

Election over, Iran's attention turns to supreme leader's post

Tehran: After Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's re-election, talk in Iran has turned to the future of an even larger political figure: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

Although the topic is taboo in Iran, the question of who will succeed Ayatollah Khamenei, who is 77 and ailing, loomed over the May 19 election. Dr Rouhani, a relative moderate, won 57 per cent of the vote in a four-man field, demonstrating strong public support for his policies of economic pragmatism, international engagement and expanding social freedoms.

But in Iran's theocracy, one vote matters most: the supreme leader's.

Ayatollah Khamenei and the hard-line "principlist" faction that is close to him have indicated impatience with Dr Rouhani's economic policies and outreach to the West - especially the 2015 nuclear agreement.

After the election, Ayatollah Khamenei congratulated Iranians on a 75 per cent voter turnout but did not mention Dr Rouhani, who won a second four-year term. Ayatollah Khamenei's slight fuelled speculation of a rift and led some observers to predict that the supreme leader would curtail the president's reform efforts by anointing a fellow hardliner to succeed him.

Here are the key questions surrounding Iran's leadership transition:

How important is the selection of the new supreme leader?

Extremely important. Ali Vaez, Iran analyst for the International Crisis Group, calls it "the most pivotal moment in the history of the Islamic Republic".

The supreme leader has the last word on all domestic and international policies, and Ayatollah Khamenei is only the second man to lead Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. His successor will be tasked with winning over a youthful population - half of Iranians are younger than 30 - that wants more openness and less confrontation.

But the transition comes as Iran's ruling establishment faces growing instability abroad, including from a US administration that wants to isolate Iran and is cosyng up to Iran's arch-enemy, Saudi Arabia. The growing tensions could produce a more hawkish successor.

How is he chosen?

Upon the leader's death, an 88-member, all-male council known as the Assembly of Experts votes in a secretive process not unlike the selection of a Roman Catholic pope. A two-thirds majority is required, and a committee is already considering possible candidates.

Ayatollah Khamenei ascended to the position in 1989 after the death of the founding supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. Then president Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani virtually guaranteed Ayatollah Khamenei's accession by announcing that he had been Khomeini's choice to succeed him.

Rafsanjani died in January, and there is no one of his stature to mastermind another transition, especially with Iran so polarised between reformists and hardliners.

"The authority that Khomeini's words had back then, and that someone like Rafsanjani had back then ... I'm not sure those dynamics will play out this time," said Adnan Tabatabai, chief executive of the Berlin-based Centre for Applied Research in Partnership with the Orient.

In that vacuum, Iran's security establishment, led by the Revolutionary Guard, could seek to control the process and ensure the appointment of a hardline leader who would oppose broad reforms or rapprochement with the West that would threaten the Guard's economic and political interests.

Has Ayatollah Khamenei indicated a choice for his successor?

Not explicitly. But he is widely believed to favour someone like Ebrahim Raisi, whom Dr Rouhani defeated in the presidential election.

Mr Raisi was a relatively obscure former judge when Ayatollah Khamenei selected him in March 2016 to head Iran's wealthiest religious foundation. This year, when Mr Raisi declared his candidacy for president, it suggested that hardliners close to Ayatollah Khamenei wanted to raise his profile.

Although Iranians rejected Mr Raisi's ultra-conservative views - as a judge he reportedly presided over the executions of political prisoners - he became a household name and won almost 37 per cent of the vote

"He won 16 million votes and went from anonymity to the spotlight in 40 days," said Hamid Reza Taraghi, a political analyst who is close to Ayatollah Khamenei's office. "I am sure that if the campaign had lasted 60 days, he would be the president-elect. In the years to come, he has a chance to promote himself and be one of the candidates for succession."

Mr Raisi has continued making public appearances since the election, signalling that he intends to keep building his profile.

Can Dr Rouhani and the moderates influence the process?

Although Dr Rouhani's supporters made gains in last year's elections to the Assembly of Experts, it is still controlled by hardliners. Dr Rouhani is believed to covet the leadership, but analysts say his best hope is to try to enthrone a fellow pragmatist.

That would be difficult. Although Dr Rouhani is a member of the assembly, hardly any fellow members supported him in the election, Mr Taraghi said.

If Ayatollah Khamenei dies during Dr Rouhani's term and the assembly does not agree on a successor immediately, Dr Rouhani would form part of a temporary three-member council that would assume the supreme leader's powers until a replacement is elected.

Did the election have any impact?

Iran's moderate and reformist faction has now won three straight national elections and controls the presidency and the parliament. The clerical establishment relies on the elections to legitimise its rule, and experts say hardliners know they risk social unrest if they don't acknowledge the voters' will. That could insert a new factor into the discussion of Ayatollah Khamenei's replacement: popularity.

"In addition to someone who is well connected with the clerical, security and political establishments, he will need some sort of broad-based acceptance among the people," Mr Tabatabai said.

Dr Rouhani's backers say they will continue to press for reforms, such as the release of opposition Green Movement leaders from house arrest, which the president supported.

Source: <http://www.smh.com.au/world/election-over-irans-attention-turns-to-supreme-leaders-post-20170604-gwjy1a.html>

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