

The Crash and The Succession: Iran's Choices for the Future

Introduction

On 19 May 2024, an Iranian Air Force helicopter crashed near the village of Tavit, East Azerbaijan, Iran, killing President of Iran Ebrahim Raisi, Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, Governor-General of East Azerbaijan Malek Rahmati, representative of the Supreme Leader in East Azerbaijan Mohammad Ali Ale-Hashem, the head of the president's security team, and three flight crew while on en route to the Iranian city of Tabriz. Among those found dead in the wreckage of the crash, the most eminent was President Raisi. Dubbed the 'Butcher of Tehran' whose journey began as a young religious scholar and ended with his death while being the President of Iran. Tehran is known to have been the principal sponsor of Hamas in Israel, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Houthi rebels in Yemen. Thus, the death of President Raisi in the crash intuitively raised suspicion of a covert foreign hand. The talk of assassination surfaced with Israel being the prime accused.^[1] Jerusalem, however, quickly distanced itself from the incident stating, "It wasn't us".^[2]

In the following days, the discourse in the media focused on the death of the incumbent president. However, the more pertinent question is of the succession of the current Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. The 85-year-old Khamenei oversees, as part of his portfolio, a complex bureaucracy called the *Beit-e Rahbari* (Leader's Office). While also holding the supreme authority over the jurisprudence, executive, judiciary, and legislature of Iran. The Supreme Leader further holds the power to appoint the head of the judiciary, the elected president, and exerts significant influence over the choice of the speaker of parliament.

If Iran's history is any judge, the helicopter crash could very well be a successful assassination attempt. What is more interesting about the crash and its possible links to an assassination, is that it might have been engineered internally and not externally, as some within Iran might assume.

A History of Bloodshed

Post the Islamic Revolution (1979), Iran suffered an outbreak of assassinations of senior officials. Among those killed for political reasons was the then Chief Justice, Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti. His death occurred when a powerful bomb destroyed the Tehran headquarters of Iran's ruling Islamic Republican Party killing over 70 including four cabinet ministers and 23 members of the Islamic Consultative Assembly (parliament). The bombing in question was carried out by the Mojahedin-e Khalq, a militant group that supported the revolution but broke with those who consolidated power.^[3] A little less than two months later, then-president Mohammad Ali Rajaei was killed in an explosion that ripped through the Prime Minister's office.^[4] The blast also took the lives of the Prime Minister and a few Security Council members. Interestingly, Rajaei himself took over from another President who had to flee Iran dressed as a woman following an impeachment by the Islamic Consultative Assembly.^[5] Even when high-ranking officials within the country are not assassinated, they are forced to leave contention for the top seat of the Islamic republic. Such was the case with Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri, who despite being named the successor by Sayyid Ruhollah Khomeini (the then Supreme Leader), did not ascend to the seat due his criticism of the mass executions following the Iran-Iraq War.^[6] Ironically, Raisi, as a young prosecutor, signed off on those executions.

With President Raisi's death in the crash, there has been a tremendous amount of churn. However, the churn is almost exclusively external. This is due to the fact that the majority of the power vests with the Supreme Leader. Therefore, the more pressing matter at hand for the Iranian regime is determining the successor of the incumbent 85-year-old.

Prospects

The major concern about the succession is that those most suited to the office of the Supreme Leader have already been buried. Former president, Hashemi Rafsanjani, died under mysterious circumstances in 2017[7] and former judiciary chief Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi of natural causes in 2018[8].

Other prospects include Mojtaba Khamenei, the son of the current Supreme Leader, and Alireza Araf, a senior cleric. However, the progeny of Khamenei is lacking in both the requisite experience and has albatross around his neck of being the son of the incumbent. The latter flies directly in the face of a quote of the first Supreme Leader which states the following[9]:

"Because the Islamic Republic is critical of the hereditary system, and with the overthrow of the monarchy, the hereditary formula, which is the least expensive method of transfer in the East, cannot be implemented. Even when the children of the referents sit in their father's place, it is emphasized because of their own capabilities and most of the referents do not follow this procedure. The recent statement of the leadership, based on the quote of Mr. Mohammadi-Iraqi, closes this way to a great extent. If it is said very much and not absolute because it was mentioned that the prohibition is in presence and for investigation and not probably in absence or for example by recognizing expediency and in the form of membership in the temporary council".

Therefore, the accession of the son to replace the father at the uppermost echelons of the Iranian regime is considered one step away from heresy. Another wrinkle in the equation for succession is an idea floated around by some in the media that the current Supreme Leader had President Raisi assassinated in order to clear the path for his son's accession.[10] Though the idea is somewhat incredible, it is still par for the course considering the history of assassinations at the highest levels of governance in Iran. Meanwhile, Araf does not come without baggage of his own as he lacks the black turban indicating descent from the family of the Prophet Mohammad.

Adding to the amount of flux in the selection of the next Supreme Leader is the variable of the Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). In an eventuality[11] posited by Mehrangiz Kar, an attorney on human rights and women's rights within the framework of Islamic law in the Islamic Republic of Iran, The IRGC and the Assembly of Experts, the 88-person body solely invested with the power to appoint or dismiss the Supreme Leader, may introduce the candidate chosen by Khamenei. The successor, in her hypothetical scenario, will be nothing more than a puppet, and if in that timeframe there is a rebellion of large enough proportions, the IRGC will seize the government and the clergy which has lost a large population base in the last 45 years will be shunted to the sidelines.

To sum up, the death of the octogenarian Supreme Leader will result in a massive amount of churn at the highest level of the Iranian Government. It would not be a tremendous leap, judging by the history of ascendance, to assume that (more?) blood will be shed.

Conclusion

As far as India is concerned, it has various vested interests in Iran. Tehran is a crucial pivot in the International North-South Transport Corridor and its enemy state Israel serves the same purpose in the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor. Furthermore, the Chabahar Port agreement was recently signed between the two countries. Therefore, it is clear to both India and Iran that Tehran has an important role to play in New Delhi's connectivity calculus. For India, the question of who ascends to the highest office in Iran upon the death of the current Supreme Leader is a bigger concern than who gets elected to the second highest office. Such is the case due to the nature of the Iranian polity which consolidates nearly all the power in the Supreme Leader's hands. As of now, the status quo for allies and enemies of Iran is set to remain unchanged. However, when the 3rd Supreme Leader assumes office, the status quo may change significantly. As far as prognostication is concerned, due to the paucity of any solid information, it is nigh on impossible to determine who succeeds Ayatollah Khamenei.

End Notes

[1] Akriti Anand, Ebrahim Raisi 'assassinated'? Many suspect Israel's role behind the Iranian President's death, officials clarify, Mint, 20/05/2024, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.livemint.com/news/world/ebrahim-raisi-assassinated-many-suspect-israels-role-behind-iran-presidents-death-officials-clarify-11716202227544.html>

[2] 'It wasn't us': Israel on Iran President Raisi's chopper crash, Times of India, 20/05/2024, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/middle-east/could-israel-be-behind-the-crash-of-iranian-president-ebrahim-raisis-helicopter/articleshow/110261625.cms>

[3] 33 HIGH IRANIAN OFFICIALS DIE IN BOMBING AT PARTY MEETING; CHIEF JUDGE IS AMONG VICTIMS, The New York Times, 29/06/1981, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/29/world/33-high-iranian-officials-die-bombing-party-meeting-chief-judge-among-victims.html?auth=login-google1tap&login=google1tap>

[4] Peter Kihss, MOHAMMAD ALI RAJAI, IRAN'S PRESIDENT, The New York Times, 01/09/1981, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/09/01/obituaries/mohammad-ali-rajai-iran-s-president.html>

[5] KHOMEINI STRIPS BANI-SADR OF OFFICE, LEAVING IRAN'S CLERGY IN FULL, The New York Times, 23/06/1981, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/23/world/khomeini-strips-bani-sadr-of-office-leaving-iran-s-clergy-in-full.html>

[6] KHOMEINI STRIPS BANI-SADR OF OFFICE, LEAVING IRAN'S CLERGY IN FULL, The New York Times, 23/06/1981, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.nytimes.com/1981/06/23/world/khomeini-strips-bani-sadr-of-office-leaving-iran-s-clergy-in-full.html>

[7] Amy La Porte, Former Iranian President Rafsanjani dies, 08/01/2017, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://edition.cnn.com/2017/01/08/middleeast/iran-former-president-rafsanjani-dies/index.html>

[8] Grand ayatollah Shahroudi, powerful Iran cleric, dies, The Times of Israel, 25/12/2018, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/grand-ayatollah-shahroudi-powerful-iran-cleric-dies/>

[9] Leadership Prevention and Difficulty of Expert Practice, Hammihano, 29/02/2002, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://hammihanonline.ir/>

[10] Navid Hamzavi, Explainer: How Does Raisi's Death Impact Khamenei's Succession?, 21/05/2024, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.iranintl.com/en/202405219820>

[11] Opinion: Who will replace Ali Khamenei?, BBC, 02/03/2024, Accessed on- 24/05/2024

<https://www.bbc.com/persian/articles/cjrjx12dj91o>

Vinayak Sharma is a holder of P.G. Diploma in Mass Communication from Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan and works as a research scholar at the United Service Institution

Article uploaded on 27-05-2024.

Disclaimer : The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the organisation that he/she belongs to or of the USI of India.