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Staging Continuity: Political Ritual and the Reproduction of Authority after Khamenei

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Bahram Kalviri

Abstract
Leadership transitions in centralized regimes expose fundamental tensions between procedural succession and political consolidation. Following the killing of its Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei in February 2026, the Islamic Republic of Iran managed this vulnerability through a two-stage process of political stabilization. The rapid activation of constitutional mechanisms and the appointment of Mojtaba Khamenei achieved procedural succession, containing immediate institutional uncertainty. However, administrative resolution left critical questions regarding elite consensus, religious legitimacy, and support for security establishment unresolved. The July funeral subsequently functioned as a second-stage mechanism of political consolidation through narrative building. Operating as political theatre, the ceremony deployed Shia religious symbolism, revolutionary genealogy, and institutional choreography to transform formal succession into a publicly intelligible display of continuity. By projecting differentiated signals of closure to elites, integration to the security establishment, and order to the public, the regime managed the visibility of political contestation. Ultimately, the intense ritualization reveals a central paradox – the capacity to stage coherence reflects organizational strength, yet the necessity to perform it exposes underlying fragility and unfulfilled personal political authority.

Keywords: Iran; political succession; funeral politics; political ritual; regime resilience; symbolic power

Leadership transitions in highly centralized political systems are moments of acute institutional stress. When authority is concentrated in a single figure, succession does not merely involve replacing an officeholder; it raises questions about whether a structure built over years or decades around individual authority can continue to exist without its architect. In such contexts, the challenge is both procedural and symbolic – regimes must maintain the functioning of political institutions while demonstrating that authority survives the death of its embodiment.

This challenge became particularly visible following the killing of Iran's Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on 28 February 2026. Over nearly four decades as Supreme Leader, Khamenei had accumulated extensive authority across the Islamic Republic's political, religious, and security institutions, while playing a central role in managing elite cohesion and factional balance (Nader et al. 2011). His killing, therefore, created not only a leadership vacancy but a broader question of institutional continuity. The immediate activation of Article 111 and establishment of a temporary three-member leadership council demonstrated that constitutional mechanisms could function under conditions of sudden rupture.[i] The Assembly of Experts subsequently selected Mojtaba Khamenei as Supreme Leader in March, formally closing the procedural succession within days of his father's death (Secretariat of the Assembly of Experts 2026).[ii]

Yet procedural closure did not eliminate political uncertainty. The succession established who would occupy the office, but it did not by itself determine how authority would be consolidated, legitimized, or exercised under a successor whose political relationships were still developing.[iii] It is within this gap between procedural succession and political consolidation that the July funeral becomes politically and analytically significant.

The internal politics of the succession were more complicated than the speed of the constitutional process suggests. Mojtaba's elevation marked the first father-to-son succession to the Supreme Leadership and occurred despite his more limited public political profile compared with his father. At the same time, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) remained a central actor in the Islamic Republic's political and security architecture, making its relationship with the new leadership an Important element of the transition. These factors did not necessarily produce open disagreement, but they left unresolved questions about the configuration of authority within the emerging order.

The succession also raised questions of legitimacy. Although Mojtaba inherited the constitutional office of Supreme Leader, acceptance of the new leadership could not simply be assumed. Public demonstrations of allegiance, therefore, acquired particular significance. A large and orderly funeral could be presented as evidence that the transition had been accepted, even though participation itself might reflect grief, religious obligation, social expectations, or political loyalty. The regime consequently faced the challenge of making acceptance visible without being able to treat visibility as conclusive proof of legitimacy.

The funeral did not resolve the succession crisis. Its political function was not to determine leadership, but to transform an already completed procedural transition into a publicly intelligible narrative of continuity. Through religious symbolism, revolutionary imagery, institutional visibility, and mass participation, the ceremony embedded the new order within the ideological and institutional grammar of the Islamic Republic.

This paper argues that the funeral functioned as a second-stage mechanism of political stabilization – it did not produce succession but sought to shape and normalize it. Drawing on Kantorowicz's (1997) distinction between the mortal body of the ruler and the enduring political body of the office, the analysis examines how the Islamic Republic sought to separate Khamenei's physical death from the continuing authority of *Velayat-e Faqih* —a logic popularized through the regime slogan "Khamenei became young" to project the notion that despite the leader's demise, nothing within the office had changed.[iv] The argument, however, does not equate symbolic continuity with political consolidation. Rather, it distinguishes between the regime's demonstrated capacity to reproduce and publicly organize authority and the unresolved question of whether the new leadership has acquired the political relationships and legitimacy necessary to sustain it.

The analysis proceeds in four stages. First, it examines the constitutional mechanisms and elite coordination through which the succession was procedurally managed. Second, it interprets the funeral as political theatre, focusing on the religious, revolutionary, and institutional symbols through which continuity was constructed. Third, it examines how these performances addressed different constituencies whose interests and uncertainties were not identical. Finally, it considers the limits of this performance by assessing what the succession and funeral demonstrate about institutional capacity, and what they leave unresolved about elite alignment, popular legitimacy, and the consolidation of Mojtaba Khamenei's authority.

Managing the Succession Narrative

The immediate aftermath of Khamenei's death was marked by the rapid activation of constitutional mechanisms designed to prevent institutional paralysis. Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution was invoked, and a temporary three-member leadership council assumed the functions of the Supreme Leader while the Assembly of Experts prepared to select a successor. The arrangement demonstrated that the Islamic Republic possessed a predefined institutional mechanism for managing a sudden

leadership vacancy. Its significance, therefore, extended beyond formal constitutional compliance – it reduced the possibility that the removal of the regime's central political figure would immediately produce an administrative vacuum or open-ended contest over the locus of authority.

The subsequent selection of Mojtaba Khamenei in March further narrowed the period of formal uncertainty. However, the speed of the decision should not be treated as evidence that questions surrounding the succession had disappeared. The possibility of hereditary succession had long been politically sensitive, as dynastic transmission directly collided with the Islamic Republic's foundational rejection of monarchical rule. Indeed, concerns over dynastic optics had previously led Ali Khamenei to express opposition to having his son's candidacy formally evaluated by the Assembly of Experts' selection committee (Araghi 2024). That Mojtaba nonetheless succeeded his father highlights that the political significance of his *filial status* functioned not as formal hereditary inheritance, but as indispensable political capital during an acute crisis. The transition was not entirely devoid of institutional alternatives; non-hereditary clerical figures with established institutional profiles, such as Alireza Arafi, were featured in pre-transition succession deliberations alongside a short-lived activation of collective leadership council (IRNA 2026a). However, the ultimate selection of Mojtaba bypassed these non-dynastic alternative, raising questions both over Mojtaba's religious qualifications (Lob 2026) and of IRGC influence over the process (Maloney 2026). These questions are analytically important because they distinguish procedural resolution from substantive agreement among actors involved.

The regime's management of the succession also extended into political communication. Official statements emphasized continuity, revolutionary legitimacy, and obedience to *Velayat-e Faqih*, framing the transition as the continuation of the Islamic Republic rather than a rupture. The Assembly of Experts called for unity around the principle of guardianship, framing the transition as a "renewal of the *Ummah's* (community) pledge". Broad state media and official discourse linked Mojtaba's leadership to "the continuation of the path of the two Imams of the Revolution," heralding his ascension as a "new chapter of guardianship" and a "new era for the regime" (*Mehr News* 2026a).

Figure 1

A large billboard in Tehran's *Vali-e Asr* Square depicting three generations of leadership –Ruhollah Khomeini standing alongside Ali Khamenei, who hands the flag of Islamic Republic to Mojtaba. The Persian text reads, "God's hand is over us, Khamenei is our leader."

Source: Abushamala (2026)

This messaging was reinforced through state broadcasting, Friday sermons, and official commemorations, where local Friday prayer leaders routinely declared that "obedience to the leader of the Islamic society is a religious and rational duty" (*Mehr News* 2026b). [v] Together, these institutions supplied a common vocabulary through which the succession could be interpreted as orderly and legitimate. The importance of this communication lies less in demonstrating consensus than in demonstrating the state's ability to structure interpretation. In an authoritarian information environment, the absence of visible contestation indicates not agreement but control over the public framing of disagreement.

At the same time, the speed and coherence of the transition also served a preventive function. By rapidly closing the formal succession process, the regime reduced the temporal space in which rival claims, factional bargaining, or alternative leadership narratives could crystallize. This compression of uncertainty is itself a form of political management – it does not eliminate disagreement but limits the conditions under which disagreement can become politically organized.

Thus, the March succession demonstrated institutional capacity – the Islamic Republic reproduced formal authority quickly and aligned key institutions around the outcome. Whether this alignment reflected durable consensus remained unresolved, a question that becomes more visible in the funeral stage of the transition.

Political Theatre and Ritualized Authority

The funeral became the principal arena through which the political meaning of the succession was publicly constructed. Rather than simply marking death, it functioned as political theatre – a structured performance assembling religious symbols, revolutionary narratives, institutional actors, and mass participation into a coherent representation of continuity.

Shia religious symbolism and martyrdom discourse were central. Official announcements framed Khamenei's death in deeply sacrificial terms, depicting the late leader as "drinking the sweet nectar of martyrdom" and echoing Imam Ali's iconic declaration, "By the Lord of the Kaaba, I have succeeded." Concurrently, mobilization slogans such as "we must rise" embedded this ritualized mourning within a framework of ongoing revolutionary obligation (Event Organizing Committee 2026).[vi] The ceremonial route linking Tehran, Qom, Najaf, Karbala, and Mashhad situated the event within a sacred geography (operationalized by the IRGC and the *Vali-e Amr* Corps), transforming political succession into an extension of religious continuity (IRNA 2026b).[vii]

The symbolism of resistance was further condensed into the image of Khamenei's clenched fist. In his first message after his father's death, Mojtaba described his father's healthy hand as clenched in his final moments – an image subsequently adopted as a visual symbol of the funeral (Khamenei 2026). The image transformed the leader's physical death into a representation of continued resolve, linking his final moment to the regime's broader narrative of resistance and endurance.

Figure 2

'We Must Rise' was chosen as the central slogan, while the 'clenched fist' served as the official emblem for the ceremony

Source: Event Organizing Committee (2026)

Revolutionary genealogy provided a second layer of continuity. Visual and rhetorical references linked Ruhollah Khomeini, Ali Khamenei, and Mojtaba Khamenei within a single historical arc. This was especially significant given concerns about hereditary succession, which pro-regime crowds countered through lineage slogans, explicitly sacralizing the succession by chanting – "After Ali is Mojtaba, the heir to the blood of God" (*Tabnak* 2026).[viii] Mojtaba himself grounded this logic by invoking Quranic logic, which states that God may replace what has been abrogated with "one better than it or similar to it".[ix] In the context of his succession, the reference provide religious vocabulary for presenting political replacement as compatible with continuity, while Mojtaba simultaneously described his elevation as a "difficult task" accepted as a humble "servant" (Khamenei 2026). He later reaffirmed this in his funeral message, asserting his leadership as a commitment to "walk steadfastly on that straight path" (Khamenei 2026). By embedding Mojtaba within an established lineage, the ceremony shifted attention from the novelty of succession to the continuity of the revolutionary project, allowing institutional inheritance to appear as historical inevitability rather than as political choice.

Mojtaba's absence from the funeral added another dimension. His non-appearance meant that continuity could not be embodied directly by the new Supreme Leader. Instead, clerics, officials, IRGC representatives, and military units became the visible carriers of authority. In Kantorowiczian terms,

the political body of the office had to be reconstructed through institutions rather than the person (Kantorowicz 1997). This absence is analytically important because it shifts the burden of legitimacy from individual embodiment to collective representation, making institutions themselves the primary visual evidence of continuity.

The IRGC's participation reinforced this institutional choreography. Its visibility signaled continued integration into the post-Khamenei order at a moment when military loyalty was politically crucial, with the organization explicitly declaring the funeral an occasion to "renew allegiance" under the "wise command of the righteous successor" (*Tabnak* 2026a). However, ceremonial presence should not be mistaken for evidence that the IRGC's position within the emerging power structure was fully settled. Its public commitment indicates alignment at a critical juncture, but it did not reveal the extent of its influence over the new leadership or the distribution of authority between the security establishment and other centers of power.

Mass participation served a different function. State media emphasized scale and order, presenting the funeral as an occasion for national unity. Yet participation cannot be read as consent. Its political significance lay in how the state selected and circulated particular images of the mourning crowds. Specifically, large gatherings, tightly ordered processions, religious symbols, and collective displays of grief were repeatedly foregrounded, while the diverse motivations of participants remained largely invisible. Through this selective visual framing, heterogenous mourning was presented as a unified expression of national solidarity. The ritual therefore revealed less about what every participant believes than about the state's capacity to organize public visibility and attach a common political meaning to collective mourning.

The funeral's power, therefore, lay in symbolic organization – religious imagery produced sacred continuity, revolutionary genealogy produced historical continuity, and institutional choreography produced organizational continuity. Together, these elements made succession appear stable even as underlying political questions surrounding elite consensus, the IRGS's position within the emerging power structure, Mojtaba's religious and political legitimacy and his ability to reproduce his predecessor's personal authority remained open.

Audience-Differentiated Messaging

The funeral did not communicate a single message but multiple ones, structured according to audience.

For elites, it signaled institutional closure, as Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, Speaker of the Iranian Parliament, explicitly called the turnout a renewal of allegiance to Mojtaba, stating that the nation had "extended their hand of alliance to our wise Supreme Leader" (Ghalibaf 2026).[x] The presence of senior clerics and governing figures situated Mojtaba within established authority structures. Revolutionary genealogy allowed succession to be framed as continuity rather than innovation, even if underlying concerns about legitimacy persisted. The ceremony, thus, functioned as a mechanism for narrowing interpretive disagreement among actors who were already embedded within the system.

For the security establishment, IRGC visibility was central.[xi] It demonstrated continued integration into the political order, with the Commander-in-Chief of the IRGC Ahmad Vahidi declaring "we would never be separated from the martyred leader" (*Entekhab* 2026), reducing uncertainty about its role in the new hierarchy. While it did not reveal internal bargaining, this public performance of firmer resolve

established alignment at a sensitive moment. This visibility also served an internal disciplinary function – by performing unity publicly, the IRGC reinforced expectations of cohesion within its own ranks.

Figure 3
A massive crowd gathers at the funeral procession in Tehran[xii]

Source: Borna News (2026)

For the broader population, the message was more general – the state remained functional. State media framed the event not as a crisis, but as proof that "Iran remains steadfast". The scale of the ceremony, uninterrupted broadcasting, and ritual order projected stability after rupture. This was less persuasion than reassurance through administrative visibility. The population was not asked to evaluate legitimacy so much as to observe continuity in state performance.

The asymmetry of these messages is crucial. Each constituency required a different form of reassurance, and the funeral allowed these to coexist without requiring unified belief. The ceremony functioned as a shared stage for differentiated political communication, where the same symbols carried distinct meanings depending on institutional position.

The Limits of Staged Continuity

Despite its effectiveness as political performance, the funeral does not resolve the deeper political uncertainties of the transition.

First, the ceremony demonstrated coordination among key actors, but it could not establish that underlying questions surrounding hereditary succession, Mojtaba's religious credentials, and the IRGC's position within the emerging power structure had been resolved. The absence of public disagreement during the funeral provides evidence of political discipline, not conclusive proof that competing interests had disappeared.

Second, popular legitimacy cannot be inferred from participation or spectacle. The state's ability to organize mourning demonstrates control over public space and visibility, not necessarily societal consent. The distinction between public compliance and private political judgment remains analytically critical.

Third, Mojtaba's limited public visibility highlights a distinct structural problem – institutional succession does not automatically reproduce personal authority. Ali Khamenei's power was constructed over decades through informal networks, clerical balancing, and security ties that are unlikely to be transferred mechanically. The successor inherits the constitutional office, but not the accumulated political capital embedded in those relationships.

These uncertainties do not mean that the succession is unstable or that elite disagreement persists beneath the surface. Rather, they highlight questions that the funeral could not answer. The ceremony demonstrated that the institutions were capable of coordinating around the new leadership; it does not reveal how authority will subsequently be distributed among Supreme Leader, the clerical establishment, the IRGC and other political actors. Likewise, it demonstrated public participation without establishing the depth of popular support for the new order. The transition, therefore, involves a distinction between the successful reproduction of the office and the still-unsettled reproduction of the authority surrounding it.

Finally, the intensity of the ceremony should not itself be treated as evidence of underlying political fragility. The funeral also carried an external signaling function during wartime, meaning that its elaborate choreography served audiences beyond the domestic political arena (Kalviri 2026). For this analysis, the more important point is what the ceremony demonstrates internally – the regime possessed the organizational capacity to make continuity visible even at a moment of exceptional political vulnerability. The funeral then reveals a fundamental paradox – high organizational capacity to stage coherence, coupled with the structural necessity to actively construct an appearance of continuity that might not yet exist in substance.

Conclusion

The death of Khamenei tested whether a highly personalized political system could reproduce authority without its central figure. The rapid constitutional response and selection of Mojtaba Khamenei demonstrated institutional capacity. The funeral later transformed this procedural outcome into symbolic continuity through religious, revolutionary, and institutional performance.

However, institutional reproduction and political consolidation are not identical. The succession shows that authority can be transferred; the funeral shows that it can be staged and made visible. Neither alone demonstrates that the succession is fully stabilized.

Questions surrounding elite cohesion, popular legitimacy and the gap between constitutional office and embodied authority remain unresolved. The Islamic Republic can organize continuity, but whether

it can sustain it depends on political processes beyond ritual performance, including elite bargaining, institutional loyalty, and the gradual construction of authority around the new leader.

The funeral matters not because it confirms consolidation, but because it shows how consolidation is produced as an appearance before it is fully achieved—and how that appearance itself becomes a political resource in the struggle to stabilize a new order.

ENDNOTES

[i] According to Article 111 of the Iranian Constitution in the event of the death, resignation, or dismissal of the Leader, the Assembly of Experts is obligated to take action as soon as possible to determine and introduce the new Leader. Until the introduction of the Leader, a council composed of the President, the Head of the Judiciary, and one of the jurists (*faqīh*) of the Guardian Council chosen by the Expediency Discernment Council shall temporarily assume all duties of leadership. If during this period one of them is unable to perform their duties for any reason, another person shall be appointed in their place to the council by decision of the Expediency Discernment Council, while maintaining a majority of jurists (Constitution 1989).

[ii] While the Iranian constitution contains no provision for hereditary succession, Mojtaba Khamenei's elevation marked the first instance of a son succeeding his father as Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic's history. This outcome occurred despite explicit resistance from Ali Khamenei himself; as Assembly of Experts member Mahmoud Mohammadi Araghi noted, when the topic was raised, Khamenei forbade it, stating, "This action of yours raises doubts about the leadership being hereditary," and refused to allow the proposal to even be examined (Araghi 2024). His eventual succession has, thus, sparked significant debate over dynastic politics versus clerical vetting.

[iii] Unlike his father, who had served as President and a prominent public figure before becoming Supreme Leader in 1989 (see Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani (2018) and Khalaji (Khalaji 2023), Mojtaba Khamenei operated largely within the Supreme Leader's office (*Beyt-e Rahbari*), making his public relationships with senior IRGC commanders and the clerical establishment in Qom critical to consolidate.

[iv] This slogan "God's hand became revealed, Khamenei became young" emerged following the publication of news regarding the selection of the new leadership in March 2026 (*Mehr News* 2026c).

[v] Friday prayer leaders across Iran are directly appointed by the Supreme Leader's office. For further discussion on how the weekly Friday sermon (*Khuṭbih*) serves as a "major vehicle for reinforcing the revolutionary ideology and legitimacy of the state" and a means for distributing policy, see (Aghaie 2014). On the state's effort to produce the "dutiful individual" (*vilāyat-madār*) who "unconditionally obeys the Supreme Leader" and aligns their will with the leadership through extensive ideological-political training, see Golkar (2015).

[vi] In Shia political theology, mourning for a fallen leader is inextricably tied to the concept of *qiyām* (rising up)—echoing the Quranic injunction to "stand up for [the sake of] Allah—individually or in pairs—then reflect" (Quran 34:46). Shia thought draws on the historical martyrdom of Imam Husain at Karbala to translate this reflective grief into active political duty and state mobilization. More broadly, as Kertzer notes, "rituals express the continuity of positions of authority in the face of the comings and goings of their occupants" (Kertzer 1994).

[vii] Najaf and Karbala, located in Iraq, are the foundational holy cities of Twelver Shia Islam containing the shrines of Imam Ali and Imam Husain, respectively. Extending the funeral procession across national borders into Iraq reinforced the Islamic Republic's claim to pan-Shia leadership and transnational religious authority. This spatial continuity was further deepened by its temporal alignment with Muharram, linking the funeral to the mourning days of Imam Husain and framing the event as an "Ashura-esque" manifestation of the "victory of blood over the sword."

[viii] The phrase “After Ali is Mojtaba” invokes both the historical Shia succession after Prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali (where Imam Hasan Mojtaba succeeded Ali) and the modern political succession from Ali Khamenei to Mojtaba Khamenei. The epithet “blood of God” *(Thār Allāh*) directly links Mojtaba to Imam Husain and the sacred lineage, shifting the discourse away from taboo “monarchical/dynastic rule” toward “divinely guided inheritance.”

[ix] Quran 2:106: We do not abrogate a verse or cause it to be forgotten except that We bring forth one better than it or similar to it.

[x] The ‘political elite’ in this context encompasses rival factions within the principlist (conservative) camp, senior grand ayatollahs in the Qom seminaries (*ḥawzah*), and heads of key oversight bodies such as the Guardian Council and the Expediency Discernment Council.

[xi] Despite its unified public image, the IRGC operates as a complex conglomerate of military, intelligence, and economic branches. Public ceremonial compliance serves to signal alignment from top commanders down through the provincial operational bases.

[xii] Spanning six days across five cities in Iran and Iraq—Tehran, Qom, Najaf, Karbala, and Mashhad—official state sources placed total participation at 41-43 million (*Kayhan* 2026).

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