

Iran's Succession Crisis: Implications for the Country and the Region

Introduction

The sudden death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash has created a succession crisis in Iran. This crisis has significant implications for the country's domestic and foreign policies. Raisi's demise comes at a time when Iran is facing numerous challenges. These challenges include a crippled economy under American sanctions, growing discontent among its youth, and increasingly hostile adversaries in the Middle East and beyond.

Current Political Landscape

Power has been transferred to Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, who was appointed Acting President by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.^[1] The Islamic Republic is mandated by law to hold elections within the next 50 days, which are expected to be hastily organised and may result in poor voter turnout. The legislative election in Mar had brought in mostly hardline politicians, with the population losing faith in the belief that change can be achieved through the ballot box. The last three elections in Iran have witnessed low voter turnout, primarily due to the escalating impact of two longstanding obstacles since the Islamic Revolution: the disqualification of candidates deemed disloyal to the regime by the Guardian Council, and a pervasive lack of transparency in the electoral process.

Immediate Impact of Raisi's Death

The succession crisis in Iran is not limited to the presidency but also extends to the supreme leadership, with Raisi's death paving the way for Mojtaba Khamenei to succeed his father once he is gone. The regime's sudden focus on hastily planning for an early election detracts from Tehran's bandwidth to address other pressing issues, particularly in foreign policy, such as its confrontation with Israel. The incident primarily inflicts a significant psychological and moral blow on the regime, which is perceived as vulnerable and fragile.

The next President of Iran will be elected through a constitutional process, with the Assembly of Experts tasked to select the next leader. Some potential candidates for the Presidency include Hassan Rouhani, Hassan Khomeini, Mohsen Araki, Alireza Araf, Sadeq Larijani, and Mohammad-Mahdi Mirbagheri. Es'haq Jahangiri, Vice President under Hassan Rouhani, has also been mentioned as a possibility for the presidency. He has sought to distance himself from Rouhani, saying that he was stripped of his power during Rouhani's second term (2017-2021). This could boost Jahangiri's chance to survive vetting by the Guardian Council. However, Jahangiri lacks a strong base among ordinary Iranians. Ahmad Khatami, a member of the Presidium of the Assembly of Experts, is another powerful figure being mentioned. Like Raisi, Khatami is a hardliner who has been placed on the European Union's sanctions list for "Inciting Violence Against Protesters".^[2]

As of 2024, the then-President Ebrahim Raisi and Khamenei's son Mojtaba had been considered frontrunners for the position as the next Supreme Leader.^[3] Raisi's death in a helicopter crash in May 2024 has now cut short his potential candidacy. Raisi's death has also sparked questions regarding who will eventually succeed Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the most powerful man in the country as the supreme leader. The Iranian clerical establishment had heavily invested in Raisi as a potential successor to Khamenei. The Assembly of Experts, responsible for selecting the successor to the Supreme Leader upon his death, has become increasingly hardline over the

years. Mojtaba Khamenei, the incumbent Supreme Leader's son, is considered a leading candidate to succeed him, but allowing him to replace his father could fuel theories that Raisi's death was not accidental. Khamenei has said that the selection of his successor must be guided by Islamic criteria and the needs of the country, rather than personal or political considerations.

The death of President Raisi has complicated leadership succession plans in Iran. The country has been thrust into an election season, and the debate is on about whether the Islamic Republic is first and foremost an Islamic state or a republic. Raisi's death is seen as a significant blow to the Supreme Leader, and Khamenei has a few options, including introducing his son to the Iranian people, finding another mini-me? or selecting a candidate from the security forces.

Implications of the Succession Crisis

The death of Iran's President has significant implications for the country's leadership succession plans when Iran is facing severe challenges, including economic problems, domestic alienation, and rising tensions with its regional arch-foe, Israel. The incident will have significant implications for Iranian domestic politics, although it is expected to have a much smaller impact on the foreign policy of the theocratic regime.^[4] The implications of the succession crisis in could be far-reaching and complex. Here are some of the key implications:

- **Succession Crisis.** Raisi's death has created a power vacuum, and the question of who will succeed him as President and potentially as the next Supreme Leader is unclear.
- **Impact on Foreign Policy.** The situation is not expected to significantly alter Iran's foreign policy in the near term. The Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards have the final say in foreign policy decisions, which will likely remain unchanged.
- **Domestic Unrest.** The death of Raisi, who was seen as a hardliner, may lead to increased domestic unrest and protests, particularly among the youth population who are discontent with the regime's policies.
- **Economic Crisis.** Iran's economy is already crippled under American sanctions, and Raisi's death may exacerbate the economic crisis, leading to further instability.
- **Regional Tensions.** The succession crisis may impact Iran's regional policies, particularly its relations with Israel, and may lead to a temporary delay in new diplomatic initiatives.
- **Legitimacy Crisis.** Raisi's death has exposed Iran's crisis of legitimacy, with many Iranians questioning the regime's authority and legitimacy.
- **Power Struggle.** The succession crisis may lead to a power struggle within the regime, with different factions vying for control.
- **Impact on Nuclear Program.** The crisis may impact Iran's nuclear program, particularly if the new President is less supportive of the program.
- **Regional Influence.** The succession crisis may impact Iran's influence in the region, particularly if the new president is less effective in maintaining relationships with proxy forces and allies.

- **Global Implications.** The succession crisis in Iran has global implications, particularly in terms of regional security and the potential for conflict with Israel and other adversaries.

Implications for India and Response

The crisis also poses diplomatic challenges for India, which has to balance its relationships with both Iran and Israel. The succession crisis has sparked a high-stakes power struggle in Iran, which may impact its economic and foreign policies. The death of Raisi has presented the Islamic Republic with its most formidable and dangerous challenge since its inception 45 years ago, with implications for the country's economic woes and foreign policy. The international reaction to Raisi's death highlights how relations with the Gulf have thawed, but the balance of political power within Iran means that there is unlikely to be a major shift in economic or foreign policy.

The present situation could also affect the North-South Transport Corridor (NSTC), which is a vital project for India's involvement in the region's connectivity plans. It is a significant project aimed at enhancing regional connectivity and trade between South Asia, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe. The revival of the Chabhar project an important component of the NSTC, signed on 13 May 2024, marks a significant milestone in the context of regional connectivity. This project, aiming to connect the Iranian port with Afghanistan and beyond to Central Asia, is crucial for India's involvement in the region's connectivity plans. India's Foreign Minister, Dr S. Jaishankar, has credited President Raisi and Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian for their role in finalising the Chabahar Port agreement and has expressed gratitude for their 'Interest' and 'Initiative' in making the deal possible. This statement is significant, as it acknowledges the importance of Iran in India's regional strategy and underscores the need for continued engagement with Tehran. India's response to the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi must be guided by a careful consideration of its strategic interests in the region. The unexpected demise of Raisi has cast an additional veil of uncertainty over an already tumultuous region, and India must navigate this situation carefully to protect its interests. India declared a day of national mourning to express solidarity with the Iranian government and people, and the national flag was flown at half-mast on all official buildings. This gesture is a mark of respect for the departed dignitaries and a demonstration of India's commitment to maintaining good relations with Iran. However, India must also be mindful of the implications of Raisi's death on its relations with other countries in the region, particularly Israel and the Gulf nations. The normalisation of relations between Israel and the key Arab countries, facilitated by the Abraham Accords of 2020, has created a new dynamic in the region, and India must be careful not to be seen as taking sides. While expressing solidarity with the Iranian government and people, India must also be mindful of the implications of Raisi's death on its relations with other countries in the region and navigate this situation carefully to protect its interests.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the death of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has created a dual succession crisis in Iran, with implications for both the Presidency and the Supreme Leadership. The country is expected to hold elections within the next 50 days, which will could face impediments and result in reduced voter turnout. The succession crisis comes at a time when Iran is facing numerous challenges internally and externally. It could pave the way for Mojtaba Khamenei to become the President and then succeed his father once he is gone. But that path is still to be seen and could raise questions.

[1] Lyse Doucet, What next for Iran after President Raisi's death?, BBC, 20/05/2024, Accessed on-24/05/2024

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c1dd99jgl09o>

[2] Saeed Azimi, Death of Iran's President Complicates Leadership Succession Plans, Stimson, 20/05/2024, Accessed on-24/05/2024

<https://www.stimson.org/2024/death-of-irans-president-complicates-leadership-succession-plans/>,

[3] Next Supreme Leader of Iran election, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Next_Supreme_Leader_of_Iran_election

[4] Raisi's Death Leads to Dual Succession Crises in Iran, 22/05/2024, Accessed on- 24/05/2024
<https://www.ifmat.org/05/22/raisis-death-leads-to-dual-succession-crises-in-iran/>

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