

Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi: Chief Justice of Iran

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Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi

Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi has steadily risen through the ranks of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Spending most of his career in the judiciary, Raisi’s ascendance can be explained by three factors: promotion by Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, an influential family network, and a knack for leveraging state positions to feed his ambition. Raisi has spent his career developing his image as an anti-corruption crusader. In recent years, Raisi has emerged as a leading candidate to succeed Khamenei.

Raisi’s Early Years

[Born](#) on December 14, 1960 in Mashhad, Iran, Raisi’s father [died](#) when he was five. He later entered the Qom Seminary, where he made an early impression. At the dawn of the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Raisi [says](#) he was selected to be one of 70 students to take part in courses on Khomeinist governance. It was there that Raisi first met [Ali Khamenei](#) as one of his students. At the time, Khamenei’s career in the regime was just beginning, having been named by Iran’s founding Supreme Leader Ruhollah Khomeini to multiple posts, including deputy defense minister and Friday prayer leader of Tehran.

That connection helped jumpstart Raisi’s tenure in Tehran’s halls of power. He first [became](#) the prosecutor-general in Karaj at the age of 20. Media accounts at the time detail the harrowing use of executions in Karaj—with one [case](#) involving four women accused of prostitution and six men accused of possession of illegal drugs being executed by firing squads. In other cases, an anti-regime protester was [executed](#) as were [members](#) of the Baha’i faith.

Raisi then became prosecutor-general of Hamedan. It was during this period—in [1983](#)—that Raisi married Jamileh Alamolhoda, the daughter of conservative Ayatollah Ahmad Alamolhoda. When his daughter met Raisi, Alamolhoda was already a fixture inside the regime, having served as the [head](#) of a revolutionary komiteh in Tehran and as a senior official at Imam Sadiq University. Alamolhoda would eventually [rise](#) to become the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad in 2005 and later the supreme leader’s representative to Razavi Khorasan Province in 2016. He would also become a mentor to rising personalities in Tehran, including Saeed Jalili, for whom Alamolhoda served as a dissertation [advisor](#) at Imam Sadiq University. Thus, Raisi’s family connection to Alamolhoda—especially given his own father’s death at a young age—would be an instrumental anchor in promoting his career.

In 1985, Raisi was transferred to Tehran and appointed deputy prosecutor-general. The capital city of Tehran was a plum assignment for Raisi, who was still in his 20s. Raisi served as deputy to two chief prosecutors-general—Ali Razini and Morteza Eshraghi—from 1985-89. He appears to have modeled parts of his career after Razini and Eshraghi. Razini later [served](#) as chief judge of the Special Court for Clergy, where Raisi would later become prosecutor-general. While serving under Eshraghi during his tenure as prosecutor-general of Tehran, Raisi received an infamous—and in regime terms, invaluable—opportunity in 1988, working with him as a member of a “death commission” established after the end of the Iran-Iraq War to review the cases of political

prisoners, which resulted in the execution of thousands of people. There is evidence Raisi was ostensibly treated as Eshraghi’s equal on the commission—specifically, a [letter](#) written by then-Deputy Supreme Leader Hossein Ali Montazeri in 1988 was addressed, in part, to both Eshraghi and Raisi. Such correspondence from someone of Montazeri’s rank signaled Raisi’s heightened profile in Tehran’s halls of power. In the letter, Montazeri blasted the Tehran death commission, [saying](#), “[w]e are upset by the crimes of monafeqin in the west [of the country] and we are taking this out on captives and former prisoners. However, executing them when they have not engaged in any new activity means undermining all our judges and past judgments. On what basis do you execute someone whom you have already sentenced to a punishment lesser than the death penalty?”

Raisi’s importance on the commission was once again confirmed in an audio recording of a meeting he [participated](#) in with Montazeri in 1988. Montazeri is heard [saying](#), “[i]n my view, the biggest crime in the Islamic Republic, for which the history will condemn us, has been committed at your hands, and they’ll write your names as criminals in the history.” But it was Montazeri, rather than Raisi, who was condemned and sidelined, later being [removed](#) from his post as deputy supreme leader, while Raisi was promoted to chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1989. Raisi’s promotion incidentally coincided with Ali Khamenei’s ascension to the supreme leadership and his installation of a new chief justice—Mohammad Yazdi. Thus Raisi was likely seen as sufficiently loyal to Khamenei as the new supreme leader and his associates began to wield authority over Iran’s judiciary.

During Raisi’s tenure as chief prosecutor, he continued to be one of the Islamic Republic’s chief enablers in purging detractors of the state. For example, one Human Rights Watch report [indicated](#) that in 1990 Tehran’s Islamic revolutionary prosecutor “ordered the arrest of more than 30 signatories of an open letter to President Rafsanjani,” which criticized his policies, particularly the ban of the Iran Freedom Movement, led by former Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan. Tehran’s revolutionary prosecutor also [ordered](#) the dissolution of the Association for the Defense of Freedom and Sovereignty of the Iranian Nation that same month. In August 1993, the Islamic revolutionary courts [ordered](#) the arrest of the editor-in-chief of *Salam* newspaper, after its criticism of government policy. Mehdi Nassiri, the editor-in-chief of *Kayhan*, was similarly [detained](#) on slander charges filed against him by Iran’s then Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi. Thus, Raisi was on the frontlines of the battle for control over Iran’s political space.

National Platform

Raisi concluded his tenure as chief prosecutor-general of Tehran in 1994. In [1995](#), soon after he left the post, Iran decided not to fill the office of prosecutors-general, instead relying on judges to act as both prosecutor and judge. Such an arrangement lasted around eight years. But Raisi was nonetheless rewarded for his service, being promoted to head of the General Inspection Office of Iran (GIO), a post in which he served for ten years. This was the first position that Raisi occupied with nationwide reach—before he was a prosecutor at the local level, with Tehran being his most prestigious assignment to date. The job at GIO would therefore offer him more management experience and exposure. Article 174 of Iran’s Constitution stipulates its authority in keeping with

the judiciary's role to "supervise the proper conducting of affairs and the correct implementation of laws by the administrative organs of the government." That Raisi was elevated to this role during the tenure of then Chief Justice Mohammad Yazdi is an example of Yazdi's promotion of his career—with the young cleric receiving now two important positions under Yazdi's tenure.

Despite the national platform the role afforded its occupants, the position had not been a steppingstone to more powerful positions in the Islamic Republic. Raisi's predecessor, Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad, served in the job for 13 years—from 1981-94—spanning almost the entirety of Khomeini's supreme leadership and the early part of Khamenei's tenure. But Mohaghegh Damad wasn't rewarded with a more powerful position in 1994. This could partly be explained by Mohaghegh Damad being trusted more by Khomeini than by Khamenei, as he rose through the ranks during the former and had his career cut short by the latter. Thus, Raisi was entering office risking the same fate as Mohaghegh Damad. The fact that his former role as chief prosecutor-general of Tehran was left unfilled by the regime for years after his tenure may have added to the fear of the GIO being a dead end for Raisi.

But he quickly established himself as a player in Tehran's halls of power during his tenure, laying the groundwork for his brand as an anti-corruption crusader—at one point saying most of the cases on his [docket](#) dealt with corruption and that he would be prepared to confront leading clerics accused of such illicit activity. Early in his tenure, he [bragged](#) to provincial judges in Hormozgan that a commission had been established at the judiciary to help inspire confidence in its operations. Raisi played a role in an [investigation](#) of corruption in institutions directly controlled by the supreme leader, boasting that a final report had been submitted to Khamenei himself. He also [showcased](#) efforts by the GIO to thwart profiteering from government grants and loans, and even began an investigation into the division of the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance in charge of book censorship. Raisi [spearheaded](#) cases of embezzlement of 100 and 120 billion rials from the Housing and Urban Development departments of Khuzestan and Qazvin provinces, respectively, and [chastised](#) state managers who flew to Kish Island, arguing the trip was too extravagant. Likewise, he exposed how private cooperatives used public assets—a method by which Iranian officials engage in corrupt activity.

Such exposure to Iran's sprawling bureaucracy—from the judiciary to the executive branch—was likely valuable for Raisi, enabling him to build a brand in tackling corruption, as well as nurturing relationships. Iranian news outlets indicate Raisi won [praise](#) at one point from then reformist President Mohammad Khatami for his "accurate reports" setting an "exemplary model for his ministers." Raisi served as the head of GIO until 2004—during the tenures of both Chief Justices Yazdi and Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi.

In 2004, he would ascend to the office of first deputy chief justice. It was again indicative of the confidence that Khamenei and Chief Justice Shahroudi had in his loyalty. Raisi replaced Mohammad-Hadi Marvi, who had served as first deputy chief justice since 1999. But Raisi soon found himself facing a similar dynamic to when he first started as the head of the GIO. His predecessors at the GIO—Mostafa Mohaghegh Damad—and as first deputy chief justice—Mohammad-Hadi Marvi—had both vanished into relative obscurity after their roles as senior

judiciary officials. Thus there was no guarantee of an automatic promotion as he began his new role. But Raisi's timing was fortuitous, as he would have direct working relationships with Chief Justice Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi and later Sadegh Larijani, who, at various points, were both viewed as potential successors to Khamenei.

Raisi quickly raised his profile as deputy chief justice—becoming associated not only with anti-corruption cases but also with pressing security and social matters of the time. In 2008, he [accused](#) the United States and the United Kingdom of supporting the Sunni militant group Jundallah “with arms and information,” claiming Iran had documents proving the assistance. Such a declaration was important as Jundallah would later sponsor a suicide bombing in Iran for the first time, killing four and wounding 12 in Saravan. Raisi played a visible role in the crackdown on the unrest following the disputed June 2009 reelection of then-President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, [announcing](#) hangings of protesters. Indeed, Raisi was careful to follow Khamenei's edicts as deputy chief justice, [proclaiming](#) that because the supreme leader had said that questioning the validity of the 2009 presidential election was a “great crime,” “those who have proposed the elections were fraudulent and created doubt in the public's mind have undoubtedly committed a grave crime and naturally will have to answer for the crime they have committed.” He also [dubbed](#) the incident with inmates detained after the 2009 presidential election unrest dying at Kahrizak Prison a “peripheral issue,” and made a point of publicizing how the children of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani would be tried.

In 2011, he dismissed [allegations](#) of gang rapes, claiming that in Iran, “there is more safety for women than in Western society.” As sanctions suffocated Iran's economy, Raisi [announced](#) in 2012 the indictment of 18 current and former U.S. officials for “criminal acts” against Iran. All of these announcements are indicative of Raisi's careful attention to his image—capitalizing on waste, fraud, and abuse inside Iran's government while at the same time meting out harsh punishments in security cases and grabbing headlines with high-profile indictments.

Raisi and his family were also rewarded after he became first deputy to Iran's chief justice. In 2005, Iran's supreme leader [named](#) his father-in-law, Ayatollah Alamolhoda, as the Friday prayer leader of Mashhad. This was a plum assignment, given Khamenei's [birth](#) in Mashhad. Raisi himself became a [member](#) of the Assembly of Experts, which is constitutionally vested with the selection and supervision of the supreme leader, in 2006. Soon after, in 2007, capitalizing on the platform that Khamenei had given him as a Friday prayer leader, Alamolhoda became a [member](#) of the Assembly of Experts.

In 2012, Raisi became the recipient of additional positions which further boosted his stock in Tehran. That year, he was [named](#) the prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy. [Alumni](#) of this post included powerful figures from the regime—including three onetime intelligence ministers: Ali Fallahian, Mohammad Reyshahri, and Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei.

Raisi lasted in the role of first deputy chief justice until 2014, and after became attorney general of Iran, another position in the judiciary. One again, Raisi found himself in the same circle of clerics who had occupied positions of consequence both in the intelligence and judicial

communities. In fact, both Mohammad Reyshahri and Gholamhossein Mohseni Ejei were Raisi's predecessors as attorney general in addition to prosecutor-general of the Special Court for the Clergy. Raisi came to the position having previously served as a provincial and municipal prosecutor. He had served on the national level at GIO and as a deputy chief justice. But the public had never before seen him as a national prosecutor. During his tenure, Raisi generated headlines by vowing to take legal action against Saudi Arabia for a stampede during the annual hajj. He [called](#) it a crime and accused Saudi Arabia of blocking a road used by pilgrims for the use of a royal motorcade.

During his time as attorney general, Raisi also began speaking at symbolically important events for the regime, thus boosting his visibility. For instance, in 2015, he [spoke](#) on Aban 13, which marks the anniversary of the seizure of the U.S. embassy in 1979, where marchers travel from the University of Tehran to the site of the former U.S. embassy. In 2016, he gave a [speech](#) during the Fajr ceremonies which mark the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution. Raisi was scheduled as the first speaker that year at Khomeini's mausoleum. Again, this was an important event for Raisi as he ascended the ladder of power.

The Politicization of a Religious Platform

On March 8, 2016, Iran's supreme leader appointed Raisi as the new head of Astan-e Quds Razavi in Mashhad. In a statement, Khamenei [referred](#) to him as a "trustworthy person with high-profile experience." Astan-e Quds Razavi is Iran's wealthiest foundation and oversees the Imam Reza Shrine, which is one of the holiest sites in Shiite Islam. According to some [estimates](#), Astan-e Quds Razavi's assets total billions of dollars. Raisi's elevation to the post was historic by any measure. He [succeeded](#) Abbas Vaez-Tabasi, who had held the position since Khomeini appointed him in 1979 until the day he died. The position provided Raisi with both a religious and financial platform from which to further promote his brand. Raisi's family was also rewarded at the same time, with the supreme leader [naming](#) his father-in-law Ayatollah Alamolhoda as his new representative to the province of Khorasan Razavi. That put Raisi's family in firm control of one of Iran's most important cities.

Nevertheless, Raisi found himself once again in a position where his predecessor wasn't necessarily upwardly mobile—with Vaez-Tabasi lasting in the role for decades. But Raisi soon found a way to capitalize on his new position. Only [months](#) after his appointment, Iranian media began referring to Raisi as an ayatollah rather than the lower ranking hojatoleslam. Soon after, [profiles](#) began emerging, which trumpeted Raisi as a potential successor to Khamenei himself.

Raisi started his new position at a time when the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) had just been inked. But he soon used his new perch in Mashhad as a means to needle President Hassan Rouhani. According to a [report](#) in the *Financial Times* in January 2017, "hardliners...prevented politicians close to Mr. Rouhani from making speeches in the city in recent months and cancelled music concerts." Just over a year into his tenure, Raisi [entered](#) the 2017 presidential race. It was a bold move for Raisi—challenging an incumbent president. Since 1981, every Iranian president had won reelection. But Rouhani was encountering a different electoral

landscape from Khamenei, Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Ahmadinejad. It was his administration that had concluded a high-stakes nuclear deal with the west.

In challenging Rouhani, Raisi [emphasized](#) that while he was reluctant to run for the presidency, he did so because he believed it was his “religious and revolutionary responsibility.” This Iranian political humility is similar to Khamenei’s own experience before ascending to the supreme leadership, pleading that he was [unqualified](#) for the post. Raisi focused heavily on economic issues in the campaign—specifically what he felt as the Rouhani administration’s failure to deliver despite the JCPOA. His official website [proclaimed](#) “The Islamic establishment is four decades’ old and while we have had achievements and progress, people are still suffering from chronic structural problems and mismanagement which are preventing the government from responding to people’s demands and fulfilling constitutional aims...Can’t we resolve issues such as recession, unemployment and obstacles in the way of businesses?...I deeply believe that this can change.” He also used his status as the head of Astan-e Quds Razavi as a credential to make himself more accessible to the needier classes of Iran. Upon registering he [said](#) “[m]y mission in AQR [Astan-e Quds Razavi] has been to help the poor and from the day one we created a department to aid the poor.”

Beyond his contretemps with Rouhani, Raisi’s candidacy carried symbolic importance. Given the speculation surrounding him being a contender to succeed Khamenei as supreme leader, the presidency would be a natural steppingstone for Raisi because of Khamenei having previously served as president. It was a way for him to test his brand electorally as well as deploy the vast resources and platform that Astan-e Quds Razavi provides. In fact, Raisi’s candidacy carried the perceived imprimatur of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). [Pictures circulated](#) of him in a chair, with senior commanders of the IRGC—including its then Commander-in-Chief Mohammad Ali Jafari and then Commander of the Quds Force Qassem Soleimani—seated at his knee. The picture was a sign of deference for Raisi.



Seated from Left to Right: Ebrahim Raisi, former Commander of the IRGC-Basij Forces Mohammed Reza Naqdi, former Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Mohammad Ali Jafari, and former Commander of the IRGC-Quds Force Qassem Soleimani

Raisi framed his [candidacy](#) as one “for the whole of Iran. I don’t limit myself to a certain group, party, or faction.” In doing so, he didn’t make a strong impression in the first debate against Rouhani, where he [focused](#) mostly on a populist message and ceded much of the barbs to more seasoned political athletes like then-Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf. In fact, Raisi attempted to make himself more accessible to moderate voters by posting a video [lauding](#) his wife Jamileh Alamolhoda, who is a professor at Shahid Beheshti University. He claimed, “[i]f I go home and she’s not there, I don’t mind. If there is no supper, I don’t mind. I genuinely believe that her work helps her and the country...and she is having an impact.” This more pragmatic view of a wife’s role stood in contrast to the traditionalist nature of figures like Khamenei, whose wife once [remarked](#) in a rare interview that “[h]e doesn’t expect anything but a happy, calm, and healthy family environment.” Additionally, Raisi tried to appeal to younger voters, appearing alongside rapper Amir Tataloo. It was another unconventional [move](#) for Raisi as a former deputy chief justice, because Tataloo had been imprisoned in 2016 for 62 days for “encouraging corruption and prostitution among the youth.”

However, despite Raisi’s attempts to portray himself as above the fray and modern, his campaign included operatives associated with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s conservative administration, most especially his campaign manager [Ali Nikzad](#), who served in Ahmadinejad’s cabinet. In the second debate, Raisi [sparred](#) with Rouhani over the JCPOA, charging that the deal had not redounded to Tehran’s benefit and asking, “Dear people! Our question is whether the wheels of economy are turning. Businessmen: are you able to do business?” In a speech, Rouhani took direct aim at Raisi saying Iranians would not vote for “those who have only known how to execute and jail people.” That’s not to mention that Raisi received a boost from Ghalibaf, a Rouhani critic, when he withdrew and endorsed Raisi’s campaign. Ghalibaf pleaded with his supporters “to contribute their full capacity and support for the success of my brother, Ebrahim Raisi.” Raisi in turn [called](#) Ghalibaf’s withdrawal a “revolutionary act.”

But in the end, Raisi lost the 2017 presidential election, [receiving](#) 38 percent of the vote, compared with Rouhani winning 57 percent. That didn’t prevent Raisi from [accusing](#) his opponents of voter fraud.

After his loss, Raisi continued to lead Astan-e Quds Razavi while also working to further raise his profile. It was in this period that Raisi attempted to build his relationship with Iran’s broader Axis of Resistance—namely Hezbollah. In January 2018, he made an important [trip](#) to Lebanon to visit Hezbollah’s Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah and other officials. Raisi generated headlines when he was [pictured](#) touring the border between Israel and Lebanon, proclaiming “Jerusalem’s liberation is near” and commenting that Hezbollah’s brand is more than military and that it encompasses “diverse tasks in building Islamic culture.” The optics of Raisi’s visit to Lebanon spoke volumes—namely of his ambition. It was a bold move after losing his bid to become president. But it demonstrated that Raisi still maintained a powerful platform at the helm of Astan-e Quds Razavi and that he still had his eyes on even higher office.

Chief Justice

In December 2018, Iran’s supreme leader began making consequential personnel decisions that would affect Raisi’s career trajectory. After the death of former Chairman of Iran’s Expediency Council Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, Khamenei [elevated](#) Sadegh Larijani, then chief justice, as his successor. The Expediency Council is a body that resolves differences between parliament and the Guardian Council. Larijani was nearing the end of his term at the helm of the judiciary in August 2019, after spending close to a decade in the powerful position. But Larijani would not occupy both positions for long. In March 2019, Iran’s supreme leader [appointed](#) Raisi as Larijani’s successor as chief justice. Such a move raised eyebrows as it came months before Larijani’s term was scheduled to end. If that promotion wasn’t enough, [days](#) later Raisi became deputy chairman of the Assembly of Experts, [beating](#) out Larijani himself.

Raisi has thus positioned himself well in the battle for succession as Khamenei ages. He controls one branch of government while commanding a leadership post in the body that is formally vested with the authority to select Iran’s next supreme leader. While Larijani was once thought to be a leading contender to become supreme leader, Raisi has systematically tarnished his brand, launching an anti-corruption case [against](#) his former deputy Akbar Tabari. Indeed, Larijani himself [argued](#) the revelations—the trial has been broadcast on state television—were part of a “pre-planned scenario” to sully his image. Raisi also [claimed](#) credit for the firing of at least 60 judges from the Larijani era. Raisi has additionally used anti-corruption as a political weapon against the Rouhani administration, with the president’s [brother](#), the [son-in-law](#) of his labor minister, the [daughter](#) of his former industry minister, and his former [vice president for women and family affairs](#) being targeted under the watch of the new chief justice.

At the same time, Raisi has attempted to win plaudits from more pragmatic power centers in Iran—instituting stricter financial transparency measures for senior officials and ordering an [investigation](#) into “possible negligence” surrounding the death of a social media activist in prison. That’s not to mention the temporary [release](#) of prisoners amid the coronavirus outbreak and the judiciary’s [decision](#) in July 2020 to order a retrial after outrage spread over the death sentences of three protesters detained after the unrest surrounding the new gas policy in November 2019.

The position of chief justice brings added advantages for Raisi as he now sits on the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) as well as the Supreme Economic Coordination Council (SECC). Both positions enhance his resume as prior to 2019, Raisi had never served on either. The SNSC has given him firsthand experience in national security policymaking and the SECC has grown into an important political body, which, at times, has circumvented Iran’s legislative chamber. He has also courted members of the broader Axis of Resistance—for example, calling Ismail Haniyeh, the head of [Hamas](#)’ political bureau, in April 2020. Raisi has played a leading role in mobilizing Iran’s legal response to the strike which killed former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani in January 2020, and was prominently pictured at Khamenei’s side at the late commander’s funeral. The optics spoke volumes. There is even speculation Raisi could run for the presidency again in 2021. If true, he would be the first sitting chief justice to actively contemplate running. But such a move would bring risks, as he could lose for a second time, potentially hurting his

chances to succeed Khamenei. Remaining in the judiciary would be a safer bet for him, as it continues to be one of the most powerful positions.



Left to Right: Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and Chief Justice Ayatollah Ebrahim Raisi at the funeral of former IRGC-Quds Force Commander Qassem Soleimani

Conclusion

Ebrahim Raisi's career has been advanced by steady promotion by Iran's supreme leader, an influential family base of power, and a shrewd ability to maximize his visibility and image. Raisi has developed a political brand and base focused on anti-corruption and populism. He is an important figure to watch as he has the administrative, political, and religious standing to be a serious contender to succeed Ali Khamenei.