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Has Ebrahim Raisi been Tagged as Iran's Next Supreme Leader?

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Recent months have seen increasing signs that the head of Iran's judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, has emerged as the leading candidate to succeed Ali Khamenei as Supreme Leader. Since his appointment as head of the judiciary in March 2019, there have been increasing efforts on the part of Raisi, a conservative cleric, apparently backed by the Supreme Leader, to advance changes in the legal system, improve his public image, and increase his media exposure, particularly in view of his loss in the most recent presidential elections in May 2017. It is still too early to assess Raisi's chances of winning the battle of succession for the leadership of Iran, which will necessarily be affected by the timing of Khamenei's departure from the political map. However, his closeness to the Supreme Leader, his experience in the judicial authority, his tenure as chairman of the Astan Quds Razavi foundation (and the Imam Reza Shrine) in the city of Mashhad, and his hardline positions, alongside his increasing efforts to improve his public standing, make him the leading candidate at this stage in the battle of succession.

There have recently been increasing signs that the head of Iran's judiciary, Ebrahim Raisi, is emerging as a leading candidate to succeed Ali Khamenei as Iran's Supreme Leader. Since his appointment by Khamenei as head of the judicial authority in March 2019, there has been an increasing effort on Raisi's part, apparently with the backing of the Supreme Leader, to advance changes in the judicial system, improve his public image, and strengthen his connections with the public.

Raisi, a conservative cleric, was born in December 1960 in the city of Mashhad. Since the early 1980s, he has filled a series of positions in the judicial system, including Tehran Prosecutor, Head of the General Inspection Office of the judicial authority, First Deputy Chief Justice, and Attorney General of Iran. In 2016, he was appointed by the Supreme Leader as Chairman of the Astan Quds Razavi foundation in Mashhad, a powerful foundation that controls significant Islamic trusts, a wide range of assets, and large budgets. In addition, Raisi serves as a member of the Expediency Council, and as deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts, which is responsible for overseeing the Supreme Leader's activity, appointing his successor, and even removing him from office if he is found unfit to continue to serve. In the May 2017 presidential elections, Raisi ran against

the incumbent president, Hassan Rouhani, but lost after winning 16 million votes, compared to the more than 23 million won by Rouhani.

A short time after his appointment as head of the judiciary, Raisi announced his intention to institute changes and effect greater efficiency in the judicial system. He placed the war on corruption high on his agenda. Even though corruption in the government and the public sector has long been rampant in Iran, public criticism of the phenomenon has increased sharply in recent years, and senior officials have been forced to address the issue, at least at a declarative level. In this context, Raisi announced his intention to reduce the number of bank accounts registered in his name, and to issue annual reports to the public regarding the activity in those accounts. This announcement came against the background of accusations that his predecessor, Sadeq Larijani, held more than 60 bank accounts that had money that came from citizens whose cases were deliberated by the courts. In another step, Raisi dismissed dozens of judges who were accused of involvement in corruption. He also issued instructions to streamline judicial proceedings and to hire thousands of additional employees in the legal system in order to shorten the handling of legal cases.

While advancing these reforms in the judicial system, Raisi worked to increase his media exposure and improve his public image, particularly in view of his relative failure in the presidential elections. During the election campaign, Raisi appeared as a dull candidate lacking charisma, who had difficulty compensating for his lack of political experience. However, in the course of the campaign, there was a marked improvement in his capabilities as a candidate, and he won public support among the religious establishment – although this did not earn him much support from the general public.

In mid-June 2019, Raisi published an unusual post on his Instagram account, calling on Iranians to contact him through his personal social media accounts (mainly internal Iranian networks that are not blocked by the authorities), to suggest necessary improvements to the judicial system. This initiative was warmly received, particularly by the pro-reform media, which expressed the hope that this would lead to a reexamination of the current policy of blocking social networks, and would strengthen the public's trust in the judicial system. Likewise that month, the Iranian media published pictures showing Raisi traveling to work on Tehran's metro, apparently in order to strengthen his image as leading a simple and modest lifestyle. In late June, Raisi used the Judiciary Week held annually in Iran for further media exposure. For the first time since he was appointed, Raisi granted an extensive live interview to Iranian television, detailing his plans to improve the judicial system. Reports on social media stated that during that week, his pictures even appeared on billboards across the country.

His public announcements reflect a significant effort to improve his public image as a hardliner cleric. His past in the judicial authority is a source of controversy, particularly given his term as Deputy Prosecutor in Tehran, which included his involvement in the mass executions of political prisoners in 1988. He encountered significant opposition, mainly on the part of reformist groups, during the presidential election campaign. President Rouhani himself hinted at Raisi's past when he stated in one of his election speeches that Iranian citizens no longer want someone who spent 38 years imprisoning and executing them.

In May 2019, Raisi held an unusual meeting with senior editors and executives in the Iranian media, and emphasized the importance he attributes to the freedom of the press. A short time later, he held a meeting with women's rights activists and promised he would complete formulating a bill for the struggle against violence against women as soon as possible. In a television interview, he even expressed support for promoting women in the judicial authority, particularly in the family courts. He also issued instructions to open an investigation into the death of political prisoner Ali Reza Shir Mohammad Ali, a 21-year-old man sentenced to eight years for the crime of publishing defamatory content against the Supreme Leader on social networks. In June 2019, Ali was stabbed to death by two prisoners who were tried for murder.

In addition, Raisi's appointment as head of the judicial authority was received positively by several reformist activists. For instance, one of the more prominent reformist activists, Mostafa Tajzadeh, conveyed on his Twitter account the hope that Raisi would be able to improve and streamline the judicial authority. Majlis member Mahmoud Sadeghi, affiliated with the pragmatic faction, also expressed optimism about Raisi's ability to promote changes in the legal system. These positive reactions may reflect a desire on the part of the reformists to maintain good relations with Raisi as much as possible, given his good chances of succeeding the Supreme Leader.

On foreign policy, Raisi has sided with the Supreme Leader's opposition to negotiations with the United States, praised the Revolutionary Guards for shooting down the American drone on June 20, 2019, and expressed support for Iranian efforts to entrench itself in the region.

His efforts to advance his public status have won Raisi the backing of the Supreme Leader, reflected in a lengthy interview with Raisi published on Khamenei's official website in late June. The timing of the publication may be connected to Judiciary Week, but highlighting the interview and publishing pictures of Raisi alongside Khamenei on the website's homepage were exceptional. In the interview, Raisi said that he agreed to take on the position of head of the judicial authority only at the insistence of the Supreme

Leader. His remarks earned close media attention in Iran, apparently in order to emphasize the support he has from Khamenei and his closeness to the Supreme Leader.

It is still too early to assess Raisi's chances of winning the succession battle for leadership of Iran, particularly because the battle is expected to be influenced to a great extent by the timing of Khamenei's departure from the political map. In recent years, other names have been raised alongside Raisi's, such as his predecessor Sadeq Larijani, President Hassan Rouhani, and even the Supreme Leader's son Mojtaba Khamenei. A member of the Assembly of Experts, senior cleric Mohsen Araki, confirmed in a recent interview to the Fars news agency that a three-member committee acting within the assembly holds a secret list of a number of potential candidates to succeed Khamenei. Even though the responsibility for appointing his successor belongs to the Council, other main power centers, such as the Revolutionary Guards, will presumably want to play a role in the battle for succession in order to maintain their interests in the post-Khamenei era. Moreover, it cannot be discounted that Khamenei's death will upset the regime's stability in Iran and perhaps even pose a real challenge to the political concept of the "rule of jurisprudence" implemented in Iran since the Islamic Revolution. In any case, Raisi's closeness to the Supreme Leader, his judicial experience, his economic management skills in Mashhad, and his hardline positions, alongside his prominent efforts to improve his public standing and increase his media exposure, at this stage make him a leading candidate in the succession battle.