

Iran: Supreme Leader Speaks on What Makes a Good President

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OE Watch Commentary

In June 2021 Iranians will head to the polls to elect a new president since Hassan Rouhani cannot constitutionally run for a third consecutive term. In the excerpted portion from Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's annual Nowruz (Persian New Year) speech as per his personal website *Khamenei.ir*, Khamenei, himself a former president (1981-1989), highlights the attributes that he suggests Iranians should look for in a president. His words, of course, are not merely aspirational; they carry disproportionate weight because the Supreme Leader is Iran's most powerful figure and keeps his finger on the scale.

His commentary is interesting for a number of reasons. First, there is a certain irony to Khamenei preaching against corruption when he has used his political and religious career to become a billionaire several times over. Second, Khamenei's emphasis on religiosity should raise eyebrows because Khamenei seems to be conflating religious with a more hardline political doctrine that would seem to exclude the so-called reformists of years past. Khamenei's call for a "jihadi" outlook also fits into the Iranian self-conception of its revolution as ongoing rather than as running out of steam.

The forthcoming Iranian presidential elections in June and possible run-off elections in August will take additional importance because



Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei delivers the annual Nowruz [New Year's] speech for Persian Year 1400.

Source: Khamenei.ir, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=47568#i/gallery/1/>, Attribution: Khamenei.ir

they will likely be the last presidential elections while Khamenei, already 81 years old, is alive. While the president is subordinate to the supreme leader, the incumbent president's influence will be enhanced during the vacuum of leadership Khamenei's death leaves. Hence, Khamenei's hints against a reformist president portends his efforts to ensure his own successor continues his own more hardline, less compromising posture.

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Source: “Sokhanrani Nowruzi Khatab beh Mellat-e Iran” (Nowruz Speech Given to the Iranian Nation).” *Khamenei.ir* (Supreme leader's personal website), 21 March 2021. <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=47576>

The next point I direct to the masses of the people: I wish to mention the characteristics that an ideal president should have. You people should see if this is really the case. These characteristics are not my personal viewpoints. It seems that anyone looking for the welfare of the country wants such a president. Firstly, he should be competent. He should possess managerial qualities and competence. Secondly, he should be religious. If he were irreligious, it would not be possible to trust him. An irreligious person will sell the country and its interests and people. Therefore, he should be religious.

After that, he should be after justice and fight against corruption. This is one of the most important characteristics that a president should possess. He should pursue justice in the real sense of the word and want to fight against corruption in the true sense of the word. He should have a revolutionary and jihadi performance. One cannot work with a pretentious and ceremonial manner. With all the fundamental issues that exist in the country, there is a need for a jihadi and revolutionary performance. He should have such a performance. He should believe in domestic capabilities. Some individuals do not believe in domestic capabilities at all. They repeat the same cliché that inside the country, it is only possible to build clay ewers. However, they do not know what is happening inside the country. Once, a gentleman said something about our defensive capabilities. Then, I said that we should hold an exhibition so that such gentlemen come and see what is happening in the country in terms of defensive capabilities. Presidential candidates should be sure about the capabilities of the country. They should also believe in the youth. They should recognize the youth as the engine of the country's general movement and they should trust them. I have been in contact with youth since long ago and I have trusted them for years over different issues. In whichever area the youth enter – it is not necessary to mention which areas – they really untie difficult knots and solve the problems. So, the president should believe in the youth. He should also believe in the people and be an optimistic person. He should not be a hopeless and pessimistic person with a bitter and dark outlook towards the future. If there is such a person with the power to manage problems, he will surely help the country reach the ideal point.

You should find a president with such characteristics. Of course, it is not easy for all people to find such a person. Well, they can refer to others and ask for their opinion. In any case, they should try to find a candidate with such characteristics. We should ask God to help the Iranian nation find and elect a person with such characteristics.