Supreme Succession

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Jun 21, 2011

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Articles & Testimony

Within the Islamic Republic of Iran, both the democratic movement and internal conflict raise questions about the regime's stability. Should Ayatollah Ali Khamenei die -- or become unable to carry out his position as supreme leader -- the regime's stability rests on the peaceful transition of power.

Born on 16 July 1939, Khamenei was a noticeably young politician when he took the office of supreme leader in 1989 -- in the wake of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's death. In comparison to his predecessor, who came to power when he was 77 years old, as well as with other founders of the Islamic Republic such as Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri or Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khamenei was considerably younger.

In 1979, after suffering a heart attack, the Ayatollah Khomeini reduced his practical role considerably. For the next ten years while he maintained the title of supreme leader, a triangle of close advisers, including his son, Ahmad Khomeini, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, and Ali Khamenei, had influential roles in running the country. When Khomeini died, a young cleric-politician became his successor with the task of preventing other religious authorities, grand Ayatollahs, or high-profile revolutionary politicians from claiming his succession or taking power. According to Rafsanjani and others, the death of Khomeini meant the end of a position suited only to the founder of the Islamic Republic -- due to his unique historical condition, charisma, and religious status. By appointing someone who lacked both religious and political supremacy as well as charisma, Iran's powerful circle of elites intended the office of supreme leader to be merely ceremonial. The constitution was revised and the executive power became concentrated in the hands of president. This could have been a significant shift toward democracy, diminishing the role of religiously legitimized authority in favor of political institutions that rely on the will of the people.

This equation proved to be totally wrong for several reasons: the constitution offers the ruling jurist a permanent position while other democratically elected bodies hold limited positions. In addition, the ruling jurist can constitutionally manipulate any election and alter the results. The guardian council, of which six jurist members are directly appointed by the supreme leader, should qualify the candidates and approve the election results; though in

practice they disqualify the majority of candidates. Most importantly, the president maintains the exclusive role of executive power, though the revised constitution still recognizes the supreme leader as the commander-in-chief of armed forces -- including the army, police, revolutionary guard and basij militia. The supreme leader also appoints the head of the judiciary, state radio and television (which holds a monopoly over television and radio in Iran. Finally, the supreme leader appoints the custodian of Imam Reza Shrine in Mashhad and the clerical establishment.

Khamenei, who began his leadership conscious that his weaknesses were the main reason for his appointment, tried to betray the image others had created of him. In his pursuit of power he first attempted to rebuild the office of supreme leader from a supervisory position to a practical and effective leadership with a very sophisticated, modern bureaucracy. Unlike Khomeini, Khamenei tried to take control of the armed forces and other institutions under him. While Khomeini never acted like a commander-in-chief, leaving authority to either the president or the speaker of the Majlis (parliament), Khamenei has never abdicated his authority over the military or the influential Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) to anyone else.

When Khamenei came to office, his first act was the appointment of two former deputies of the ministry of intelligence, Gholam Hossein Mohammad Golpayegani and Asghar Hejazi, to head of the office and security deputy, respectively. Golpayegani and Hejazi are clerics, but spent the first decade of the Islamic republic in the army and IRGC or in the ministry of intelligence. With Khamenei's succession, they took the lead in building the new leader's executive office. By recruiting commanders of the IRGC or intelligence officers, the supreme leader's office -- now with more than one thousand employees -- became the central command of both the armed forces and the intelligence apparatus rather than a political office.

The institutions which have enabled the ostensibly weak supreme leader to gain unparalleled power are the armed forces, the ministry of intelligence, and the judiciary. As commanders of war returned to cities after the ceasefire between Iran and Iraq and financial foundations provided competition to the government's revenues, young Khamenei was given ample time to erect his monument of power. He transformed himself from a weak leader into a self-assertive leader who challenges the power of the president by intervening in his affairs and matters of the parliament. Ayatollah Khamenei's increasing authority has been the main obstacle to state-building in Iran because he deliberately and systematically undermines political institutions in order to keep them from acquiring the necessary autonomy.

Khamenei's leadership style has changed the nature of the Islamic Republic. Since the ruling jurist has absolute authority and defines the expediency of the regime, he is able to suspend all Islamic and constitutional laws as he wills. In such a system, the regular function of institutions can never become normalized. In every situation, the ruling juror can veto all rules and any decision made by parliament, president, or judiciary. In such politics, the extreme elements can be identified on the ruling juror's authority to announce every situation as an emergency. Hence the Islamic Republic is transformed from a revolutionary government to a religious despotism.

Succession scenarios can be as varied as the ways the current supreme leader's reign could end. One could imagine Khamenei overthrown by popular uprising like Ben Ali and Mubarak. Alternatively, one might think of his end in the form of a coup d'etat by IRGC intervention after rifts widen between the governments' factions. In each case, the leader's successor will differ in the way he inherits power and in the nature of his leadership.

But if Khamenei dies tonight, would a peaceful transition of power -- similar to what took place twenty-two years ago -- be the most likely option? The constitution declares that the task of appointing the new supreme leader should be vested with an assembly of experts comprised of 86 shiite jurists (or *mujtahid*s), qualified and shortlisted by the guardian council and elected by the people. The constitution reads, "The experts will review and consult among themselves concerning all the *fuqaha* possessing the qualifications specified in Articles 5 and 109. In the event they find one of them better versed in Islamic regulations, the subjects of the *fiqh,* or in political and social issues, or

possessing general popularity or special prominence for any of the qualifications mentioned in Article 109, they shall elect him as the leader. Otherwise, in the absence of such superiority, they shall elect and declare one of them as the leader." It continues, "Till the appointment of the new leader, a council consisting of the president, head of the judicial power, and a *faqih* from the guardian council, upon the decision of the nation's exigency council, shall temporarily take over all the duties of the Leader." The constitution, however, does not specify a time frame for the temporary council, leaving the possibility of such a provisional council running the country for a very long time.

It is hard to believe that the appointment of Khamenei as supreme leader in 1989 was a natural election by the assembly of experts. Rather, it seems more plausible to think that he was first elected by a handful of influential political elites -- before the assembly of experts held its meeting and was then suggested to others for voting. At that time, the political power was not concentrated in the hands of one person or one faction, requiring powerful factions to come to a consensus in order to appoint a new leader. The situation today is very different.

First, the power circle in Iran has become increasingly narrow, especially after Khamanei marginalized the first generation of revolutionary politicians such as Akbar Hashemei Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami and Mir Hossein Moussavi. Khamenei has refashioned the political spectrum by elevating a new generation of politicians who were weak and owe him their political credentials. Second, the nature of government changed from a revolutionary government to a military government, relying on neither constitution nor political institutions. Khamenei identified himself with the entire political regime. In the political vocabulary of the Islamic Republic, when officials refer to "regime," they usually mean "Khamenei." Lastly, as a consequence of the political transformation, the clergy does not have influence on the management of the country, greatly diminishing its ability to affect the process of choosing a leader. The regime demystified the clergy by dividing them into good and bad and marginalizing those clerics who have the potential to form an actual religious power. It made the clerical establishment economically and bureaucratically dependent on the government. Regardless, the clergy views the position of the supreme leader as a military position rather than an autonomous clerical power.

Finally, the socio-political fabric of Iranian society has changed in twenty-two years. Not only has society's elite widely questioned the notion of *velayet-e faqih* (guardianship of jurist), but the existing constitution also outlines a dual power structure that guarantees a perpetual conflict between positions that are democratically legitimate and positions with divine legitimacy and zero accountability before the people. Opposition leaders like Moussavi have mentioned on several occasions that the constitution is not perfect and it might need to change. Any discourse surrounding constitution change or reform primarily targets the supreme leader's position and his authority. Although Khamenei's appointment twenty-two years ago was surprising for society and shocking for the clergy, the government managed to establish him as a supreme leader -- exploiting the emotional atmosphere created after a long war which exhausted the country. At this time, the death of a charismatic leader attracted millions to his funeral ceremony. Now, particularly after the government has been significantly discredited in the wake of the 2009 rigged presidential election, it would be difficult to introduce a new leader to society whose background and records would be undisputed by a large part of society.

In order to go forward and appoint a new leader -- even before the formation of a temporary council -- the government must apply tough security measures and suspend ordinary law to keep Iranians from seizing the opportunity to revolt.

It seems that whoever has power now will maintain power after Khamenei's death. The armed forces, especially the IRGC, which controls over one third of Iran's economy, military, and nuclear program, will have the biggest say in appointing the next supreme leader. It is unlikely that their choice will be a highly influential Ayatollah. Learning from the experience of the past twenty-two years, they might prefer to appoint a weak, ailing Ayatollah as the supreme leader in order to justify the constitutionality of their own power. Removing an iconic figure like Akbar

Hashemi Rafsanjani and appointing Mohammad Reza Mahdavid Kani as a head of the assembly last March is a model that will most likely be followed by the IRGC in appointing a new leader. A weak leader would be a suitable successor for Khamenei because Iranian society will not tolerate a powerful person who imitates Khamenei's toughness and autocratic tendencies. The IRGC would grasp power more firmly if his successor holds a genuinely ceremonial position.

All of this depends on how the armed forces and the IRGC solve the conflict between their political and economic interests. Now Khamenei has full control over them and manages its factionalism, but in the absence of such a commander, the power balance within the armed forces and the IRGC should also change. Often in such a situation, more radical groups have a higher chance of success. In sum, Khamanei's successor may allow the government to become more militarized and most likely more radical.

Mehdi Khalaji is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on the politics of Iran and Shiite groups in the Middle East. ❖

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