



Q&A / MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA 20 MAY 2024 ⌚ 6 MINUTES

Iran: Death of a President

A helicopter crash on 19 May killed Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who many had thought was the likely successor to the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader. In this Q&A, Crisis Group experts Ali Vaez and Naysan Rafati look at the implications of Raisi's sudden demise.

What happened?

On 19 May, a helicopter carrying Iran's president, Ebrahim Raisi, crashed in the north-western province of East Azerbaijan. Raisi, 63, was killed, along with Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and six others including the East Azerbaijan governor and Tabriz's Friday prayer leader. They were returning from a trip to the Iran-Azerbaijan border, where they had inaugurated a dam alongside the Azerbaijani president, Ilham Aliyev. Initial reports suggest that poor weather may have been a factor in the incident; it also hampered search-and-rescue efforts in the remote area where the aircraft went down. Not surprisingly, rumours of foul play are rife. But so far, Tehran has not fuelled such speculation: it has neither offered evidence for this possibility nor pointed a finger at any of its regional or extra-regional adversaries.

What are the implications for domestic politics?

Raisi is the first Iranian president to die in office since 1981, when Mohammad-Ali Rajai was killed in a bombing less than a month after assuming the post. A subsequent election elevated Ali Khamenei – the Islamic Republic’s current Supreme Leader – to the presidency. According to Article 131 of the Islamic Republic’s constitution, in the event of death or incapacitation, the president’s deputy – in this case, Vice President Mohammad Mokhber – is to occupy the position as caretaker for no more than 50 days, during which period a presidential election is to be organised in cooperation with the speaker of parliament and the head of the judiciary. On 20 May, the government set 28 June as election day, to be preceded by candidate registration, vetting of contenders by the Guardian Council (an unelected oversight body) and a campaigning period.

Raisi took office in 2021 and was widely expected to seek re-election in 2025. The three national elections that have occurred in the past four years – two parliamentary and one presidential – offer pointers as to the likely political ramifications of his death, even if it is impossible to make specific predictions.

First, a feature that has stood out in all these recent polls has been the narrowing of political competition to the conservative camp, with contests consisting almost entirely of groups considered stalwart adherents of the Islamic Republic’s core ideology. Oversight bodies have become more prone to quash the candidacies of those regarded as reformists or moderates on the Islamic Republic’s political spectrum, while security forces have restricted the political activities of these figures. Even some conservatives who are more critical of the government’s direction have ended up excluded from an election system that tolerates only the most loyal. As a result, hardliners have consolidated power in all the system’s elected and appointed institutions. There is little sign that they are inclined to jeopardise this control by allowing for genuinely competitive elections, especially as the Supreme Leader consistently urges doctrinal purity.

Secondly, these exclusionary moves have not prevented fratricidal infighting in the conservative camp, which manifests itself in the form of blame games for the country’s economic and other problems. Some of the disagreements are ideological, but many are based on factional power struggles. Khamenei has chided conservatives about their bickering, but the fissures could deepen and grow more pronounced with the unexpected vacuum at the top of government following Raisi’s death.

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Thirdly, at the same time that the electoral process has become an increasingly hollow exercise, turnouts have plummeted, with a majority of voters failing to participate in the 2020 and 2024 legislative elections as well as the presidential poll that Raisi won in 2021. These shows of public disaffection, along with recent and still raw memories of the violently repressed nationwide

protests in 2022, underscore the growing gap between state and society amid stifling social and political restrictions as well as a persistent economic malaise. While the government will likely seek to exploit Raisi's death to call for national unity, public interest or engagement in the election to replace him could well be negligible, with many Iranians seeing no possibility of meaningful change via the ballot box.

What is Raisi's foreign policy legacy, and what does his death mean for Iran's external relations?

Raisi's authority in foreign policy matters was constrained by competing centres of state power and the decision-making authority of the Supreme Leader, which restricted his influence but did not spare him a fraught period in high office. The headline legacy of his truncated term was a sharp deterioration of Iran's relations with the West, owing to failed efforts to negotiate a return to the 2015 nuclear agreement and Tehran's increasingly close military ties to Moscow during Russia's war in Ukraine. In the Middle East, the ledger is mixed, with improved relations with Gulf Arab neighbours but deepening rivalry with Israel and its allies. The latter was on full display in mid-April, when Iran carried out a brazen drone and missile attack on Israel, bookended by Israeli strikes on senior Iranian commanders in Syria and near sensitive nuclear sites on Iranian soil. The other legacy is economic deterioration. Despite steps intended to find relief through increasing reliance on internal capabilities, in addition to warmer relations with China and membership in multilateral organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and an expanded BRICS, the country's economic struggles have continued. These have taken the form of high inflation and a weakened currency; recurrent corruption cases suggest considerable rot at the system's core. The government has long claimed that a "resistance economy" can thrive despite the increasing Western sanctions imposed on Iran for its nuclear program, regional policy and domestic repression, but the persistent economic problems demonstrate that this strategy has limits.

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As for Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, his personal diplomatic achievements were scant. Both the high-stakes nuclear negotiations and indirect talks in Oman with senior U.S. officials were conducted by his deputy, Ali Bagheri Kani, who is now acting foreign minister and is widely seen as Amir-Abdollahian's most likely successor. Engagement with Middle Eastern neighbours – including the talks that led to the Chinese-brokered restoration of relations with Saudi Arabia – was primarily driven by security officials.

It is not immediately clear that these two deaths will have major consequences for Iran's external relations, and the uncertainty is likely to persist at least until their replacements are known. Even then, the new president and foreign minister are likely to face the same structural constraints on their ability to shape diverging policies. Indeed, for the next few weeks, Iran will remain focused on

internal affairs as it chooses its ninth president (as well as confirming a speaker of parliament and chair of the Assembly of Experts, discussed below). Still, **regional tensions remain high**, as does the potential for an external crisis that could pull in Tehran. Low-level hostilities continue between Iran and its partners in the “axis of resistance”, on one side, and the U.S., Israel and their allies, on the other. As April’s perilous tit-for-tat with Israel underscored, events always have the potential to escalate, though neither side seems to want that to happen for the time being – and while the two sides have changed the old rules of the game, new ones have yet to be tested. Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian’s successors are likely to continue efforts to mend ties with Gulf Arab neighbours, while on the nuclear front, a key flashpoint already looms as a forthcoming Board of Governors meeting at the International Atomic Energy Agency will bring Tehran’s continued stonewalling on access and transparency back on to the agenda.

What does Raisi’s death mean for the Supreme Leader’s **succession?**

The Islamic Republic’s overriding priority in recent years has been to leave nothing to chance in preparing for the eventual demise of its most senior figure, Ayatollah Ali **Khamenei**, who **is 85**. **Raisi’s** rise to the presidency and longstanding relationship with Khamenei had made him widely tipped as **one of the likeliest candidates** to succeed the Supreme Leader, becoming only the third occupant of the system’s most powerful post since the 1979 revolution. By elevating figures regarded as true believers in the Islamic Republic, and excluding those with even modestly dissenting views, the Iranian leadership has aimed to consolidate conformity at the top in anticipation of a seamless changing of the guard.

Raisi’s death comes at a time when the Assembly of Experts, an 88-member institution nominally tasked with selecting the Supreme Leader, is undergoing a delicate transition following the **March legislative elections**. These saw the disqualification of regime veterans such as Hassan Rouhani, Raisi’s predecessor as president, as well as the electoral defeat of Mohammad Sadegh Amoli-Larijani, another long-time insider and former head of the judiciary. In Iran’s opaque political environment, none but a handful at the top know how likely Raisi was to become the next Supreme Leader. But if he was to get the job, his death puts a big question mark on the succession.

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