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How will Iran President's death impact the region? | Explained

Will there be changes in Iran's foreign policy? In the domestic arena, will the status quo prevail?

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Iranians attend a funeral ceremony in Tehran on May 22, 2024 for the late President Ebrahim Raisi and his companions who were killed during a helicopter crash in a mountainous region of the country's northwest. | Photo Credit: AP

The story so far: The death of Ebrahim Raisi, Iran's President, and eight others, including Foreign Minister Amir Abdollahian, in a helicopter crash on May 19, has sent shockwaves across the region. The timing of the accident was significant. Tensions remain high in West Asia, particularly after Iran launched its first direct attack on Israel in April. The war

in Gaza rages on with Iran backing Hamas and other anti-Israel non-state militants in the region. At home, the regime has seen growing protests in recent years. And now, Iran has to elect a new President amid this uncertainty.

How important was Raisi?

In Iran's semi-representative theocratic system, the role of the elected president is limited compared to that of the Supreme Leader, who is appointed by a clerical body. The President's primary responsibility is to run the day-to-day affairs of the government, while critical policies and long-term strategies are set by the Supreme Leader (read 'the establishment'). But the President and his government have a say on how to implement these policies.

Editorial | **Death of a President: On Iran's Ebrahim Raisi**

In the past, Iran has seen friction between the establishment and the Presidents as they tried to champion their agenda. But in Raisi, who was elected President in 2021, the establishment found a staunch ally who hardly strayed from the line set by the Supreme Leader. Raisi oversaw a marked shift from the Hassan Rouhani years when Iran pursued dialogue with the West and reached a nuclear deal in 2015 (which was sabotaged by the U.S. in 2018). During Raisi's tenure, Iran sought closer strategic and economic cooperation with Russia and China, doubled down on its support for the so-called 'axis of resistance' (non-state actors such as Hamas, Houthis and Hezbollah) and expanded the country's nuclear programme. Tehran also adopted a more aggressive policy towards Israel, which saw the April 14 drone and missile attack.

Will his death alter Iran's policies?

The President's death is unlikely to bring in any serious change to Iran's foreign policy. But it is highly likely that the regime's focus would shift to the transition at home. Even before Raisi's death was formally announced, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei told Iranians that governance would not be disrupted. The message from the Supreme Leader is that the system reigns supreme, not individuals, and the status quo prevails. Iran has lost several high profile officials in recent years, from Qassem Soleimani, the charismatic Quds Force General, to Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, the country's top nuclear scientist. But the loss of key figures does not affect the national project.

However, Raisi's death poses two succession challenges to Iran's leaders. One, it has to quickly elect the next President. The second challenge is to identify a potential successor to Mr. Khamenei. In the past, different influential clerics were seen as his prospective successors, such as Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi. Rafsanjani died in 2017 and Shahroudi in 2018. In recent years, Raisi, a hardline cleric, an elected President and a former judicial chief, was seen as a potential successor. His death leaves a huge void in the corridors of power in Tehran.

What does Raisi's death mean for India?

India has built a good relationship with Iran since the revolution of 1979. Even though trade ties have taken a beating in recent years, owing to American sanctions on Iran, both sides stayed invested in the overall bilateral partnership. One good example of this partnership is the Chabahar port project where India has made investments worth millions. External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar had attended Raisi's inauguration in August 2021. In January, Mr. Jaishankar travelled again to Tehran to meet its leaders at a time when Houthis, the Iran-backed Yemeni Shia militants, were carrying out attacks against vessels in the Red Sea. India had refused to join a U.S.-led coalition to attack the Houthis.

Earlier this month, India signed a long-term agreement to further develop and operate one of the two terminals of the Chabahar port, formalising a deal that has been in the works for years. On May 20, a day after the accident, Mr. Jaishankar said India and Iran reached the Chabahar agreement "because of the interest and initiative" of President Raisi and Foreign Minister Abdollahian. India was careful not to take a direct position in the West Asian crisis. When tensions broke out between Iran and Israel, India expressed deep concerns but stopped short of condemning any party. The fact that India sent Vice President Jagdeep Dhankhar to Tehran to offer condolences shows that retaining the current momentum in ties remains a priority for New Delhi.