Iran’s Next Supreme Leader: The Islamic Republic After Khamenei

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On July 17, 2016, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s supreme leader, turned 77. Rumors that he suffers from cancer have circulated for over a decade, and in 2014, the state-run news agency published photos of him recovering from prostate surgery. Although Khamenei’s prognosis remains closely guarded, the Iranian government is evidently treating his succession with urgency. In December 2015, Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, a former president and a kingmaker, broached the usually taboo subject when he publicly admitted that a council within the Assembly of Experts, the body that selects the supreme leader, was already vetting potential successors. And last March, after new members of the assembly were elected to an eight-year term, Khamenei himself called the probability that they would have to select his replacement “not low.”

The death of Khamenei will mark the biggest political change in the Islamic Republic since the death of the last supreme leader—Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the revolutionary founding father—in 1989. The supreme leader is the most powerful person in Iran, with absolute authority over all parts of the state. A new person in that position could dramatically alter the direction and tenor of Iran’s foreign and domestic policies.

But those hoping for a kinder, gentler Iran are likely to be disappointed. Since he took power in 1989, Khamenei has steadily built an intricate security, intelligence, and economic superstructure composed of underlings who are fiercely loyal to him and his definition of the Islamic Republic, a network that can be called Iran’s “deep state.” When Khamenei dies, the deep state will ensure that whoever replaces him shares its hard-line views and is committed to protecting its interests.

PAST IS PROLOGUE

When Khomeini died, observers considered Khamenei just one of a handful of possible replacements—and not even the likeliest. A 50-year-old midranking cleric at the time, Khamenei lacked Khomeini’s towering stature. But at a meeting on June 4, 1989, the day after Khomeini’s death, Rafsanjani, a close confidant of Khomeini, told the assembly that Khomeini had considered Khamenei qualified for the job. The group elected Khamenei by a vote of 60 to 14.

Khamenei pledged to maintain stability as supreme leader, saying in a speech the year he took over, “I assure you, Iran continues on the path of the Islamic Revolution and has not diverged from its principles.” In fact, however, he immediately began ushering in dramatic changes to Iran’s political system. Given Khamenei’s middling clerical rank—he was only an ayatollah and not a grand ayatollah, or marja—his election technically violated the Iranian constitution. So the political establishment quickly put to a referendum a series of constitutional revisions that Khomeini had already approved in an effort to reduce factional tensions after his death. Not only did these downgrade the required clerical qualifications for supreme leader; they also increased the position’s authority.

The changes eliminated the possibility of a three- or five-person leadership council should the Assembly of Experts fail to elect a supreme leader. The word “absolute” was added before a description of the supreme leader’s authority in the article specifying the separation of powers, thereby maximizing his
control over Iran’s executive, legislative, and judicial branches. Another article was rewritten to give the supreme leader extensive new powers, including the authority to resolve “issues in the system that cannot be settled by ordinary means” through a new constitutional body called the Expediency Council. These modifications put an unprecedented amount of power in the hands of the new supreme leader. And in the ensuing years, Khamenei proved determined to use it.

THE RISE OF THE DEEP STATE

Under Khomeini, the Islamic Republic had been divided. On the left were those who sought to preserve state control over the economy and impose moderate cultural policies. On the right were those who frowned at government intervention in the economy but favored a sharia-inspired domestic policy. Khomeini had held the system together at the top with the backing of the clerical establishment—the original power brokers behind the revolution—while giving each side influence. A shared sense of struggle during the Iran-Iraq War, along with Khomeini’s enormous personal influence and charisma, kept these tensions from breaking into the open during his reign. But beneath the surface, the divisions ran deep.

With the war over and Khomeini gone, factional infighting entered a new stage, and Khamenei began to gradually consolidate his power. During Rafsanjani’s first term as president, from 1989 to 1993, the two men coexisted peacefully, with Khamenei cautiously supporting Rafsanjani’s postwar plans for economic liberalization and regional integration and tolerating his efforts to promote cultural liberalization. But opposition to Rafsanjani’s liberal agenda began to mount among his hard-line allies, who in 1992 won a majority in parliament. Two years later, Khamenei openly sided against Rafsanjani over the budget, criticizing him for the country’s growing economic malaise and widespread corruption. Rafsanjani backtracked from his cultural liberalization agenda and appeased conservatives by offering them more seats in his cabinet and greater access to economic privileges. Competition between Khamenei and Rafsanjani would continue up until the latter’s death, earlier this year, with Khamenei repeatedly emerging on top.

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Khamenei’s next problem was gaining authority within the religious establishment. Khamenei had enjoyed its near-unanimous backing when he became supreme leader, and in 1994, the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, an important clerical and political institution, proclaimed Khamenei a marja. Still, a number of clerics strongly questioned Khamenei’s theological credentials. To counter his perceived weakness, Khamenei embarked on a decadelong journey to build religious support. He imposed a state-controlled bureaucracy on top of the clerical structure of Qom that stripped the ayatollahs of their once cherished financial independence and put them under his implicit control. And he rewarded his supporters with political positions and financial privileges that he denied to his critics. In the process, Khamenei managed to subjugate the Assembly of Experts, the one and only body with the constitutional authority to supervise him.

Over the years, Khamenei has also steadily diminished the role of Iran’s elected government, concentrating power in his own office and in state entities that fall outside government oversight. In 2011, he established a body charged with resolving conflicts among various branches of government and appointed its chair. He also created the Strategic Council on Foreign Relations, his personal advisory board on foreign policy, and set up a parallel intelligence apparatus that has grown more powerful than the elected government’s. Whereas Khomeini relied on a small coterie of officials to run his office, Khamenei has placed thousands of his direct and indirect representatives in government ministries, universities, the armed forces, and religious institutions throughout the country, all of whom report to him or his office.
Most important, Khamenei has cultivated a strong relationship with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the parallel military force beside the regular army, loyal to the supreme leader, that is charged with protecting Iran’s security and Islamic character. His methods have largely been financial. Over the past two decades, as Iran has hesitantly embarked on the path of economic liberalization, Khamenei has helped businesses affiliated with the IRGC purchase state-owned companies at below-market rates and steered lucrative government contracts their way.

As a result, the IRGC has become a multibillion-dollar commercial powerhouse that comprises hundreds of companies. These employ hundreds of thousands of Iranians directly, and millions more depend indirectly on them for their livelihoods. To name just one example, the IRGC controls the Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, which ranks as the biggest engineering firm in Iran and employs more than 160,000 people.

As the IRGC’s economic power has grown, so has its willingness to assert itself politically. The key moment came in 1999, when thousands of students took to the streets to protest the closure of a reformist newspaper. Twenty-four IRGC commanders wrote an angry letter to then President Mohammad Khatami, criticizing him for not stopping the demonstrations and implicitly calling for his resignation. “Our patience is at an end,” they wrote, “and we do not think it is possible to tolerate any more if this is not addressed.” It was the first time the IRGC had intervened directly in politics, and the move neutralized Khatami’s reform agenda. Iran’s deep state had pulled off a soft coup against its government.

From that point on, reformists were on the back foot as the deep state grew. The trend continued into the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who took office in 2005. More government offices and parliamentary seats came to be held by members of the IRGC, and its associated organizations took control of most newly privatized entities. Then came the contested presidential election of 2009. After the Green Movement protests broke out, the IRGC oversaw the crackdown, which further solidified its authority.

What officials in the deep state care most about now is defending their institutions against what they call a “soft war” (jang-e narm) led by the West. Caught unawares by the 2009 protests, they see themselves as standing guard against efforts by the United States and its Western allies to undermine Iran. As the deep state prepares for Khamenei’s succession, it will look for a candidate who can help it continue this struggle.

In the hours following Khamenei’s death, the Speaker of the Assembly of Experts will likely convene an emergency session to choose a successor. Although the process is not written in stone (or in the constitution), precedent suggests that the assembly will name one of its 88 members.

Because the members are concerned most with protecting Iran’s deep state, they will likely elect a relatively young insider who seems capable of maintaining stability for a long time to come. Such a candidate would, like Khamenei, have hard-line ideological leanings (in terms of both domestic and foreign policy), adequate but not overarching religious authority, and good executive experience. Most important, he would respect the interests of the deep state and allow it to operate without interference. These criteria rule out three oft-mentioned candidates: Hassan Khomeini (Khomeini’s grandson), President Hassan Rouhani, and Mojtaba Khamenei (Khamenei’s son). The first two are distrusted by the deep state for their reformist inclinations, and the third has no popular base of support. Rather, the next supreme leader is likely to be one of three men: Sadeq Larijani, Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, or Ebrahim Raisi.
THE TARNISHED HARD-LINER

The current head of Iran’s judiciary, Larijani, 56, was born in Najaf, Iraq, to an influential family: his father, Mirza Hashem Amoli, was a much-esteemed grand ayatollah, and his four brothers have all risen to senior posts within the Iranian government. An elected member of the Assembly of Experts since 1998, Larijani was appointed to the Guardian Council (which approves candidates for parliament, the Assembly of Experts, and the presidency) in 2001 and named to his current position in the judiciary in 2009.

Larijani possesses impeccable clerical credentials. He studied under his father and another grand ayatollah, Hossein Vahid Khorasani, and began teaching the highest level of seminary education when he was just 30 years old. He has written extensively on the philosophical merits of Islamic government. Indeed, Larijani is best described as a genuine hard-liner. A member the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers’ extreme right wing, he opposes the relaxation of social and religious norms and the liberalization of Iran’s political system. He also advocates a zero-tolerance policy toward dissent: at a convention of judiciary officials in 2015, he spoke of resolute action against domestic opposition, adding, “We cannot exchange compliments with them.”

Like the supreme leader, Larijani has a decidedly anti-Western outlook. After moderates supportive of Rafsanjani and Rouhani made gains in the February 2016 Assembly of Experts elections, Larijani issued a statement accusing the moderates of collaborating with Saudi Arabia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Larijani’s uncompromising stances have put him in conflict with more than a few members of the political establishment over the years, including Ahmadinejad and Rafsanjani.

But Larijani has demonstrated an absolute devotion to the supreme leader. He has never claimed the status of grand ayatollah, thereby showing deference to Khamenei’s authority. And he supports the notion that the Assembly of Experts should exercise minimal supervision over the supreme leader, an extreme view within the seminary. Khamenei has described Larijani as a “learned, brave, cerebral, revolutionary mujtahid [an authoritative interpreter of Islamic law] and devout scholar” and has rewarded him for his loyalty by promoting him to important positions.

As head of the judiciary, Larijani earned the ire of reformists and the admiration of hard-liners for meting out severe punishments to the Green Movement protesters (as well as a place on the EU’s list of designated human rights violators). Larijani established good relations with the IRGC, whose intelligence arm has assisted the judiciary in recent years by detaining and questioning activists. And he demonstrated his conservative zeal, eagerly attacking Rouhani for supporting the nuclear deal. Further adding to his influence, Larijani chairs the board of trustees of Imam Sadiq University, which trains civil officers for key political positions in the Islamic Republic. His involvement in such pivotal institutions has given him a deep understanding of Iran’s labyrinth of power.

Only one major obstacle stands in Larijani’s way: in recent years, his family has come under attack for corruption. In 2013, Ahmadinejad played a video in parliament that he claimed showed one of Larijani’s brothers trading on his family connections, and members of parliament have accused Larijani of transferring public funds to his personal bank accounts. Although the allegations were eventually debunked, they could still block Larijani’s ascent to Iran’s top job if members of the assembly conclude that his reputation is simply too tarnished.

THE CREDENTIALED CANDIDATE

Larijani’s predecessor as head of the judiciary, Shahroudi, is an equally plausible candidate for supreme leader. Born to a family of clerics in Karbala, Iraq, Shahroudi, 68, immigrated to Iran shortly after the 1979 revolution, where he acted as a go-between for the Islamic Republic and the Iraqi Shiite opposition to Saddam Hussein. He rose to prominence after Khomeini’s death, when Khamenei named him to the
Guardian Council. In 1999, Shahroudi was appointed head of the judiciary, and he served in that position until the end of his term, in 2009. Shahroudi has had a long and close relationship with Khamenei. He shares the supreme leader’s anti-American worldview and hard-line foreign policy positions, but unlike Khamenei, he has shunned factional politics.

What distinguishes Shahroudi most are his Islamic credentials. Shahroudi holds the honorific title “sayyid,” meaning that he is considered a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad. When Khomeini was an exiled lecturer in Najaf, Shahroudi studied under him and other esteemed scholars. In 2010, Shahroudi declared himself a grand ayatollah and published a collection of fatwas. With strong links to parts of the Shiite community in Iraq, Shahroudi enjoys a religious authority that extends beyond Iran, giving him a leg up over his rivals for supreme leader. But his relationship with the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, of which he is a member, has been less successful: in 2012, he tried to start a rival, more inclusive clerical group, only to receive strong pushback from some fellow high-ranking ayatollahs who accused him of trying to sow discord.

As head of the judiciary, Shahroudi showed minimal opposition to the harsh treatment of dissidents and activists. He made tepid attempts at reform, which achieved little. His effort to fight corruption in the judiciary failed to do much. (In fact, the press has speculated that various associates of his are corrupt.) A 2004 parliamentary law he championed that was intended to monitor the performance of the courts and interrogators proved ineffective, as did his attempts to end solitary confinement and torture. While these efforts appear to have been genuine, as a regime insider, he never pushed for wide-scale reform.

Shahroudi has a great deal of experience at the highest echelons of power and influence. In addition to his time heading the judiciary and sitting on the Guardian Council, he has served on the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (which sets policy on Iran’s social mores). And in March, his name was circulated as a possible candidate to chair the Expediency Council (which arbitrates disputes between parliament and the Guardian Council), a significant promotion. But Shahroudi’s influence extends only so far: he does not appear to have strong ties to military or security officials.

Known for his gentle personality, Shahroudi has largely steered clear of factional politics. During the 2009 demonstrations, he said little about the judicial sentences handed down to protesters. He has maintained ties with both Ahmadinejad’s circle of hard-liners and Rafsanjani’s more reform-minded crowd. Shahroudi’s fence straddling may lead some within the deep state to consider him unreliable, and it may explain why his two bids to become Speaker of the Assembly of Experts failed.

THE DEEP STATE’S PICK

Since early last year, Raisi has emerged as the odds-on favorite to become Iran’s next supreme leader. In March 2016, Raisi, 56, was appointed head of Astan Quds Razavi. A massive charity that is controlled by the supreme leader’s office, the organization manages a shrine that attracts religious pilgrims from Iran and beyond. In this post, Raisi oversees the organization’s sprawling business empire, which dispenses the charity’s financial largess to religious groups and institutions. Although Raisi is not that well known among the Iranian public, his new appointment will no doubt increase his profile.

Raisi made his career in the judiciary. In 1980, when he was just 20 years old, he was among the first group of young clerics to enter the newly established Islamic court system, and he steadily worked his way up. After heading the group that prosecutes corruption in state-owned entities, he was named deputy chief justice in 2004. A year later, according to press reports, Ahmadinejad asked him to lead the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, but Raisi declined the offer, preferring to retain the more powerful post in the judiciary. In 2014, Larijani appointed Raisi attorney general, the country’s top prosecutor. He
distinguished himself most in that position by dragging his feet on an investigation into a series of acid attacks in 2014 against women in the city of Isfahan.

Raisi’s biggest liability is his mediocre religious résumé. He is not a high-ranking cleric, has published little theological scholarship, and has never taught in top seminaries. Unlike Larijani and Shahroudi, he is not a member of the Society of Qom Seminary Teachers, nor has he ever sat on the Guardian Council. Although he studied under Khamenei in the early 1990s and forged close ties to the supreme leader’s coterie, his association with other seminarians is limited. In an attempt to burnish his clerical credentials, he started teaching graduate courses in theology at Imam Sadiq University and, in 2016, began using the title “ayatollah.” Raisi also serves as the prosecutor on the Special Clerical Court, the body that punishes wrongdoing among the clergy, and as a member of the council that oversees seminaries in Mashhad, Iran’s second-largest city.

Despite his clerical shortcomings, Raisi enjoys the high esteem of his fellow members of the Assembly of Experts. He was elected to the assembly in 2006, and just two years later, his peers voted for him to replace Rouhani on the body’s presiding board, which acts as a liaison with other state institutions. Raisi also serves as secretary of the committee within the assembly that oversees the supreme leader.

Raisi is nothing if not a hard-liner. He hails from the extremist faction within the Combatant Clergy Association, a conservative political group. In 1988, as a prosecutor, Raisi handled the mass executions of political prisoners, including members of the Mujahideen-e Khalq, or MEK, an exiled group that advocates the overthrow of the Islamic Republic.

Perhaps most important, of all the candidates, Raisi has the strongest ties to the deep state. Last year, the commander of the IRGC paid a visit to Raisi in Mashhad with other top brass to report on the group’s classified regional activities. In photos of the meeting, Raisi can be seen sitting in a chair while his guests sit on the floor—a remarkable show of respect and confidence for a security establishment that closely guards its secrets. For ten years, Raisi served on the board of Setad, a holding company under Khamenei’s control that has interests in Iran’s pharmaceutical, real estate, telecommunications, and energy sectors and, according to Reuters, has assets of some $95 billion.

Throughout his career, Raisi has maintained the utmost loyalty to Khomeini and Khamenei. That, along with his conservative bona fides, experience in the judiciary, and political savvy, makes him the leading candidate for supreme leader. He ticks all the right boxes.

PREDICTING THE UNPREDICTABLE

It is tempting to hope that when Khamenei dies, Iran’s reformists will resurface to challenge the hard-liners. But when Rafsanjani died, so, too, did the possibility of any internal challenge. The question of succession will force unity among Iran’s various political factions, all of which remain devoted to safeguarding the state above all else.

The Green Movement, meanwhile, has been neutralized through violence and intimidation. Khatami has been marginalized since he was placed under close state supervision in 2009 (and even as president, he never truly attempted to challenge the deep state). Rouhani, who counts as a moderate in today’s Iran, is also a creature of the political system, and when push comes to shove, he, too, will fall into line, despite his deep disagreements with the hard-liners. Like the rest of Iran’s establishment, he has no desire to relive the 2009 protests or allow the Arab Spring to spread to his country.

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As Iran gears up for a leadership transition, it is important to see the Islamic Republic for what it is, and not what one may hope it can be. Given the enduring power of its deep state, Iran will likely keep trying
to expand its regional influence. When it comes to relations with the West, it will probably continue its cautious and pragmatic strategy, cooperating on some issues (for example, helping with the fight against the Islamic State, or ISIS) while refusing to do so on others (for example, maintaining its hostility toward Israel). And as long as the United States upholds its end of the nuclear deal, Iran will continue to uphold its. But it is foolish to hope that pressure from the Trump administration will bring about political change in Iran.

Khamenei wants a stable transition, and he is counting on the deep state to ensure it. In a 1996 speech to a group of IRGC commanders, he divided Iranians into two groups, the avam, “masses,” and the khavas, “insiders,” and emphasized the importance of the latter’s “level of dedication to the ideals of the Islamic Republic.” He went on: “Some fall for the glitter of the material world, and the faithful are only those who remain committed and loyal.” As Khamenei sees it, Iran’s survival lies in the hands of his carefully built network of disciples. In all likelihood, they will continue to safeguard the Islamic Republic long after he is gone.