

Iran's Supreme Leader Explains Spoilt Ballots



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei offers his election analysis.

Source: [Khamenei.ir https://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/48194/B/14000407_2348194.jpg](https://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/48194/B/14000407_2348194.jpg)

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OE Watch Commentary

Iranians went to the polls on 18 June 2021 to elect a new president as Iranian law limits incumbent Hassan Rouhani to two consecutive terms. Judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi won the polls in the first round in an election which most outside analysts label neither free nor fair. Raisi's rise appeared predetermined, especially after the Guardian Council that vets aspirants rejected any credible competitor. Within Iran, however, much of the focus was not on who won the most

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votes, rather the process of voting itself. As Iranians grow apathetic about the revolution, Iranian leaders often interpret participation in elections as endorsement of the system. They often claim high voter participation, especially in provinces with long histories of animosity toward Teheran. To some, this appears to lack credibility. This year, the sensitivity among government officials was especially high as many Iranians in and outside the country actively promoted an election boycott.

Ten days after the election, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei met with senior judiciary officials to announce Raisi's successor as head of the Judiciary. During the course of his speech, excerpted here from his official website *Khamenei.ir*, Khamenei addressed the voting process and sought to explain the high numbers of invalid votes. He dismissed these as of no concern since, simply by going to the polling place, Iranians had endorsed the system. In this, however, he is wrong.

The Islamic Republic has a bloated state sector. In order to qualify for jobs—be they municipal sanitation worker, school teachers, or a clerk in a local office—Iranians often must show proof that they voted in recent elections. Many poll workers stamp the national identification cards of voters, especially in peripheral provinces with significant ethnic, linguistic, or sectarian minority presence, for example, in Kordestan or Baluchistan. Those who depend on a state salary, therefore, often go to the polls, but purposely spoil their ballots as a sign of protest. Top Iranian officials likely do not believe Khamenei's explanation and it is doubtful he does himself. Nor does Khamenei's logic explain growing numbers of spoiled ballots. For the regime, however, it is necessary to offer a public explanation to address an increasing frequent topic of conversation among Iranian diaspora groups and teahouse talk inside Iran. That said, no cover story can fully eliminate a growing belief inside Iran that the regime faces a legitimacy crisis.

Source: “Bianat dar Didar-e Rais va Mosa'ulan-e Qaveh Qazha'iyeh (Statements from the Meeting of the Leader with High Judicial Officials),” *Khamenei.ir* (Supreme Leader's official website), 28 June 2021. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=48211>

Now, some people highlight the invalid votes, saying, “They are too many.” So, what does this show? Are they a sign of the disenchantment of those people with the governmental system? No, not at all. The opposite is true. Those who go to voting centers in order to cast their votes – those who do not cut off their relationship with the ballot boxes and who wish to vote – take a look, but do not find among the candidates the person whom they believe in. So, what do they do? They can sulk, saying, “Now that my favorite person is not among the candidates, I will not vote.” And they can leave. However, if they do not go into a sulk and if they cast their votes, writing the name of their favorite candidates – which is an invalid vote – or if they cast a blank vote, it is evident that they are interested in ballot boxes. It is obvious that they have not cut off their relationship with the ballot box. Evidently, they like the system. Some people focus too much on pointless matters and make wrong analyses. Thankfully, the election was held and I hope it will be a blessed one in the end. During the elections, certain things were witnessed that one should keep as experience and that one should learn from. Later on, the Iranian nation should draw on these lessons.