



Potential Impact of the Death of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian

Earlier this week on Sunday, Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian were among the eight people killed when their helicopter crashed in a foggy and mountainous region near the Iran-Azerbaijan border. Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian were traveling back after inaugurating a joint dam project with officials from the neighboring country, and after losing contact with the helicopter and an extensive overnight search, authorities and rescue teams found the crash site on Monday morning local time. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei later announced that now-former First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber would take over managing the government as acting president until the country holds a new presidential election, which has been set for June 28th. With respect to the foreign minister post, one of Amir-Abdollahian's deputies – Ali Bagheri Kani – was appointed as caretaker. According to many issue experts, no major change is expected in Iran's policies and agenda given that Ayatollah Khamenei is responsible for much of this, however the death of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian may alter political calculations within the country.

It is anticipated that the upcoming election will not result in any major surprises, as political figures favored by the establishment are likely to secure victory. As one analyst pointed out, the replacements of both Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian are expected to possess the same degree of loyalty to the regime. However, what may emerge as a source of discord are potential internal disputes and uncertainty regarding succession to the role of Supreme Leader. Prior to his death, Raisi had been considered one of the most credible choices to succeed the current Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Thus, the longer-term effect on leadership succession and the prospects for infighting are things that are worth keeping an eye on. This has led commentators to express the belief that the death of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian will test the regime's ability to efficiently manage a succession process during a time of some notable crises. Since the establishment in Iran is run by conservative and hardline political factions, any possible power struggles are forecasted to be among those, with reformists being out of the picture. As such, hardliners are expected to keep their grip on power.

The death of the Iranian president and foreign minister comes amid a backdrop of domestic and regional challenges for the regime. The country has recently seen high levels of public dissatisfaction manifest via one of the most significant protest movements in its history following the killing of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini back in September 2022 while in police custody. Additionally, parliamentary elections earlier this year in March had the lowest turnout since the Iranian revolution in 1979, so the regime's public legitimacy is also lacking. At the regional level, tensions with Israel in the preceding months have escalated into direct hostilities, as witnessed with Israel's attack against an Iranian consulate in Damascus and Iran's retaliatory missile strike on Israel. This raised concerns regarding the risk of a wider-scale conflict in the region, which still exists the longer that the destructive War on Gaza persists.

While much of the Iranian public holds deep-rooted frustration and criticism towards the regime, the latter has so far been able to withstand this pressure. Whether or not that continues to be the case remains to be seen, as the unexpected political opening may spark renewed activism against the regime. One thing that does seem certain is that the death of Raisi and Amir-Abdollahian is likely to stir up internal power struggles within the establishment in Iran, presenting a considerable challenge to seamless transition and long-term stability.