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The Implications of a Military Figure as President of Iran

by Farhad Rezaei and Jason M. Brodsky

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In 2021, Iran will be preparing for a presidential election even as it faces an unprecedented economic crisis. Some conservatives argue that a military figure could turn the country around by virtue of his "jihadist spirit" and "military charisma." While the allure of such a person as president is attractive to some in Tehran, structural impediments remain. The power of the Office of the Supreme Leader will prove a formidable obstacle in the path of any military figure who hopes to ascend to the presidency in the near term.

With elections less than a year away in Iran, there has been much commentary on the electoral horse race among current and former Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers. Speculation has ranged from surprising figures such as Hossein Dehghan, Ayatollah Khamenei's military advisor, and Rostam Ghasemi, former head of the IRGC's Khatam al-Anbiya Construction Headquarters, to utterly predictable candidates like Mohsen Rezaei, former commander-in-chief of the IRGC, and Ali Shamkhani, secretary of the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC).

For the IRGC, the country's strongest economic and military force, the idea of occupying the presidency has always been attractive. Former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad is thought to have served in the IRGC. But ever since its inception, all candidates with senior IRGC pedigree have lost every election they entered. The multiple unsuccessful candidacies of Mohsen Rezaei and former IRGC Air Force Commander Muhammad Bagher Ghalibaf loom large.

There are, however, reasons to believe that if a military figure runs for president this time around, the odds of his getting elected are reasonably

high—primarily because the majority of Iranians may not vote, as they no longer believe their ballots make any difference. Low voter turnout will set up the conservative camp for big gains. In the 2020 parliamentary elections, in which the country saw the lowest turnout since 1979, hardliners emerged victorious, winning 223 seats in the 290-strong parliament. A former member of the IRGC's top brass became speaker of parliament.

To achieve this goal, conservatives may even try to sabotage any attempt by President Hassan Rouhani to negotiate with a Biden administration or at least delay such negotiation until after the Iranian presidential election. Biden made clear in his *Foreign Affairs* article that if "Tehran returns to strict compliance with the deal," he "would rejoin the agreement." For now, maintaining the status quo is in the conservatives' interest because an easing of US pressure on Iran could offer a boost to pragmatists in the election.

With both Ghalibaf and the hardline Chief Justice Ebrahim Raisi occupying seats on the SNSC, there is the possibility of President Hassan Rouhani being outflanked and outmaneuvered in any attempts to revive the accord. This is because while the former speaker of parliament, Ali Larijani, ran interference for the Rouhani administration on the nuclear file, Ghalibaf is likely to be less forgiving.

The debate in Tehran

Why is the regime attracted to a military figure as president, and what are its implications? To answer these questions, we must examine the debate in Tehran.

The idea of the elevation of a military man to the presidency gained momentum in 2018. There was speculation that Qassem Soleimani, then commander of the IRGC-Quds Force, would run for president in 2021. Despite Soleimani's never having publicly exhibited any ambition to hold elected office, he was a wily political operator who had cultivated ties with both conservative and pragmatic figures—including FM Javad Zarif, who disclosed that before Soleimani's death they met every week. Soleimani was also credited by the regime as the one who kept ISIS away from Iranian borders. As a result of all this myth-making, his chances of winning would have been relatively high had he been able to enter the race.

Even after Soleimani's demise, the appeal of a military man as president has persisted. Proponents argue that it has a number of benefits. First, the country is facing serious crises, among them a lack of efficiency and coordination between state and parastatal organizations. A military man, they argue, would be able to put an immediate end to the conflict between these

institutions. He would have the potential to gain the trust of large revolutionary foundations that compete with the president and are outside the government's control.

The same logic applies to engagement with the incoming Biden administration, which remains interested in broadening the JCPOA by tackling Iran's ballistic missile program and regional proxy network. Having a military figure in the presidency could increase the cross-factional and cross-statal credibility of Iran's negotiators.

Secondly, according to advocates, having a military figure as president would save the country from future problems. A military president is perceived as a "symbol of power and authority" who could send a strong signal that the nation is prepared for war. There are many figures in Iran's political establishment who believe war between Iran and the US is inevitable and that the country must prepare for conflict.

Thirdly, some argue the regime has lost its legitimacy and only a military figure can rebuild the nation's trust in the system. The Islamic Republic has used oil revenues to bankroll its authority, but the combination of sanctions and corruption among the elite has tarnished the regime's brand. According to the proponents, the likelihood of low turnout is the best opportunity to bring a military figure to power who can reorganize and restore the nation's faith in the system.

Even ultra-hardline elements in the conservative camp openly argue that Iran needs a benevolent dictator at the head of the country to fix its problems and eliminate poverty. "We must move towards authoritarianism, or otherwise we will collapse," said Ibrahim Fayyaz, who is considered the ideologue of the conservatives. "Today, our legitimacy is eroded, our efficiency is undermined, and even our system's cohesion has been disturbed. Only a benevolent dictator, a military man or a person with military discipline, can fix this system."

Pragmatists in the regime argue, however, that given that the country's main problem is its ailing economy, the country would be better served by a president with economic experience. According to this line of thinking, electing a soldier president would imply that the Islamic Republic has reached a dead end and is unable to find solutions to the nation's most deeply rooted problems.

The Supreme roadblock

A military man as president is unlikely to be a cure-all for the Islamic Republic's woes. The Office of the Supreme Leader remains a formidable obstacle.

With the Guards' increasing influence in Tehran, a new president with a senior-level IRGC pedigree could be a powerful player in the Islamic Republic's hydra-headed establishment. He could, theoretically, thread the diplomatic and political needle more effectively through Iran's armed, deep, and elected states. However, this does not mean he would be omnipotent.

A military man as president would not be a true "benevolent dictator," as some proponents have argued. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei remains the constitutional commander-in-chief. In his 31 years as Supreme Leader, Khamenei, through political balancing, has centralized and consolidated control over the regime's sprawling state apparatuses. Recently, in the debate over the regime's posture ahead of the US presidential election in November, Khamenei demonstrated that he remains firmly in control as state puppeteer. He reportedly rejected the IRGC-Quds Force's request for significant reprisals amid the US maximum pressure campaign, the explosion at the Natanz nuclear enrichment facility, and Israeli strikes in Syria.

At the same time, he has taken swipes at the Rouhani administration. In Khamenei's most recent remarks at a joint graduation ceremony for the Armed Forces, he warned, "[c]owards are not entitled to speak of rationality because rationality means correct calculations. The enemy is trying to insinuate a wrong description of rationality and some people in the country ignorantly repeat the enemy's words." This was an implicit rebuke to President Hassan Rouhani, whose political brand has been "prudence and hope." Additionally, in October, after Rouhani invoked the peace of Imam Hassan to justify negotiations with the West and came under fire from hardliners in parliament, the Supreme Leader intervened and defended the president, saying "desecration is forbidden." In all these episodes, Khamenei can be seen as checking the IRGC, conservatives, and Rouhani, and, in the process, ensuring his authority as indeed supreme.

Thus, the Supreme Leader's balancing among different government organs, especially on the question of whether to negotiate with a Biden administration, will likely continue even if a conservative former military officer is elected president. This eventuality would not foreclose the possibility of negotiations. Khamenei authorized such talks even under hard-line administrations—the back channel between the US and Iran, for example, started under Ahmadinejad.

Lastly, the incumbent Supreme Leader has proven less willing to delegate than his predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This difference in personal style could be seen amid the US maximum pressure campaign. Rouhani argued that Iran is engaged in an economic war, and that his administration should be afforded emergency powers. He likened the situation to the Iran-Iraq War, when a supreme council was established that "held all powers, and even the parliament and the judiciary did not intervene." But Khamenei has rejected such requests for more presidential authority. As the conservative managing editor of *Kayhan* retorted, "[Y]ou had enough powers." However, Khomeini entrusted then Speaker of Parliament Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as acting commander-in-chief at the end of the Iran-Iraq War. Khamenei's reluctance to do so is a demonstration of his need for control.

The situation could change if Khamenei becomes incapacitated or dies. Given his age—81—it is conceivable that the next president of the Islamic Republic could be Khamenei's last. To avoid a power vacuum, it is possible that upon Khamenei's demise, the regime will establish an interim leadership council, which, according to Article 111 of the Constitution, would be comprised of officials like the chief justice, the president, and a clerical member of the Guardian Council selected by the Expediency Council.

This is where a candidate from the senior ranks of the IRGC emerging as president could prove pivotal. Having such a figure on the scene would constitutionally ensure a seat at the decision-making table.

In the end, the debate over having a military figure as president is a proxy for a larger battle over succession. While such a chief executive may be able to build consensus within the system more effectively, he will still be subject to the Supreme Leader's authority. As long as Khamenei remains in office, that power equation will remain unchanged.

Farhad Rezaei is a visiting professor of international relations at Glendon College, York University and an associate research fellow at the Center for International Policy Studies. He is coauthor of Iran, Revolution, and Proxy Wars *(Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). He is on Twitter at @FarhadRezaeii.*

Jason Brodsky is policy director of United Against Nuclear Iran. He is on Twitter at @JasonMBrodsky.