

Iran's Power Pyramid: Role of the Supreme Leader Explained

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Iran's Power Pyramid Latest News

- The assassination of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader, marks the end of a defining era in the country's post-1979 Islamic Revolution leadership. He was killed in an attack by US and Israeli forces.
- Following his death, the constitutional process to appoint a successor was immediately activated. The Assembly of Experts has begun deliberations to select the next Supreme Leader.
- In the interim, a three-member **Interim Leadership Council** has taken over his duties, as provided under Iran's Constitution.
- These developments highlight the structured mechanisms within Iran's political system to manage leadership transitions during crises.

Religion and Politics in Iran: Historical Roots

- The close relationship between religion and politics in Shia-majority Iran predates the 1979 Islamic Revolution.
- Shia clerics often adopted an anti-monarchist stance and actively participated in political movements.
- Important examples include:
 - the **19th-century Tobacco Movement** against British concessions,
 - the **Constitutional Revolution of 1906-11** demanding a constitutional monarchy,
 - protests against the Shah's **1963 White Revolution reforms**, and
 - finally the 1979 Revolution.

The 1979 Revolution and Clerical Leadership

- The ideological leadership of Ayatollah Khomeini, even while he was in exile in France, played a decisive role in shaping the 1979 Revolution and the Islamic Republic that followed.
- Although diverse groups such as workers and communists joined the anti-Shah protests, the religious establishment gained greater legitimacy and influence after the Revolution due to its strong ideological direction.

Mosques as Political Spaces

- One key factor behind the clergy's rise was the central role of mosques in political mobilisation. Friday prayer gatherings became important platforms for religio-political expression.
- In a repressive environment where public spaces were monitored by the Shah's secret police, **SAVAK**, mosques functioned as relatively safe spaces (bast) for organising resistance.

Consolidation of a Religio-Political System

- Over the past 47 years, Iran developed a political system made up of hierarchical yet interconnected institutions rooted in revolutionary ideology.
- Ayatollah Khamenei led this system, which blends religious authority with political power and reflects the long historical intertwining of Shia clerical leadership and state governance in Iran.

Khomeini and Khamenei: Shaping Iran's Supreme Leadership

- Before and during the 1979 Revolution, religious scholars and intellectuals reinterpreted Islamic ideas in a revolutionary way.
- Thinkers like Ali Shariati linked faith with social justice and anti-imperialist politics, though he did not support clerical political rule.
- **Ayatollah Khomeini**, however, advanced the doctrine of **velayat-e-faqih** (rule of the jurisprudent).
- He argued that a senior Islamic jurist should lead the state. This idea became the foundation of Iran's political system.

Constitutional Framework of the Islamic Republic

- The 1979 Constitution combined Khomeini's theory of clerical rule with elements of republicanism.

- It created the post of Supreme Leader with overarching authority over political and religious affairs.
- After Khomeini's death in 1989, constitutional amendments redistributed some executive powers and abolished the Prime Minister's post.
- However, the core structure of clerical supremacy remained intact.

Rise of Ayatollah Khamenei

- Ayatollah Ali Khamenei succeeded Khomeini in 1989. His selection was controversial, as Ayatollah Montazeri had earlier been designated successor.
- Khamenei had served as President from 1981 to 1989, during the Iran-Iraq War.
- The war years shaped his political outlook and strengthened his image as a defender of the Islamic Republic.

Leadership Style and Challenges

- As Supreme Leader, Khamenei combined religious authority with political control.
- Internationally, he was seen as a hardliner, though some analysts described him as pragmatic.
- Domestically, his leadership faced criticism.
- The Mahsa **Amini protests** in 2022 and later economic demonstrations reflected dissatisfaction with authoritarian governance and economic isolation.
- His policy of a "resistance economy," aimed at reducing dependence on the West and countering sanctions, did not fully resolve Iran's economic challenges.

Continuity and Change

- Both Khomeini and Khamenei shaped Iran's unique system of clerical governance.
- While institutional adjustments occurred over time, the central principle of Supreme Leader supremacy remained the defining feature of Iran's political order.

Iran After the Supreme Leader

- Iran has regularly held elections for the **President, the Majlis (Parliament)**, and local bodies. Politics has long been shaped by rivalry between reformists and hardliners.
- Ayatollah Khamenei, though often supportive of hardliners, developed a practice of balancing factions and managing internal differences.
- His religious decree (fatwa) against nuclear weapons and his approval of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) showed a mix of ideology and pragmatism in state policy.

Role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

- The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), created after the 1979 Revolution, became a key pillar of the regime.
- Beyond defending the revolution internally, it expanded Iran's regional influence by supporting groups such as Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon.
- Khamenei regarded the IRGC as central to maintaining political stability.

Growing Gap Between State and Society

- Years of sanctions and international isolation have strained Iran's economy. Many citizens have demanded greater political participation and accountability.
- This has created a widening gap between public expectations and the state's performance.
- Economic hardships and political restrictions have intensified domestic dissatisfaction.

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