

Can Iran avoid a political crisis after its president's death?



challenge for the regime at a time when its public legitimacy is at its lowest.

In addition, the recent escalation in the ongoing shadow war with Israel has presented serious security concerns and given rise to a host of conspiracy theories. Rumours have gained traction with the public suggesting the president's helicopter crash was the result of electronic warfare, a drone attack or even a ground assault by Israel. (The IRNA state news agency said the crash was due to a "technical failure".)

Despite these challenges, however, the transfer of power is unlikely to significantly impact the country's stability due to the nature of power dynamics in Iran. The Iranian political system consists of multiple interconnected circles under the guidance of the Supreme Leader. Losing one main player would not cause a major disruption when there are several others ready to fill the void. Vice President Mohammad Mokhber has stepped in as acting president until new elections are held. It is expected the conservative inner circle close to the Supreme Leader will select its preferred candidate for the poll, aiming for a smooth transition with minimal challenges.

As Khamenei posted on X: "The nation doesn't need to be worried or anxious, as the administration of the country will not be disrupted."

However, a historical analysis of leadership in the Islamic Republic suggests a recurring pattern of power shifting between conservatives and reformists, which creates a sense of balance in Iranian politics and boosts the regime's public legitimacy.

Hence, even though Raisi's successor will be nominated and supported by a conservative inner circle, he may embody somewhat of a moderate stance. Figures like the current parliament speaker, Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, or former speaker Ali Larjani, who are both moderate conservatives, fit this description.

What will it mean for Iran's neighbours?:

During his tenure, Raisi shifted the country's foreign policy more towards the Middle East, making it the top priority. This marked a departure from his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, who had prioritised strengthening relationships with European countries and normalising ties with other Western nations. During Raisi's presidency, for instance, Iraq hosted five rounds of negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, culminating in the historic normalisation of relations between the two in early 2023.

As a former advisor of strategic communication to the then-Iraqi prime minister, it became evident to me that Iran was earnest about forging a strategic, long-term, robust relationship with its neighbours. The outcome of these negotiations marked the end of a lengthy civil war in Yemen, facilitated the normalisation of Arab countries' relations with Syria, and contributed to enhanced stability in Iraq.

Additionally, Iran has recently engaged in substantial negotiations with Jordan and Egypt, facilitated again by Iraq. These initiatives offered

a chance to move past the sectarian conflicts that have long dominated the region and lay the groundwork for greater cooperation.

Iran also grew closer with both China and Russia as well during Raisi's presidency, reflecting a strategic, long-term pivot towards the East endorsed by the Supreme Leader. However, Iran also continued negotiations with Western powers over its nuclear program, employing different tactics compared to Rouhani's tenure. Iran's foreign policy looks likely to remain the same under a new president.

The appointment of Ali Bagheri Kani as acting foreign minister following the helicopter crash (which also claimed the life of the current foreign minister) reinforces this continuity. Kani, who played a key role in leading the nuclear negotiations under Raisi, aligns with the country's established foreign policy direction.

In addition, Iran's closer relations with its neighbours signals a more permanent shift away from isolation. This will likely continue to improve in the short term.

The death of President Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash has occurred during one of the Islamic Republic of Iran's most challenging periods.

Raisi, a prominent figure in the political elite, held substantial sway over Iran's domestic policies. He was also central to Iran's recent moves to improve relations with its rivals in the region.

Given his sizeable influence, what will his absence mean for the country's domestic affairs? And how will it impact the country's relations in the region?

Maintaining stability at a perilous time: Raisi's government was very conservative and had a close relationship to the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. There were almost no conflicts or disagreements between the two sides, which contrasts with previous governments, most of which had some distance or tension with the leader.

Raisi was also considered one of the leading candidates to succeed the 85-year-old Khamenei, who has held the office of Supreme Leader for 35 years. His broad influence within

the country's conservative circles made him a significant figure in shaping the future of Iran's leadership.

However, his death, which occurred a year before the conclusion of his second term, came amid a backdrop of domestic, regional and international challenges. Iran remains under severe sanctions imposed by the United States for its nuclear program, which have caused significant damage to the economy and had a profound impact on people's lives.

The country also witnessed one of the most significant protest movements in its history over the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini in September 2022, following her arrest by the morality police. There have been local protests in different parts of the country as well, mostly over the economic crisis and some of the government's domestic policies.

Moreover, parliamentary elections in March of this year saw one of the lowest voter turnout rates in the country's history. As a result, the holding of new elections, which is mandated within 50 days of Raisi's death, poses a significant



Protesters clash with police following the death of Mahsa Amini, in Tehran in Sep 2022

Prez Raisi's death leaves Tehran mourning loss of regime loyalist



the protests, Raisi demonstrated his loyalty to the supreme leader and conservative elites by doubling down on restrictions and crackdowns. Meanwhile, under Raisi, Iran's economy continued to suffer due to a combination of government mismanagement and corruption, along with U.S. sanctions that have intensified in response to Tehran's domestic repression and overseas provocations.

Confrontation over rapprochement: Domestic turmoil under Raisi's presidency was accompanied by shifts in Iran's regional and international role.

As supreme leader, Khamenei has the final say on foreign policy. But Raisi presided over a state that continued down the path of confrontation toward its adversaries, notably the U.S. and Israel. And whether out of choice or perceived necessity, Tehran has moved further away from any idea of rapprochement with the West.

Faced with increased U.S. sanctions, Iran under Raisi has been reluctant to revive the nuclear deal. Instead, Iran has increased uranium enrichment, blocked international inspectors, and become a nuclear threshold state. Raisi also continued the "Look to the East" policy of his predecessor, Hassan Rouhani. To this end, he and his government pursued greater rapprochement with China.

Beijing, in turn, has offered an economic lifeline by importing Iranian oil and brokering a diplomatic agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia in March 2023.

Meanwhile, under Raisi's presidency, Iran continued to serve as an ally and funder of anti-US and anti-West conflicts, delivering combat drones to

What death means for stability in Iran & beyond... Expert Q&A



A helicopter carrying Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi, the country's foreign minister and other officials crashed in the mountainous north-west reaches of Iran on Sunday May 19, sparking a rescue operation in thick fog and driving rain. On May 20, search and rescue teams reached the crash site and "found no signs of the helicopter's occupants being alive".

The death of Raisi and his foreign minister will shake up Iranian politics. What happens now? And what could his death mean for stability in the country and beyond? We spoke with Scott Lucas, a Middle East scholar at University College Dublin, who has been writing about tensions in the Middle East for many years.

How big of a blow is losing Raisi for the regime? Raisi was considered loyal to Khamenei and often took on the role of a scapegoat to help the supreme leader avoid criticism. It is because of this loyalty that, despite being seen as unexceptional and even weak by many in Iran's political system, Raisi had been mentioned as a possible successor to the supreme leader.

But, in itself, the loss of Raisi has little effect on the Iranian system. He was largely a placeholder representing the wishes of the supreme leader, the Revolutionary Guard Corps and hardliners.

The bigger challenge is replacing Raisi with a minimum of in-fighting in the Iranian regime, maintaining the ostracism of reformists and centrists, and suppressing any protests.

Following the crash, Khamenei reassured Iranians there would be "no disruption to the work of the country". How true is this claim?

The supreme leader's statement is best understood as a call to Iranians to avoid "disruption", given the series of nationwide protests that erupted after the contested result of Iran's 2009 presidential election.

The incumbent president at the time, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was declared the outright winner against many people's expectations. Widespread unrest followed and thousands of people were arbitrarily arrested, and dozens were killed on the streets or died in detention.

Khamenei's rhetoric is also an "all is well" proclamation defying the serious economic problems and regional tensions that Iran faces. Iran's economy has been in a parlous state for years, through a combination of mismanagement and sanctions. The currency is at a historic low, having lost 93% of value since 2018. Inflation remains above 40% officially and far higher unofficially. And unemployment is high, especially among the younger generation.

The regime continues to suppress protests through detentions and intimidation. But demands for reforms are still widespread. They have been galvanised by the regime's crackdown over compulsory hijab. Iran's authorities have tried to quash centrists as well as reformists, but face a backlash from public criticism, including that of former president, Hassan Rouhani.

Who will replace Raisi?

If a president dies in office, Iran's constitution says that the first vice president takes over for a period of 50 days, with the approval of the supreme leader. A new presidential election is then held at the end of the interim period. Khamenei has confirmed that the first vice president, Mohammad Mokhber, will serve as the country's acting president until elections are held.

Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi, who was killed when his helicopter crashed on May 19, 2024 in a mountainous border region, was a consummate loyalist whose passing will be a severe blow to the country's conservative leadership.

The discovery of wreckage and bodies followed an overnight search operation hampered by weather and terrain. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei announced that there would be a five-day period of public mourning in the country.

As an expert on Iran's domestic politics and foreign policy, I believe concern in Tehran may extend beyond the potential human tragedy of the crash. The change forced by it will have important implications for an Iranian state that is consumed by domestic chaos, and regional and international confrontation.

Who was Ebrahim Raisi? Since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Raisi acted as an assiduous apparatchik of the Islamic Republic and a prominent protégé of Khamenei, who as supreme leader holds ultimate power in the Islamic Republic.

Before becoming president in 2021, Raisi held various positions inside the judiciary under the purview of the supreme leader. As a prosecutor, and at the end of the Iran-Iraq War in 1988, he sat on the committee that sentenced thousands of political prisoners to death.

nickname the "Butcher of Tehran" and subsequently subjected him to sanctions by the United States and to condemnation by the United Nations and international human rights organizations. Since 2006, Raisi served on the Assembly of Experts, a body that appoints and supervises the supreme leader.

And despite being seen as lacking charisma and eloquence, it was thought that Raisi, 63, was being groomed to succeed the 85-year-old Khamenei as supreme leader.

A checkered domestic record: Domestically, Raisi's presidency was both the cause and consequence of a legitimacy crisis and societal chaos for the regime.

He controversially won the 2021 presidential election after a high number of candidate disqualifications by the Guardian Council, which vets candidates, and a historically low voter turnout of less than 50%.

To appease his conservative base, Raisi and his government reinvigorated the morality police and reimposed religious restrictions on society. This policy led to the Women, Life, Freedom protests sparked by the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini in 2022. The demonstrations proved to be the largest and longest in the Islamic Republic's near 50-year history. They also resulted in unprecedented state repression, with over 500 protesters killed and hundreds more injured, disappeared and detained. Throughout

ment mismanagement and corruption, along with U.S. sanctions that have intensified in response to Tehran's domestic repression and overseas provocations.

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