death of Ebrahim Raisi.

## Presidential Candidacy

In early June of 2024, reformist organizations [put forward](#) Pezeshkian as one of their potential presidential candidates, just over a week after [announcing](#) that they would not field contenders without Khamenei's permission. After the Guardian Council approved his candidacy, he received the [support](#) of prominent figures within the regime often presented as "moderates" or "reformists," including Zarif and former First Vice President Es'haq Jahangiri.

Given that the regime remains [concerned](#) about [low turnout](#) in recent elections, it at first appeared likely that Pezeshkian's candidacy was an [attempt](#) to create the illusion of choice and political enfranchisement in the upcoming election. This was especially the case given Khamenei's recent moves to bolster Pezeshkian's career as other so-called "reformists" have been [purged](#).

Regardless, the Supreme Leader and members of his office [assessed](#) that Pezeshkian lacks a sufficient social base to challenge their authority. Pezeshkian also demonstrated full loyalty to the regime, promising to [support](#) the IRGC's missile and drone programs, [committing](#) to the "goals and policies" of the Supreme Leader, and emphasizing the importance of [continuing](#) Raisi's agenda. He also [offered support](#) for the foreign policy of Khamenei and the IRGC, including the regime's aggressive posture against the United States and its allies. All of this demonstrated his suitability for the [rubber stamp](#) role of president.

Over the course of the campaign, Pezeshkian was also the subject of an extensive propaganda effort. Regime-aligned media pointed to Pezeshkian's candidacy as [evidence](#) of "a mobilization of the silent and discontented segments of Iranian society towards the ballot box," and political engagement by ethnic minorities. In an interview earlier this year, Pezeshkian even [admitted](#) that his responsibility as a "reformist" candidate was to encourage electoral participation.

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These sentiments were echoed in some Western reporting that uncritically accepted the regime's portrayal of Pezeshkian as both a [meaningful reformist](#) and reflective of increased political engagement by the people of Iran.

Misrepresentation and propaganda aside, Pezeshkian will not offer a meaningful departure from the regime's status quo. He will continue behaving in the same manner as he has throughout his career – fully defending the Islamic Republic, even if he calls for stylistic change. Ultimately, he could not enact reform even if he wanted to, as power within the regime remains concentrated in the hands of Khamenei and the IRGC.

## Presidential Tenure

Soon after his victory, Pezeshkian set the tone for his presidency by [praying](#) at the mausoleum of Ruhollah Khomeini, leader of the 1979 Islamic Revolution – an opportunity to reaffirm his commitment to the regime and its ideology. He [reaffirmed](#) his support for Hezbollah and other terrorist proxies of the Islamic Republic and [called](#) for resistance against the “illegitimate Zionist regime.” Nevertheless, Western media quickly [touted](#) Pezeshkian's victory as an opportunity for renewed agreements with Europe and the United States, and [claimed](#) he would institute liberalizing changes within the regime.

Despite this fawning coverage, it remains [unlikely](#) that United States policy toward the Islamic Republic will shift with Pezeshkian in office, though European officials have [opened](#) the door to fresh negotiations. Given the likelihood that Pezeshkian was elevated to the presidency for this specific reason, it is possible that Khamenei's gambit could succeed. This is especially the case as Pezeshkian has named Zarif as a head of his Strategic Council for Transition, positioning him as a conduit to lure Western policymakers into negotiations.

There have been [reports](#) that Pezeshkian's transition effort is eyeing 60% of the proposed ministers being under 50 years old, 60% will not have previously served as ministers in other governments, and 20% will be women or minorities. Pezeshkian and his government may want to pursue these goals to attempt to placate and divide and conquer the Iranian opposition as the regime prepares for succession.

## Conclusion

Pezeshkian's presidency does not mark a turning point for the Islamic Republic, or the opportunity meaningful change in Iran, as some would [suggest](#). Rather, he served the purpose of creating the illusion of choice as part of the Islamic Republic's [election circus](#). Now he will be used as an instrument for Khamenei to seek sanctions relief while maintaining the regime's aggressive posture both in the region and toward the people of Iran. Reuters [reported](#) that

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Khamenei purposely orchestrated the 2024 election to see Pezeshkian win to provide him space—at home and abroad—to further plan for succession and preserve the Islamic Republic.