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Will the death of the Iranian President bring domestic and regional change?

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Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as a region has some characteristics that have remained consistent for over a century. These include that change is cataclysmic and not slow or evolutionary. Rather change is revolutionary.

Most countries have an authoritarian political system where leadership changes in monarchies and dictatorships comes only with the death of the incumbent. Most wars have religious elements where conflict resolution is uncompromising by their very nature of individual and communal absolute beliefs. Violent confrontations are explained as a manifestation of the deities will (Islamic Allah), and as a situation in which the believer's (warrior's) faith is put to the test.

Such characteristics are evident in Iran domestically and in its foreign policy and international relations. They are unlikely to change immediately in the aftermath of the death of Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's president and a top contender to succeed the nation's supreme leader (Ayatollah). He was killed on Sunday 19 May in a helicopter crash, aged 63.

If you want to think of his legacy, he did not turn around the country's economic ruins, and it has not become less repressive. He did not address the decline of Iran's currency to a record low, nor its mismanagement of water shortages, or even domestic security. His presidency was notably unremarkable.

The Iranian constitution calls for elections for a new President to be held within 50 days. The next President true to the MENA characteristics is not expected to make any quick or dramatic changes domestically in Iran or its foreign policy. It may well be Mohammad Mokhber, who was Raisi's vice-president and is now the acting president.

The Iranian political system

There is a separation of authority and power in Iran's political system where Raisi as the president, did not set the country's nuclear or regional policy. As a continuum of decades of such policy determined by the Ayatollah, he continued Iran's steady expansion of regional intervention. This was through a network of proxy militia groups, a missile delivery system and uranium enrichment (nuclear) program, and growing closeness to Russia and China.

This is seen in Iranian intervention in the civil war in Syria with Russia, the support of Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and the Houthi in Yemen. In sum, Iran is a regional fermenter of conflict and violence to further the expansion of the beliefs, practises, and ideology of Shia Islam.

Indeed, it is the Ayatollah of whom there have only been two since the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution and not the President that is the formulator of policy and the true leader in Iran.

Wither any changes domestically?

What is pressing, more than who will be the next president, is the issue of succession for the third Ayatollah in Iran. The current Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is 85 and frail. Raisi was widely seen as the one of the top contenders for that role to succeed him.

This does not mean that Iran is going to be thrown into chaos with the death of Raisi. It merely means that the path is now better paved for *Ayatollah Khamenei's son Mojtaba*, to succeed his father. He is an influential cleric who helps run his father's office. *There may well not be even many differences between Mojtaba and Raisi as both are from the hard-line faction and recalcitrant to reforms.*

The pressing question is whether the next Ayatollah be it Mojtaba or someone else can resist reforms given the deteriorating state of Iran's economy, and dissenters who periodically challenge the government. Such challenges having become more and more violent seeing brutal crackdowns on them with arrests and executions. The country needs reforms as it suffers from severe economic downturns, driven by international sanctions and high unemployment.

Wither any changes in foreign policy?

Iranian foreign policy as determined by the Ayatollah and implemented by the president has been one of resistance diplomacy since 1979. That means a defiance of Western powers but an openness to negotiations. That has seen a progressive move towards closer relations with Russia and China and pivoting away from the West.

Yet there has also been a willingness to negotiate with the United States, and European countries over its uranium enrichment program and even with its longtime regional adversary, Saudi Arabia.

This places Iran in the category of a rational actor in the international system of states. It has interests and has shown no reluctance to using violent means to achieve them. Yet, it is willing to compromise through negotiations. Albeit that such compromise is not a change of interests, objectives, or means, but merely one of a change in its timetable. It is willing to hold back and play for time.

This display of rationality in not acting immediately is one commonly displayed by those who have a legacy of empires, and great power and super-power status. Iran of today has a legacy of the Persian Empire. It has the belief that if one waits long enough then the wheel of fortune will once again come around to it.

Such a view is a double-edged sword. On the one edge is the historical evidence of political systems and international relations that is typified by integration and fragmentation of states, alliances, and systems. Indeed, the Soviet Union is no longer, and BREXIT has placed the European Union in question. For how long the United States will remain united and a superpower is no doubt a bet that Iran has placed! Or indeed the future of the royalty in its arch-rival the Sunni Saudi Arabia.

The possibility of regime change.

On the other edge some of the rest of the MENA including Israel are also rational actors and willing to compromise through negotiations. Yet, their timetable differs from that of Iran. Israel is now fighting an eight-front war sees Iranian involvement in all of these – direct Iranian drone and missile attacks, support for Hamas in Gaza, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Shia militia in Syria and Iraq also launching drones and missiles. Israel may well become pressurised to act militarily to change the regime in Iran.

Iran's new President, as well as the successor to the Ayatollah may not care too much about Israel's security concerns timetable. And Israel may not be capable of acting alone. The decisive turning point will come if they do not pay heed to how their predecessors have ruffled the world's economy for example by supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The threat to the world's shipping in the Red Sea and so to the global economy has seen two international naval forces from five continents being deployed there.

The death of President Raisi should therefore be an opportunity for new leadership in Iran (both the next Ayatollah and the next President) to change their ways domestically and to retreat from regional interventionism. The timetable for doing so is very short and just one miscalculation on Red Sea shipping for example might well see global military action against Iran. That could also see regime change in Teheran aided by local dissenters acting simultaneous to such global military action.

Conclusion

Only time will tell if Raisi's death will be a watershed for Iran, domestically and internationally. Namely if the new leaders of Iran, both president and Ayatollah, make the necessary changes to set their country on the path for a better economy and less domestic and regional strife, or if this is just wishful thinking. If they do, then Raisi has done more for his country and the region in death than in life.