

REPORT

Iranians and the Politicization of the Shiite Clergy: Honorific Titles and Ebrahim Raisi as an Example

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In the media, Ebrahim Raisi — before winning the presidential election — had always been called *Hojatoleslam wal-Muslimin*, an honorable title referring to having authority over Islam and Muslims. In his inaugural speech to announce Raisi as the chief justice in March 2019, the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei referred to him as “Hojatoleslam wal-Muslimin Ebrahim [Raisi](#).” However, newspapers and media agencies close to the Iranian government began to use the title “ayatollah” to refer to Raisi, especially after he won the presidential election held in June 2021 which was engineered by the Guardian Council through disqualifying Raisi’s most powerful rivals.

The titles given to the clergy is an important issue in the community of clerics in general and in the seminary in

particular. They no longer depict mere honor as was the case before the modern state was established. Titles now indicate a jurist's jurisprudential ranking and his rank within the seminary's leadership.

However, after the Iranian revolution, such titles were politicized to a large extent. Before, a jurist's rank was based on popularity, fame, and jurisprudential capacity — matters that were dependent on clerics specifying who had more knowledge and greater jurisprudential capacity. After the revolution, a jurist's position was determined by the political authority, which boosted his popularity and fame through its media and security tools. This is a big shift away from the public and the clerical community evaluating the rank of a cleric. The political authority began to determine the rank of a cleric.

Perhaps this (the Iranian government intervening in promoting clerics and redrawing the seminary's leadership) was the reason why many Shiite clerics denounced the issue of "jurisprudential capacity" (i.e, popularity and ranks). Marja Mohammad Hussein Fadlallah (1035-2010) said in his critique of jurisprudential capacity:

"I don't believe that ijtiḥad-practicing clerics should meet the condition of having certain 'jurisprudential capacity' for people to follow them in taqlid. This is because — in my view — that there is no proof that 'jurisprudential capacity' is a reliable criterion. But I believe the condition [of 'jurisprudential capacity'] is ijtiḥad and the experience based on long-standing practice. I also believe that 'jurisprudential capacity' is unrealistic. Across the world, in all areas of knowledge, there is no specific person that could be pointed to as having more knowledge than all his peers in this or that area. There could be some differentiations of ijtiḥad-practicing clerics in the elements and characteristics of their ijtiḥad approach, [etc.](#)"

By his argument, he eliminates the idea of guardianship. If the jurist does not have jurisprudential mastership over a matter

and if the characteristics of mastership are not met, then it is impermissible for the jurist to declare his guardianship and custodianship over the public, let alone over other jurists. Yet, Marja Kamal al-Haydari argues that popularity does not prove authority over a matter and neither is it proof of jurisprudential mastership. He also criticized picking fixed criteria for determining [jurisprudential mastership](#). There are tens of thousands of clerics and hundreds of marjas, and it is impossible for the people of expertise and reliable jurists to track the intellectual works of such a huge number of clerics and judge their theses.

1. Background of Honorific Titles Offered to Shiite Clerics

Before the Safavid era, the titles granted to clerics were not a proof of their position. Titles did not have the role they have today. There were titles like *Hojjat* (the authority) or *Allamah* (polymath), *al-Muhaqiq* (researcher). During the Safavid era, titles indicating an official status began to emerge after the creation of official religious institutions such as *Shaykh al-Islām*, [Sadr ul-Sodoor](#) (chief justice) etc.

But the present-day hierarchy of religious titles appeared at the end of the Qajar dynasty, specifically in the first quarter of the 20th century. Terms like “ayatollah” and “grand ayatollah” and “hojatoleslam” began to emerge. Then their use declined until the middle of the 20th century and they powerfully resurfaced under the marjas Muhsin al-Hakim (1889-1970) in Najaf and Hossein Borujerdi (1875-1961) in [Qom](#).

Each of the mentioned titles have a specific meaning and a jurist can only progress to a higher title if he meets certain conditions. The title “Sheikh” is mostly given to all those who work in the religious sciences. Sometimes it is given to senior clerics. The title “grand ayatollah” is given to ijtihad-practicing clerics. He is also called a “marja.” “Hojjat” is a title given to the clerics who have not reached the rank of ijtihad-practicing clerics but are

close to it. It is also given to ijtehad-practicing cleric on other occasions. Yet, the title “Hojatoleslam wal-Muslimin” is given to the mentioned group of clerics. “Head of Hawza” (head of the seminary) is a title given to the marja whose authority is endorsed by all the Shiite seminaries worldwide. The title “Thiqat al-Islam” is given to a cleric who is revered. Sometimes it is given to the narrator, veteran transmitter of hadith or to seminary students based on their knowledge of some sciences. The title “Supreme Marja” is given to the marja who has the largest number of taqlid clerics worldwide and runs a [religious seminary](#). This marja is usually among the [most senior marjas](#). Many reformist Shiite clerics have criticized the mentioned titles as they have led to rivalry, politicization and [exploitation](#). This politicization was apparent when semiofficial media agencies deliberately referred to Ebrahim Raisi as “ayatollah.”

2. Ebrahim Raisi and the Title of Ayatollah

Even though Ebrahim Raisi has not reached the level of an ijtehad-practicing cleric in Qom or Mashhad, Iranian media agencies aligned with the “conservatives” referred to him as “ayatollah.” Some voices have justified this title, arguing that he had accomplished his jurisprudential career in Tehran, and in addition, they have differentiated between government-affiliated ijtehad-practicing clerics and seminary-affiliated ones. The chief justice is a member of the Assembly of Experts, so it stands to reason that he is an ijtehad-practicing cleric and he is a mujtahid even if he is not affiliated with the religious seminary; he was approved by the Guardian Council as a mujtahid in 2006. He was endorsed during the Assembly of Experts’ election. This justification is profoundly misleading because it means that a jurist can only be appointed as a judge or a chief justice when he reaches the rank of mujtahid. But Raisi did not meet these conditions.

Moreover, if we accept that this justification is true, Raisi

should be given another title other than “ayatollah” since it is a seminary-related title. He does not recognize the seminary-designated leadership, as a result he sought approval from the government, not from the religious seminary. He receives the mujtahid ranking from the government but uses the seminary-approved title, which is logically unacceptable.

3. The Creation of Marja

Looking back, we find that Khomeini (1902-1989) was not the number one cleric in Qom the night the Iranian revolution succeeded in 1979. But there were other powerful clerics such as Ayatollah Shariatmadari (1906-1986), Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani (1899-1993) and Shahab ud-Din Mar’ashi Najafi (1897-1991). However, Khomeini’s revolutionary charisma and effectiveness led him to become the sole religious and political leader.

Marja Ayatollah Shariatmadari was the highest religious authority in Iran, and he was in charge of running the religious seminary along with his colleagues Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani and Shahab ud-Din Mar’ashi Najafi. Furthermore, he was engaged in politics and advocated a civilian and constitutional state unlike his two colleagues. Therefore, the pro-Velayat-e Faqih political authority rushed to intervene and placed him under house arrest. It also arrested some of his students, and raided his office, clearing the way for Khomeini to lead the religious and political marjas. The same happened with cleric Mohammad al-Shirazi and other multiple senior marjas. After the demise of Khomeini in 1989, politics again began to influence the qualification of marjas. The Iranian government threw its weight behind Khamenei who did not reach the level of ijtihad at that time. The government backed him, and allowed him to control both religious and political authorities.

Khamenei was not in a jurisprudential or seminary position that qualified him to become the guardian jurist — a position that

requires a cleric to be ranked at the level of “ayatollah.” However, Khamenei at the time ranked at the level of “hojatoleslam” while there were many marjas who were “ayatollahs.” However, Hojatoleslam Hashemi Rafsanjani (1934-2017) — the most powerful man at that time — believed that handing the leadership over to Khamenei would help in sidelining the deposed powerful deputy supreme leader Hussein-Ali Montazeri who was sacked shortly before the death of Khomeini.

He also believed that Khamenei’s ascent to the position of the supreme leader would help in maintaining the interests of his camp at that time. Perhaps Rafsanjani also believed that it would be easier to control Khamenei from behind the scenes given his political and administrative skills and his helping hand in securing Khamenei’s position. He then thought about paving the way for a power sharing arrangement; he himself taking over the presidency — a position which was enhanced following the constitutional amendments of 1989 — and Khamenei would take over the [supreme](#) leader position.

The aforementioned interpretation is based on scholars from Shiite seminaries; for example: Hani Fahs, a prominent Shiite scholar (1946-2014) — supported this argument. Fahs said: “Although Khamenei did not meet the requirements of the position at that time, he was different from present-day Khamenei. He was cultured and acquainted with the world’s cultural products. And the cultural dimension was given precedence by him over the jurisprudential dimension. His jurisprudential *ijtihad* and his qualification for guardianship is not something that cannot be questioned. But it is a narrative promoted by Rafsanjani — the principal pragmatist.”

He added that Khomeini said: “Khamenei is qualified for leadership, but some remained suspicious of the origin of his [ijtihad](#) level.” Therefore, to render legal the marja status of Khamenei, constitutional provisions were manipulated in the well-known constitutional amendments in 1989.

Khamenei did not agree merely to be Iran's political leader. But he attempted — via his tools — to hijack the religious marjaya. He made many maneuvers to achieve this end. For example, following the death of Khomeini, Ayatollah Lotfollah Safi Golpaygani remained the head of the religious marjaya — and he was the third among three clerics who ran the affairs of the marjaya after the death of Hossein Borujerdi in 1961. But he was far less engaged in politics, unlike his colleague Shariatmadari. He was not engaged in politics and opposed the guardianship of the jurist theory. However, this benefited the Iranian government because he did not become an active opponent of the political system's policies from within the religious seminary. The leaders of the Islamic Republic at that time had two options. First, to appoint a cleric who was loyal to the republic but lacked taqlid credentials. Second, allow a cleric from outside the political system's circle to take over the position. The second option, according to Linda S. Walbridge, posed a danger, given the ability of the individual who is acknowledged as a marja to oppose the policies of the government with [relative](#) immunity. The government depended on the element of time. Time was needed to vacate the landscape of senior marjas and create the conditions for Khamenei to be accepted as the religious and political leader. Indeed, after the demise of Golpaygani in 1993, the government threw its weight behind Ayatollah Mohammad Ali al-Araki (1894-1994) — the then elderly cleric. He was easy to control given his age and loyalty to the political system. One year after the death of Golpaygani, Araki died in 1994. At that time, the government felt that the time was appropriate to nominate Khamenei for the rank of supreme marja, combining the religious establishment with [government](#) leadership. The Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom issued a statement on December 12, 1994, in which they mentioned the names of jurists who met the conditions to be supreme marja, including Ali Khamenei.

In parallel, the government intervened using security means. By 1995, those appointed to government positions were asked about their favorite taqlid cleric, and the ultimate answer undoubtedly was [Khamenei](#).

According to Linda S. Walbridge in her book “The Most Learned of the Shi’a: The Institution of the Marja’ Taqlid,” the government has its own methods to punish the followers who support a marja, who is not endorsed by it.

This answers the following jurisprudential and philosophical question: who chooses the guardian jurist? Perhaps the veteran clerics speak flatteringly or manipulate the Iranian Constitution politically and pragmatically. But one of the junior clerics answered this question innocently and frankly, saying: “The Kalashnikov,” meaning that force is the principal factor in determining who will become the supreme leader. Whoever possesses power can impose his decisions.

Hence, the Iranian government today wants to avoid all the problems that happened when Khamenei took over from Khomeini. Therefore, we can understand the reason as to why Raisi has been given the title of “ayatollah.”

Media agencies referring to Raisi as “ayatollah” is not an accident. But it comes in the context of possibly preparing the ground for him to succeed the current Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei — Raisi is the most powerful candidate to succeed him, especially if there are no surprises during his presidency, whether at home or regionally. Raisi is one of the figures who is accepted by the old guard, the IRGC and the supporters of the political system.

He is a powerful figure with huge clout and has occupied senior positions over the past years. Adding the title “ayatollah” is in fact a repetition of what happened in the past with Khamenei.

Conclusion

It can be said that we are heading towards a phase in which marjas are created, with their legitimacy cemented at the

expense of the long-held seminary tradition of determining jurists' ascension to the position of marja. But at the same time, engineering the qualification of marjas and redrawing the leadership of the religious seminary in a way that suits the political system and its religious interpretation may give rise to independent marjas and result in the public shunning the official religious establishment.

Therefore, the government seeks to curb the rise of independent clerics by using multiple strategies, which has resulted in the creation of other problems as the landscape is devoid of rational and independent influential marjas. The problems that have arisen include atheism and growing frustration among the youth regarding political and social reforms. But it seems that the government believes that such phenomena are less harmful to its interests than the emergence of independent marjas and the noticeable divergence between the government and the religious seminary.



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