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Iran: The Ayatollah Succession Question

The questionable health of the supreme leader has prompted debate about an eventual succession.

By Kevjn Lim

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Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Sayyed Ali Khamenei recently underwent prostate surgery, following recurrent rumors that he suffers from some form of cancer. At 75, the Mashhad-born Khamenei, who is half Azeri-Turk and hence only half Persian, has been the Islamic Republic's top arbiter and ultimate enigma ever since he replaced its founder in 1989. Although he has managed to go hiking following his surgery, questions about his health reinvigorates debate over the single most important question in Iran.

The looming succession, already increasingly ripe for public discussion both outside and inside Iran, is far from straightforward. When Khamenei took up Ruhollah Khomeini's mantle, he inherited one hell of a frock. Fundamental constitutional adjustments had to be made on the fly to compensate for his sub-Leader inadequacies, including a fast-track promotion from the middling *Hojjatoleslam* to the rank of *Ayatollah*, usually reserved for the most senior among *Mojtaheds* – that is Shi'ite clerics qualified to issue their own independent rulings. (Sunni clergy deploy juridical precedent instead.) Had Khomeini's original designated successor, Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri not run afoul of the Imam, or had one of the other contemporary Grand Ayatollahs of undisputed clerical repute – such as Mohammad Reza

Golpayegani, Mohammad Ali Araki or Abulghassem Khoei – bought into Khomeini’s personal theory of the Ruling Jurisprudent (*Vali-ye Faqih*) or the revolution he violently fathered, all this fuss might have been unnecessary.

Even despite the constitutional fudging, bereft of Khomeini’s towering stature and unitive appeal, Khamenei found he still had to hedge his bets from day one, so he courted and co-opted the security establishment, and particularly the hardline Revolutionary Guards. In the quarter century that has elapsed since, while he has clearly proven to be politically dexterous, Khamenei has also become more of an adjudicatory ombudsman among fiercely competing power centers – with a preference for the hardliners – than a spiritual-temporal authority guided by a clear vision of statehood and rulership. Iran’s body politic, as a result, has become only more fractious and factionalized.

Hence, the shoes Khamenei will be leaving behind to be filled aren’t particularly big, so much as they are an awkward fit. As if demonstrating the constitutionally requisite piety, political finesse, administrative ability, and (dumbed down) scholarship weren’t enough, Khamenei’s successor – or successors – will also have to surmount increasingly centrifugal domestic forces and secure an independent support base. No such comparable figure of authority has yet emerged in contemporary Iran, which makes this whole succession shebang all the more arcane. Nonetheless, at least three broad succession scenarios exist.

Continuity: The *Vali-ye Faqih* Hat Trick

While the constitutionally appointed, 86-man Assembly of Experts is charged with designating and “supervising” the Supreme Leader (the Assembly itself is scheduled for eight-yearly elections in early 2016, and its makeup, together with that of the Guardian Council, conceals important succession clues), paramount influence over the choice of successor resides in two other power centers. These are the Guards (and their Basij complement), and to an extent the pro-revolutionary, as distinct from the traditional quietist, elements of the clerical establishment.

Given their longstanding and symbiotic relations with Khamenei, the Guards would conceivably accept a candidate who at the least guarantees structural and ideological continuity. Since 1989, the Guards have evolved from a motley binge of armed factions into a vast, shadowy organization with immense vested interests in critical economic sectors, custodianship of Iran’s ballistic missile program, and an unmistakably public propensity for interference in domestic politicking. When a former Guard stalwart and neoconservative member of the Revolution’s second, wartime generation, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad assumed the presidency, Guard alumni flooded about half of the ministerial positions in his cabinet and even more seats in the parliament, prompting some observers to pronounce a virtual military dictatorship in the making.

Traditionally independent of Persia’s temporal shahs, economically self-financing, and politically quietist, the clerical establishment has over the decades been cowed and brought into line, both subtly and brutally, with the ideological outlook adopted by Khomeini’s heirs and institutionalized in Qom’s seminaries. Those among the clergy who came to prominence along with 1979’s powerbrokers, or who enjoyed personal patronage and today hold key positions in such conservative hardline institutions as the Guardian Council, the Ministry of Intelligence and

Security, the judiciary, and the numerous charitable foundations known in Persian as *bonyads*, have long marched in lockstep with Khamenei and like the Guards are certain to seek continuity. For after all, under the existing conditions, the Supreme Leader designate will also rise from their ranks.

In recent years, speculation has yielded several potential names. The most likely of these is ***Ayatollah Sayyed Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, 66***. A Najaf-born cleric who was once Khomeini's representative to pro-Iranian Shi'ites in Iraq, and the antireformist head of Iran's judiciary for a decade, Shahroudi possesses fitting clerical credentials of the sort Khamenei never had. As first deputy chair, he temporarily heads the Assembly of Experts following Ayatollah Mohammad-Reza Mahdavi Kani's recent heart attack. But if Khamenei lacks Khomeini's charisma, Shahroudi is reportedly still more unexciting, and his Iraqi birth despite ancestral origins in Iran's northeast may pose awkward hurdles.

Next is ***Sayyed Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei, 45***, the second son of the Supreme Leader and the most blatant, though not necessarily logical, choice for successor. Mojtaba is closely associated with the conservatives, is possibly even more hardline than his father, and more importantly administers much of the access to, and key affairs within, the Office of the Supreme Leader – arguably the single most important institution in the Islamic Republic – and hence to Khamenei himself. All this makes him an attractive candidate for the Guards, with whose senior leadership he is said to be chummy. How his clerical credentials are viewed are probably a different story, though the younger Khamenei also studied under Ayatollah Shahroudi. While there hasn't been a dynastic precedent since 1979, Khamenei may attempt to change all that.

Then there is ***Hassan Khomeini, 42***, the most prominent grandson of the Islamic Republic's founder, and son of Ahmad Khomeini, who died in mysterious circumstances in the mid-1990s. Hassan Khomeini commands an impeccable pedigree crucial for wider popular acceptance, although in clerical gerontology terms he is still a relative strapping like Mojtaba. However, his dangerously weak link lies in his association with the reformists and moderates (Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani is said to be a fan) and his involvement in the 2009 protests, which would render him virtually anathema to the Guards – unless a fundamental shift occurs, in which case he might be a suitably pliable cipher for the Imam's Praetorian elite.

Finally, the A-list's outlier is ***Ayatollah Mohammad-Taqi Mesbah-Yazdi, 80***. Professor "Crocodile" (or *Temsah*, which mockingly rhymes with Mesbah), is close to Khamenei and spearheads the fiery fringe of the ultraconservative right, also known as the Principlists. At one stage, he ardently backed then president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the rising star of the younger generation of neoconservatives (other than their generally lay, security backgrounds, "neoconservatives" are almost ideologically indistinguishable from the clerical "ultras"). Mesbah-Yazdi presides over the Haqqani seminary, a leading hardline institution in Qom where notable pro-regime clerics – especially ministers of Intelligence – have been schooled, and openly abhors democracy in favor of an absolutist interpretation of clerical rule. More than this, he publicly encourages violence against reformers, whom he infamously likened to the AIDS virus. Among the clerical ultras, Mesbah-Yazdi also possibly represents such figures as secretary of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, who might have been a candidate himself but for his advanced age (87). However, Mesbah-Yazdi's extreme comments disturb even some

among the hardline conservatives and little evidence exists to suggest he enjoys widespread support in general, let alone for the top job. Besides, there is also his starting age. (Khomeini, exceptionally, became Supreme Leader at the age of 77.)

Still others have been mooted. Ayatollah Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, 80, was once regarded as the most suitable and capable successor. Even more influential than Khamenei at the time of Khomeini's death, he unwittingly lost out in influence and instead became number two, securing his reputation as a bastion of moderate pragmatism faced with the priorities of the post-war reconstruction years. Conversely, Rafsanjani's name has become widely associated with unvirtuous wealth and corruption (he is incidentally nicknamed "the Shark," though for reasons of facial appearance rather than behavior), and he ran afoul of almost everyone politically rightwards of center in his perceived support of the reform protests in 2009, never mind his difficult historical relations with the Guards.

There is also Sadeq Larijani, 54, the current head of the judiciary, another Najaf-born conservative and a member of one of the Islamic Republic's few dynastic families (two of the five Larijani brothers head two of the government's three main branches, without even going into the broader family ties). Larijani, however, possesses little of distinction other than years in Khamenei's loyal service and close ties with the Guards. Like his direct boss, his judiciary appointment required that the previous *Hojjatoleslam* be promoted overnight. If anything, Shahroudi stands a far better chance.

If the likes of Sadeq Larijani can make the B-list, then surely so can Iran's current president, Hassan Rouhani. A key player in the revolutionary generation, Rouhani actually fulfills all the requirements of a pious, (mid-level) cleric and a proven political administrator. In addition, he is a rare powerbroker capable, until now at least, of bridging divergent views across Iran's political spectrum, although the remainder of his presidency will tell whether he's equally capable of retaining crossfactional and especially conservative support. His current position poses little problem: when Khamenei became Supreme Leader, he too crossed over from the presidency. Rouhani owed part of his surprise June 2013 presidential victory to last minute endorsements from former presidents Khatami and, especially, Rafsanjani. While the Shark may no longer be the compelling choice for the top job, he could still pull off another June 2013 through his protégé.

On balance, Ayatollah Shahroudi and Khamenei Jr. probably stand the highest chances of relieving the elder Khamenei. Mojtaba may be young, but Khamenei was also just short of 50 back in June 1989, and relative youth holds out promises of a longer and more stable tenure than one interrupted by natural demise. And while Khomeini *père* couldn't be succeeded by a direct descendant without reviving fears of yet another Shah-type dynastic coup, Khamenei has accumulated far more clout now to do so should he wish. Shahroudi may be viewed as an outsider, yet a number of regime notables including the elder three Larijani brothers also spent their early years in Iraq. Moreover, his relative moderation vis-à-vis the Crocodile, and his generally topnotch scholarship (like traditional "Sources of Emulation" or *Maraje'-ye Taqlid*, he has published his own juridical treatise) would attract far greater acceptance.

Reviving an Old Idea: The Leadership Council

According to Art. 111 of the Constitution, in the event Khamenei dies or is no longer capable of carrying out his duties as *Vali-ye Faqih*, a temporary leadership council – with the approval of the Expediency Council, a body officially created to adjudicate legislative disputes between the parliament and the Guardian Council – takes over consisting of the serving president, the head of the judiciary, and a jurist from the powerful Guardian Council. But this was the outgrowth of an older idea. At the time of Khomeini's passing, a parallel proposal was circulated by Rafsanjani, then Khamenei's key ally *and* rival, for a permanent ruling council rather than a single Leader. This arrangement was to include himself, Khomeini's younger son Ahmad, and Ayatollahs Khamenei, Abdolkarim Mosavi-Ardebili and Ali Meshkini, but in the event was struck down by a weak majority in the Assembly of Experts and famously gave way to Khamenei's one-man ascendancy instead.

While possible in theory, the idea of a leadership council is unlikely to withstand the test of time. The reason is that the vigorous competition for power, prestige and patronage among and *within* factions, especially within the conservative fold (they couldn't even agree on a presidential candidate for the June 2013 elections, another key reason for Rouhani's unexpected victory), is almost certain to replicate itself within any such triadic or pluralist structure and reignite the struggle for supremacy. Consider that the virtual duumvirate in the 1990s comprising Rafsanjani as president and Khamenei as Supreme Leader only further deepened the personal rivalry and entrenched the growing political bifurcation despite bouts of cooperation.

Discontinuity Amid Continuity: A Guards-Led Military Takeover

In the absence of a consensus candidate (or candidates) acceptable to the Guards, or rather to the dominant hardline faction within the Guards, the likelihood of a military takeover rises. Deprived of their prime benefactor and threatened with potentially antagonistic change, the Guards' top leadership and alumni, who have gone on to a wide range of other key positions in government, may pull off a coup à la *Pakistanaise*. Having already waxed in power and influence, the Guards arguably need the clergy much less than the latter need the Guards.

Yet the anointed Guardians of the Revolution are unlikely to completely overturn the existing order and institute permanent military rule. Instead, they would retain a degree of deference to Khomeinism given that the cachet of divinity imparts a relative legitimacy that *machtpolitik* cannot. As such, if it happens, Guards-led rule will likely be transitional, until a consensus clerical figure is identified.

The Futility of Prediction?

Referring to the U.S. failure to predict the events of Pearl Harbor, the strategist, game theorist, and economics Nobel-laureate Thomas Schelling blamed it on a "great national failure to anticipate" and the "poverty of expectations." Should one exert the imagination, several other post-Khamenei scenarios may come to mind, including the full abolition of *Velayat-e Faqih* or substantial modifications in favor of a far stronger Republican, elected component. At the moment, though, the alignment of forces at work makes these hard to imagine, let alone anticipate.

Iran's coming succession is important for obvious reasons. One of these is that a quarter-century of continued hostility directed outwards, especially against the U.S., may very simply have been Khamenei's only way to avoid being outfoxed by domestic rivals. Another is the uncertainty hanging over Iran's nuclear program, and the Ayatollah's real thinking behind the growing pile of yellowcake and centrifuges. And then of course there are the implications for Iranians themselves, and whether their economy, and more importantly, their bid for improved social and civil freedoms, will sink or swim. The first and only succession took place at a time of tremendous transition, the start of a long process of post-war recovery, and tectonic shifts in the global balance of power. While modern-day circumstances may not be quite as dramatic, the world continues to watch as Iran dances along the edge of a precipice, perhaps one that it could still be persuaded to step away from.