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Opinion – One Year of Masoud Pezeshkian's Leadership in Iran

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STUTI GOGOI, AUG 25 2025

On 28 July 2025, Masoud Pezeshkian completed one year in office as the President of Iran becoming the second reformist to become President after Khatami. His election campaign ran with the slogan "For Iran". He promised a relaxation of the hijab law and a robust engagement with the West together with working towards a sanctions relief mechanism. Pezeshkian's Azeri-Kurdish descent made people hopeful for considerable reforms and inclusivity vis a vis minorities in the country. However, several challenges came up, most notably the Iran-Israel war that lasted for 12 days. Domestically, Pezeshkian inherited a weak economy with the Iranian rial plummeting and the sanctions still in place. However, the hijab law has seen some kind of relaxation which is a welcome relief following the Mahsa Amini case. In terms of foreign policy, there is not enough maneuvering space for the President. Given that the hardliners are still dominant, Pezeshkian spent most the first year of his term trying to defend his cabinet and balancing between the hardliners and the reformists, both of which have been critical of his approach.

One of the most notable achievements of the Pezeshkian government so far has been the keeping the Guidance Patrol (*Gasht e Ershad*) in check and some degree of easing of the strict enforcement of the mandatory hijab. He has also taken measures to reinstate some expelled university students and professors, which was an election promise he had made. There has also been some easing of restrictions on the house arrest of the 2009 presidential candidate Mehdi Karroubi. However, other restrictions including a ban on the internet have remained intact. Pezeshkian had promised to lift the ban on social media during the campaign. However, most of the social media apps remain banned except for a limited access to apps like WhatsApp and Google Play.

When Pezeshkian came to power, the Iranian economy was already struggling. Things have not changed positively since then. The inflation rates are still high and chronic unemployment continues to be a problem. According to the Iranian Statistical Centre, unemployment rates among individuals aged 15 years and above has reached 7.8 per cent in the winter of 2025, registering a 0.6 per cent increase from last year. Moreover, as the country faces conflicts and sanctions, the value of the rial has depreciated significantly. As of August 2025, the Iranian Rial has been ranked the third weakest currency in the world with an exchange rate of 0.000024 USD.

Notably, Pezeshkian's popularity ratings have declined considerably since last year. According to an opinion poll conducted by an Iranian research institute, the approval ratings of the president have fallen from 50 percent in September 2024 to 23 percent in March 2025. This declining popular support has been further exacerbated by the water crisis that has caused protests in several regions of the country. In several cases, protestors have not only limited their grievances against the water crisis but also against other systemic failures. For instance, in Tehran, power grid operators have protested against dismal living conditions and unfair contracts. So far, Pezeshkian has done little to assuage these grievances.

In terms of foreign policy, Iran has largely remained unchanged. One of the reasons for this is that reformist Pezeshkian has virtually no room to manoeuvre in this aspect and has to abide by what the Ayatollah says. The assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran just three days after the swearing in of Pezeshkian caused a dramatic shift in Iran's foreign policy forcing it to adopt a much more confrontational stance, particularly against Israel. This ultimately led to the 12 days war with Israel where Iran suffered a great loss. This war also tested the

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leadership of Pezeshkian and brought forth many simmering issues.

One of the key foreign policy promises of Pezeshkian during his campaign was to get sanctions relief and the Joint Cooperation Plan of Action (JCPOA) back on track. However, getting through with the JCPOA only becomes more distant by the day. The 12 days war with Israel has made negotiations regarding JCPOA even more difficult. Several attempts at negotiations have proved to be futile with the United States (US) emphasising on a complete dismantling of nuclear enrichment and the Iranian side reiterating its rights to peaceful nuclear enrichment. As the JCPOA is all but dead, economic sanctions have made the lives of the common Iranians more difficult. Pezeshkian has so far not been able to deliver any sanctions relief measures that were promised during the campaign.

However, not every aspect of Iranian foreign policy under Pezeshkian has been doomed. He has managed to forge better cooperation at the regional level. In May 2025, Pezeshkian visited the Sultanate of Oman, making it the first Gulf country he visited after being sworn in as President. Saudi-Iran cooperation still holds despite the challenging regional power calculations. Iran has also been an active member of the Shanghai Regional Cooperation (SCO) as well as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) together with deepening its relations with Russia and China. One of the highlights of Pezeshkian's presidency in the last one year is the fact that he could manage to get some form of condemnation for Israeli attacks on Iranian territory. Regional powers like Saudi Arabia have also stood in support of Iran during the war. However, when it comes to major foreign policy issues, Pezeshkian is not the deciding authority which is a major roadblock in bringing in the kind of reforms he promised.

Although one year is not a substantial period based on which any conclusive opinions can be drawn about where the presidency of Pezeshkian may lead Iran to, it is time enough to gauge the broad contours of the direction where the country might be heading by 2028. While some limited reforms have been introduced, they have mostly been limited to the domestic sphere. Even in this, most of the major reforms remain difficult to come through because Pezeshkian is trying to balance between the hardliners and the reformists – and at this point, both remain dissatisfied. The ultimate authority still lies in the hands of the Ayatollah. Moreover, hardliners still remain dominant in Iranian politics and Pezeshkian is too cautious about losing their confidence which makes him somewhat antithetical to the reformist camp. In trying to strike a balance between the two factions, most of the reform promises keep hanging in the middle with most not making it to the finish line.

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