

Ailing Official Highlights Concentration of Power in Iran

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Brief Analysis

The Assembly of Experts may soon have a new leader, but hints of a name have yet to emerge.

Last week, Muhammad Reza Mahdavi Kani, who heads Iran's Assembly of Experts, suffered a stroke and fell into a coma from which doctors do not expect him to recover. Rumors around Tehran even suggest that the eighty-three-year-old official has died but that the announcement of his death has been postponed until a successor can be named. The jockeying for Mahdavi Kani's position could be intense, given that the Assembly of Experts head names a successor upon the Supreme Leader's own death. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is seventy-five, and the state of his health is unknown.

Mahdavi Kani is a leading figure among conservatives who played a significant role in consolidating Khamenei's power. He holds several high-level positions, as is common among the Iranian elite, including membership in the Expediency Council and presidency of Imam Sadeq University, an institution designed to train cadres for government service, especially in the foreign and intelligence ministries. Mahdavi Kani also exemplifies the nepotism that pervades the Iranian scene. For instance:

- His son Muhammad Saeed Mahdavi Kani heads the president's office at Imam Sadeq University.
- His wife, Qodsi Sorkheh-e, heads the women's branch of Imam Sadeq University.
- One of his daughters, Mahdiheh, heads the "ideological admissions" (*ghozinesh*) office of the university's women's branch, the approval of which is required before even the most academically outstanding applicants can be admitted. Two other daughters, Sedigheh and Maryam, graduated from the same university and now teach there. Their husbands are clerics who work at the university.
- His brother Muhammad Baqer Baqeri Kani serves on the Assembly of Experts and is Muhammad Reza's deputy at Imam Sadeq University. He also served as Muhammad Reza's deputy when the latter was interior minister in the Islamic Republic's early years.

- The two sons of Muhammad Baqer Baqeri Kani -- Mesbah al-Hoda Baqeri and Ali Baqeri -- also hold prominent professional and social roles in Iran. Mesbah al-Hoda, for his part, is Ayatollah Khamenei's son-in-law, through his marriage to Hoda al-Sadat Khamenei (b. 1981). Under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Ali Baqeri served as deputy to chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili. Both Ali Baqeri and Saeed Jalili studied at Imam Sadeq University and now teach there.

Such a heavy concentration of power means fewer top positions are available to talented people without family connections. This breeds resentment against the regime, with bitter complaints about the *aqazadeh* (children of the elite). However much this resentment may surge after Mahdavi Kani's exit, high-level positions in Iran are sure to remain in the hands of a select group.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute. ❖

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