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THE LESSER KNOWN MEN: NAVIGATING THE COMPLEXITIES OF IRAN'S NEW LEADERSHIP

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Source: Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar paying tributes to H.E. President Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi



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Iran, a nation with a complex political landscape and significant regional influence, recently witnessed a significant portrayal of power in regional dynamics especially under the leadership of President Ebrahim Raisi's whose sudden death in a helicopter crash along with the country's foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian's sent shockwaves across the world. In these unfortunate deaths, the Islamic Republic has lost an experienced, crisis-hardened cleric administrator and a seasoned diplomat. It has also set in motion the talk of succession in the Shia nation's corridors of power. ¹

According to the Iranian constitution, in case of President's absence, incapacitation or death while in office, the Vice President assumes presidency. In this case, H.E. Mohammad Mokhber, assumed the role of Acting President. He is a seasoned politician and technocrat and this transition comes at a crucial time for Iran, both domestically and internationally.

H.E. Mohammad Mokhber was born in Dezful, Khuzestan, a region known for its oil reserves and diversity. He studied management and engineering in Tehran. His career began in the economic sector, rising quickly due to his skills. He led the Execution of Imam Khomeini's Order (EIKO), managing large assets. In October 2018, under President Hassan Rouhani, he was appointed Vice President for Economic Affairs, focusing on reducing the impact of sanctions and stabilizing the economy, with approval from Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.²

The current situation that has placed Mohammad Mokhber in a critical position of leadership and his appointment is seen by some as a continuity of President Raisi's hardline policies, while others view it as an opportunity for potential economic reforms given his technocratic background. However, despite all this it does not guarantee him the next Presidential position.

In line with Article 131 of the Iranian constitution, "In case of death, dismissal, resignation, absence, or illness lasting longer than two months of the President or when his term in office has ended and a new president has not been elected due to some impediments, or similar other circumstances, his first deputy shall assume, with the approval of the Leader, the powers and functions of the President."³ It also slates that a new presidential election should be announced within next 50 days and in the present the due date was to be declared before 08 Jul 2024. However, within days the state media reported that the election will take place on 28 June 24, with candidates to be registered between 30 May and 03 June 24. ⁴

The President in Iran is elected for a four-year term by victory in national election by simple majority, with voting by all citizens over 18 years of age. Candidates for the presidency are screened for eligibility by the Council of Guardians, which is a twelve-member body consisting of equal number of clerics and lawyers. According to the Constitution, candidates for the presidency must possess a stringent qualification criteria including administrative ability and resourcefulness; dependability and devoutness; and belief in the fundamental principles of Iran and the official Shiite madhhab (mazhab).⁵

Apropos, the Council ruthlessly scrutinises and rejects a number of candidates who are deemed unacceptable including provisions like that they are not "a well-known political figure"(only 07 out of 600+ applications were accepted in 2021 elections). On winning elections and appointment by the Supreme Leader, the President assumes appointment of the Head of the Supreme National Security Council as well as Head of the Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution.⁶

It happens at a time when the situation surrounding the aging Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who recently turned 85, raises questions about the future of leadership in Iran. Given that the Islamic Republic has only had two Supreme Leaders in its history, Khomeini and Khamenei, The Supreme Leader's office holds significant authority, with the final say in all state matters, making any succession process crucial for the country's future direction. He is selected by members of the Assembly of Experts to serve life tenure. However, if Supreme Leader Khamenei were to resign or not continue in office, it could lead to a period of uncertainty and potential power struggles within Iran's political establishment.

Combined with it is the erstwhile President Ebrahim Raisi who came from a cleric family with special religious lineage, being a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad (sayyid) through Husayn ibn Ali lineage and also connected to the line of Ali ibn Husayn Zayn al-Abidin had. He had completed almost three years as President and had initially used the title "Ayatollah" on his personal website, but stopped it after facing criticism. Instead, he began using the title "Hojat-ol-Eslam" (Authority on Islam), which is a clerical rank just below Ayatollah. However, just before the 2021 presidential election, he once again referred to himself as an Ayatollah. Interestingly, the proclamation issued by Supreme Leader appointing him as President announced him to be Hojat-ol-Eslam. These titles could reflect various factors, including political considerations or personal preferences based on his hard-line approach.

In these testing times and conspiracy theories due to large scale geopolitics involved, there would be a number of contenders for the Presidential post including Mohammad Mokhber, the Acting

President, Sayyid Mojtaba Hosseini Khamenei, a mid-ranking Iranian Shia cleric and son of Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who was barred from running in 2021 elections, Ahmad Marvi, an Iranian Twelver Shia cleric, former General /Police Officer and custodian of Astan Quds Razavi (Bonyad or charitable trusts which manages Imam Reza Shrines), Person supported by the Shirazi Cult(Hussein al-Husayni al-Shirazi from Qom, or Eshaq Jahangiri Kouhshahi the previous first vice president in Hassan Rouhani's government⁷ and many such men of repute backed by both hardliners and moderates.

The current situation is required to be observed carefully and would be evidently clear post nominations ending on 03 Jun 24. More so, in India's geopolitical matrix, Iran is crucial due to deep cultural and historical ties and large Shia population residing within India. It is also due to Iran's role in providing energy security and its strategic importance due to Chabahar Port, providing a direct trade route to Afghanistan as well as Central Asia. The passage of trade on sea routes infested by Houthi/ other militia and the Iranian influence over these groups along with ongoing conflicts in Israel and Europe is also a serious concern for India.

India is currently able to carefully balance its relationship with Iran allowing both nations to demonstrate their strategic autonomy and independent foreign policy while maintaining strong ties with the US and Israel. Meanwhile India has stood with Iran in these difficult times and announced one-day state mourning along with the Vice-President of India Shri Jagdeep Dhankhar paying tributes at the official funeral ceremony of H.E. President Dr. Seyyed Ebrahim Raisi, H.E. Foreign Minister Dr. Hossein Amir-Abdollahian and other Iranian officials who died in an unfortunate helicopter crash on 19 May 2024.⁸

Notes:

- ¹ “Iran helicopter crash: What we know about how Ebrahim Raisi died,” May 20, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c4nnd23d505o>.
- ² ABC News. “Who is Mohammad Mokhber, appointed Iran’s acting president after a helicopter crash?,” May 20, 2024. <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/irans-vice-president-mohammad-mokhber-appointed-acting-president-110392446>.
- ³ English translation of the Iranian Constitution.
- ⁴ NDTV.com. “Highlights: Iran President Dies In Chopper Crash, Presidential Polls On June 28,” May 20, 2024. <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/ebrahim-raisi-iran-president-helicopter-crash-live-updates-wreckage-of-iran-presidents-crashed-helicopter-found-5702084>.
- ⁵ <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/irans-presidential-election-what-know>
- ⁶ Motamedi, Maziar. “Iran’s Guardian Council disqualifies most presidential hopefuls.” Al Jazeera, May 25, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/25/irans-guardian-council-disqualifies-most-presidential-candidates>.
- ⁷ Iran International. “Iran’s Former President Calls Elections Failure,” n.d. <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202403070918>.
- ⁸ Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India. “News Detail,” n.d. <https://www.mea.gov.in/newsdetail1.htm?12210/>.