

Suspended Equilibrium in Iran's Political System

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Two sets of power relationships have emerged in the political system of the Islamic Republic of Iran: official, institutional relationships outlined in the Constitution, and unofficial, informal ones existing between and within groups and clusters of powerful individuals and institutions. The juxtaposition of informal factional alliances with the formal institutions of power has resulted in the development of a precarious balance within the state, as 'hardliners' and 'softliners' vie for greater influence and the adoption of their agendas as official state policy. The ensuing results have been two-fold. On the one hand, the emergence of multiple centers of power has enhanced the extent and reach of the state in relation to various social strata, thus bestowing it with considerable durability and staying power. On the other hand, the existence of multiple official and unofficial venues for competition has sharpened the tenor and substance of factional rivalries. For the most part, each of the factions has so far been able to balance out the influence and agendas of the other. At the same time, however, since the 'softliners' by and large advocate greater political liberalization, these very factional rivalries have had some modest consequences in opening up the Iranian polity. Ultimately, the pace and direction of political liberalization in Iran will depend on the outcome of the ongoing rivalry that is currently being played out within official state institutions and unofficial power-cliques.

The election of Muḥammad Khatami to Iran's presidency on May 23, 1997 ushered in the country's third "Republic" since the 1978–79 revolution. So far, the Third Republic is distinguished from the two preceding it

by its lack of cohesion and an unprecedented degree of internal competition among its chief actors and, by proxy, the institutions they control. The state's lack of cohesion is especially apparent along the three principle axioms of ideology, institutions, and controlling personalities. In many ways, Iran's post-revolutionary state has become institutionally "Balkanized." At the very least, its previous *modus operandi* in relation to society and the emerging equilibrium of its internal forces has been upset and, for now, thrown into confusion. For the time being, a "suspended equilibrium" of sorts has emerged within the Iranian state, whereby the different institutions of the state have gone under the control of competing individuals who in turn have their own often contradictory ideological agendas. One of these state-based groups, whom the Iranian electorate has come to broadly identify as the Left (*Chap*), advocates greater liberalization of the political process and a less restrictive atmosphere for the emergence of civil society. In the country's last two presidential elections in 1997 and 2001, the public, who has been largely absent from the state's internal squabbles, overwhelmingly sided with the Left. Repeatedly, however, the groupings on the Right have reminded others that they may be down, but they are not out. Ultimately, given that a middle ground between the Right and the Left is increasingly unlikely, the Iranian political system appears to be headed for either extremes of increased repression or, alternatively, greater political liberalization.

This article examines the underlying causes for the development of what we call "suspended equilibrium" within the Iranian state. More specifically, we analyze the institutional and ideological features of Iran's "Third Republic" and the corresponding groups and/or individuals whose alliances and competitions have come to characterize the current state of Iranian politics. The emergence of a suspended equilibrium is, among other things, the result of what one observer has called the Iranian revolution's "dissonant institutionalization."¹ In our view, this institutionalization has not only been dissonant, but has also been highly penetrative of the various strata of society. The Islamic Republic, in fact, has successfully consolidated itself through reliance on a plethora of official and unofficial means of control over, and next with, society. More specifically, the Iranian state has engaged in "parallel" or "dual" institutionalization, with the establishment and/or empowerment — sometimes deliberately and other times less planned — of two or more institutions that perform identical or related functions and, therefore, watch over each other. Oftentimes, especially given the increasing lack of state cohesion in the Third Republic, these parallel institutions — for example, offices of the Leadership and the presidency — balance each other out. This internal incongruity, or suspended equilibrium, is edging the Iranian state closer to the threshold of a major change.

Why is it inevitable for the overall posture and direction of the Iranian state to change in one direction or another? By nature, suspended equilibrium is a temporary phenomenon that often develops at a particular, transitional stage in the life of a political system. No matter how hard they try, states cannot completely insulate themselves from the societies over which they seek to govern. Invariably, their “autonomy” is curtailed to one extent or another because of engagement with social forces.² Suspended equilibrium brings the state to the brink of disequilibrium, or institutionally as close to it as possible. Seldom do social groups simply content themselves with playing the role of passive observers. The processes whereby states go about their business — i.e., rule — necessitate that they forge particular ties with at least one or more groups in society. These ties assume crucial importance when the state loses its institutional cohesion and, as a result, groups within the state use their social support base to strengthen their hands.

In the Iranian case, the Islamic Republican state has actually institutionalized a regular process of interaction with society; it has faithfully adhered to a limited form of electoral politics from its earliest days. In fact, parliamentary and presidential elections have become an integral part of the Iranian political landscape. Therefore, elections, even though so far only for candidates who have been approved by the Right, have become the wildcard of Iranian politics. As the parliamentary elections of 2000 and Khatami’s re-election in the presidential elections of 2001 demonstrated, the Right has so far been either unable or unwilling to stop the electoral momentum of the Left. Nevertheless, most major levers of power — including especially the Leadership and the judiciary — remain the exclusive domain of the Right. The result has been the steady emergence of an institutional suspended equilibrium and, more importantly, near-complete policy paralysis.

Before going any further, we should clarify our use of the notion of “suspended equilibrium.”³ In simple terms, we take suspended equilibrium to denote the internal disposition of a non-democratic or pre-democratic state in which a number of key institutions work to undermine each other’s agendas and influence. This often results from the loss of ideological cohesion on the part of a ruling elite that was once united in its goals and its vision of the ideal society. A state that is in a condition of suspended equilibrium should not be confused with one that features a system of “checks and balances.” Although both systems offer institutional venues for ideological competition, in checks-and-balances states there are built-in mechanisms for the resolution of intra-institutional conflict and competition. Therefore, institutional and/or policy paralyse — such as the 1996 budget impasse in the United States due to executive-legislature rivalry, or immobility within the French executive in times of “cohabitation” — tend to occur rarely, if at all.⁴ In states grappling

with suspended equilibrium, however, such institutional means for intra-elite conflict resolution are either absent or, if available, have been rendered irrelevant by the very conflicts they were meant to resolve. In Iran, as we shall see later, the Expediency Council, designed specifically for purpose of institutional conflict resolution, has itself become one of the main actors within the on-going factional conflict.

The precise reasons for the elite's loss of ideological cohesion vary depending on the particular circumstances. There are, nevertheless, three specific types of non-democratic systems that are particularly prone to developing conditions of suspended equilibrium. The first two involve post-revolutionary and sultanistic regimes after the departure from the scene of the personalist leader who once dominated the political establishment. A third type is made-up of post-totalitarian states in which societal developments prompt the ruling elite to develop and pursue alternative strategies for furthering their increasingly divergent interests. In all three states, suspended equilibrium first ensues from the emergence of fissures within the ruling elite. This in turn spurs a protracted process of intra-elite competition, during which competing factions use the resources and institutions of the state in pursuing the dual goals of furthering their own agendas and undermining their opponents. Policy paralysis and contradictions are the most immediate outcomes of the state's internal struggles. Which elite group then emerges on top, and at what point, depends on factors within the state itself as well as those influenced by changing social dynamics.

The fading of a unifying vision frequently occurs in post-revolutionary states as they age, especially once the revolution's charismatic leader is no longer around to singularly articulate the revolution's vision. So long as they were alive, men like Mao Tse Tung and Ayatollah Khomeini remained as the primary — and largely only — articulators of the ideologies that guided the policies of the Chinese and the Iranian states, respectively.⁵ In fact, their reliance on charismatic legitimacy blunted the growth and consolidation of most existing post-revolutionary institutions as long as they were alive. It was largely only after their deaths that some of the state institutions they had created had the opportunity to come into their own. In the meanwhile, these institutions were staffed by the Leader's lieutenants who, in their own right, formed the revolution's second-tier leadership. Once the Leader was no longer around, these lieutenants, who once faithfully carried out the Leader's directives, found elbowroom to advocate their own slightly different versions of the revolution's vision using the previously overshadowed institutions of the state. For many of these second-tier leaders, their revolutionary credentials and long history of collaboration with the Leader gave them what they considered to be a special mandate to pursue their goals. This is precisely what

happened in China and Iran following the deaths of Mao and Khomeini. In the former Soviet Union, Stalin was able to outmaneuver and soon repress his opponents shortly after Lenin's death, and it was only after the death of Stalin himself that the many latent factional rivalries of the Soviet state came to the fore.⁶

The two other instances in which conditions of suspended equilibrium can emerge are in highly weakened sultanistic and post-totalitarian states whose ability to maintain the status quo is being seriously threatened. Insofar as sultanistic regimes are concerned, they are especially susceptible to being pushed into a condition of suspended equilibrium immediately prior to the ruler's overthrow, or soon after his death. As long as the ruler is alive and can effectively ensure his total personal control over the political system, the various institutions of the state are sapped of any actual power and are instead allocated to cronies and associates in order to cement a system-wide network of patronage and clientelism.⁷ It is only after a significant decline in the hegemony of the ruler over the system, or his death altogether, that these associates can use their control over the previously insignificant institutions of the state to their own personal political advantage at the expense of other potential competitors. This phenomenon was witnessed in Indonesian politics in the months leading up to the fall of President Suharto, when many former allies defected from his camp as the long-time President's political demise seemed increasingly inevitable.⁸ In the meantime, for a number of months prior to his overthrow, the political chaos and uncertainty caused by the President's troubles had brought the workings of many governmental institutions to a virtual halt.

The same held true for the post-totalitarian states of Eastern Europe, where an array of competing groups within the state — broadly categorized into "regime hardliners" and "regime softliners" — emerged and sought to gain control over the trajectory of the state.⁹ For a time, neither was able to effectively sidestep the other, and a condition of suspended equilibrium, accompanied by institutional and policy paralysis, developed. However, as elsewhere, concurrent developments within society were not insignificant, and the pressures that society as a whole or specific social groups in particular exerted on the state were instrumental in determining the state's eventual fate. Of course, in Eastern Europe and places like Haiti, Nicaragua, and Panama, where conditions of suspended equilibrium emerged for a time, international developments were also highly instrumental in determining political outcomes.¹⁰

In examining the emergence of suspended equilibrium in Iran's current political system, we first look at the development and overall characteristics of Iran's so-called "Third Republic." This section lays the groundwork for the

examination of both formal (constitutional) and informal centers of power in Iran. It is because of the competition between these formal and informal institutions that the Iranian state has reached a condition of suspended equilibrium. The article's conclusion offers some conjectures as to the possible outcomes of the current factionalism being played out in Iran.

Iran's Third Republic

As already mentioned, the birth of the Third Republic has been accompanied by the Iranian state's loss of ideological cohesion, one that had been methodically and often brutally fostered by the regime's founder, Ayatollah Khomeini. This ideological consolidation had occurred concurrently with the state's institutional consolidation beginning in the early years of the revolution, when a variety of institutions were constructed and became officially operational. These complementary processes of ideological and institutional consolidation, and the accompanying purging of many of the revolution's early protagonists, became the hallmarks of the First Republic. The war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988 provided the backdrop against which the state initially consolidated its hold on power.

During the Second Republic, which lasted roughly from after Khomeini's death in 1989 up until Khatami's election in 1997, the state slightly moderated its ideological zeal and instead concentrated on post-war reconstruction.¹¹ At the same time, through constitutional revisions, the new, post-Khomeini stewards of the state — chief among whom were 'Ali Khamenei and 'Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani — sought to deepen and solidify the processes of ideological and institutional consolidation that had started earlier, this time with careful attention to their own personal positions within the state apparatus.¹² Khamenei, despite lacking religious seniority within the Shi'a clerical hierarchy, was chosen to succeed Khomeini as the *Velayat-e Faqih* (ruling jurisprudent).¹³ Rafsanjani, who emerged as the primary architect of the state's economic and foreign policies, moved up from the parliament (*Majles*) and was elected as the country's first executive president under the new, revised constitution.

For nearly a decade, Iran's Second Republic busied itself with ameliorating the economic setbacks of the war with Iraq and, in a more guarded manner, repairing some of the country's damaged foreign relations. With the ideological zeal and the blanket repression of the revolution's early days somewhat reduced, the state's measured openness was not sufficient to allow for any kind of open dissent, whether from outside the political establishment or from within. Instead, the Khamenei-Rafsanjani alliance sought to foster a new, slightly modified social contract with the populace. In return for a partial easing of social and political restrictions, coupled with accelerated economic

development, the public was expected to acquiesce to the regime's new institutional configuration and ideological disposition. Rafsanjani's re-election in 1993 seemed to confirm the public's acceptance of the regime's emerging social contract.

By the time the next presidential elections came around in 1997, however, a majority of the electorate was no longer willing to abide by its end of the bargain. Instead of voting for the establishment candidate — the Majles Speaker 'Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri — who enjoyed the tacit support of Khamenei and the rest of the Right, some seventy-seven percent of the voters endorsed Muḥammad Khatami, a former culture minister whose ostensibly liberal cultural policies had brought about his forced resignation in 1992. The surprise election put a sudden and unexpected end to Iran's Second Republic and, with it, the once-unchallengeable hegemony over the system by the Khamenei-Rafsanjani alliance.¹⁴

Khatami's election brought to the surface several deep fissures within the Iranian polity that previously had been either ideologically glossed over or were physically suppressed. To begin with, the election exposed, and in turn reinforced, profound divisions among the Islamic Republic's most powerful actors over their vision of Iran's future. It quickly became apparent that both the Left and the Right were and continue to be further divided into a bewildering array of smaller groups (more on this below). With Khatami's re-election in June 2001, this time with some eighty-three percent of the votes cast, the regime's ideological divisions appear to have been further polarized. In particular, the various groups on the Right of the spectrum, who were put on the defensive by the electorate, have gone on the offensive in order to prevent what they perceive to be the corruption of Ayatollah Khomeini's true legacy. The ensuing tug of war between the two main contending wings of the system has touched literally all aspects of Iranian politics and society, ranging from fundamental differences in foreign and domestic policies to the dismissal of "reformist" ministers, clamping down on supposed public immorality, closing down numerous newspapers and jailing their editors, drastically increasing the number of public floggings, and unleashing violent vigilantes on activists and other well-known figures.¹⁵ In many ways, the fractious Iranian state, featuring multiple centers of power with conflicting agendas and their own groups of institutional clientele, appears to be at war with itself.

All of this has been occurring within the larger context of a revolution grappling with the growing pains of post-revolutionary institutionalization. In other words, the state is confronting the difficulties associated with routinizing Khomeini's charisma, a process which, as Weber reminds us, is both inevitable and fraught with tension and conflict.¹⁶ The steps that the

Islamic Republican state took toward this end, many times reluctantly,¹⁷ have been drastic and not without contention: it agreed to end the war with Iraq; restructured its internal organization through revising the constitution; purged many of its own diehard “radical” elements; and embarked on an ambitious process of economic reconstruction.¹⁸ At the same time, in an attempt to perpetuate Khomeini’s charisma after the death of the “Imam,” the new constitution mandated that there will always be a “Leader” presiding over the system — previously, there could have been a “Leadership Council” if a suitable Leader were not found — and designated Khomeini as the successor to Khomeini.¹⁹ Lastly, the remaining crop of state leaders, once the “followers or disciples” of the charismatic leader, appropriated “the powers of control and of economic advantage” and sought to institutionalize a post-Khomeini order under their own hegemony.²⁰ As it happened, their efforts at institutionalization and monopolizing power have been less than fully successful. In fact, they are confronting a serious condition of suspended equilibrium.

There are three primary reasons for the emergence of a suspended equilibrium in the Iranian Third Republic. First, as mentioned earlier, it is a product of the revolution’s “multiple biographies” and the dissonant institutionalization that followed as a result.²¹ From the revolution’s “fathers” (e.g., Khomeini and Montazeri) all the way down to its “children” (former President Bani Sadr and former foreign minister Ebrahim Yazdi) and “grandchildren” (today’s youth), people with different ideological visions have vied for power and position since 1979. Naturally, many of their policies and the institutions they created reflected, and still reflect, the revolution’s Janus-faced nature.

Second, the state’s suspended equilibrium is a product of its institutional make-up as outlined in the constitution. The constitution of the Islamic Republic was originally drafted in 1979 and was then substantially revised in 1988–89. As the following section demonstrates, the constitutional arrangements of the Islamic Republic in many ways make institutional competition and rivalry inevitable. At the very least, through the creation of parallel institutions tasked with similar or overlapping functions, the constitution contains the inherent potential for inter-institution rivalry and policy paralysis.

Third, the general absence of institutional venues for political expression and participation, especially political parties, has resulted in the proliferation of various unofficial, informal groups and power-centers. Many of these informal groups use the already-divided institutions of the state to further their agendas, undermine their opponents, and solidify their own positions within the larger polity. The combined consequences of these three developments

have stalled many of the overall agendas of the Iranian state and, in many ways, have forced it to a condition of suspended equilibrium.

Constitutional Arrangements in the Islamic Republic

One of the most prominent features of the Iranian political system is the pervasiveness of parallel or multiple political institutions with similar and/or overlapping functions. Broadly, this duality can be found in five arenas of the political structure: the executive branch; the legislature; the judiciary; the armed forces; and the economy. A highly complex set of interrelationships governs the operations of each of these branches internally and, more importantly for our analysis, between one another. At the highest levels, the state has an array of parallel, functionally similar institutions that are linked together through a series of complex relationships. Equally pervasive, and potentially just as consequential for the efficacy and internal balance of the system, are the interactions of the respective bureaucracies that sustain each of these multiple institutions and their mutual dependence on (or dislike for) one another. This section looks at the complex interrelationships that exist at the apex of the Iranian political system. The reader should be mindful, however, that the consequences of these interrelationships reverberate throughout the entire system.

According to the revised 1989 constitution, the Iranian political system is officially comprised of the three “independent” branches of the executive, legislature, and judiciary. Article 57 stipulates that all three branches operate under the supervision of the “absolute jurisconsult” (*Velayat-e Faqih-e Mutlaq*), who occupies the position of Leader (*Rahbar*). Changes to the position of Leader featured prominently in the revised constitution. In the new document, the key requirement that the Leader be recognized as a “source of emulation” (*marjaʿa*) was dropped (Article 109). This was largely because the person elevated to the position (Khamenei) lacked the necessary theological credentials to be a *marjaʿa*, while the remaining living *marjaʿas* were bypassed.²²

Another equally important change, this one designed to minimize the potential for factionalism within the institution of the Leadership (Rahbari), was the elimination of the position of Leadership Council, which previously could have been constituted if a suitable Leader could not be found (Articles 5 and 107). Along the same lines, largely to streamline the functions of the executive, the position of the prime minister was eliminated. Instead, the president, assisted by an undetermined number of deputies, was put directly in charge of the ministries and given responsibility for all of the country’s administrative and budgetary matters (Article 126).

Despite these and a number of other constitutional changes, Iran’s political system remains rife with functional overlaps and, invariably, institutional

friction. The duality of functionally similar institutions still remains. The executive branch, for example, still has functions and responsibilities that are divided between the Leader and the president; the legislature is essentially bicameral and comprised of the two separate institutions of the Guardian Council and the Consultative Islamic Assembly (*Majles-e Shoura-ye Islami*, or Majles for short); the armed forces are divided into the regular army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC); and, within the judiciary, there is a separate court that deals specifically with cases involving deviant clerics (Special Court for the Clergy or *Dadgah-e Vizhe Royhaniyoun*). Even the economy is officially divided into three spheres — the public, private, and cooperative spheres (Article 44) — whereby state-owned enterprises compete not only with private ones but also with numerous government-funded and controlled “foundations” that wield considerable economic and political power.

Although the Constitution stipulates that there are three separate branches of government, in reality, the Iranian political system is comprised of seven key institutions, not all of which fit neatly into the branch in which they are meant to belong (table 1). The institutions of the Leadership and the Expediency Council are cases in point. In addition to having command of the armed forces, the Leader oversees the operations and overall direction of the entire system, including matters involving judicial and legislative issues. Also, the Expediency Council advises the Leader on various issues and mediates between the Guardian Council and the Majles in legislative conflicts. In many ways, the Expediency Council acts as a fourth branch of the government. Under the direction of its current head, former President Rafsanjani, it has become an immensely powerful institution. Interestingly, the 1979 Constitution did not foresee the frequency of legislative conflicts between the Majles and the Guardian Council. Ayatollah Khomeini decreed the creation of an Expediency Council in February 1988 as an institution designed to mediate between the two bodies and, additionally, to advise him on constitutional articles dealing with the responsibilities of the Leader. Article 112 of the 1989 Constitution made the Council a permanent feature of the system.

Also key to the system is the eighty-six member Assembly of Experts for Leadership (AEL, *Majles Khobregan-e Rabbari*). The constitution mandates that this parliamentary body be comprised of senior clerics elected for eight-year terms for the purposes of choosing the Leader when the position is vacant and overseeing his and his nominees’s performances while they are in office. Although the AEL’s members are technically elected by the electorate, the Right-controlled Guardians Council, which is responsible for assessing the qualifications of all candidates for elected office, has made certain that the

Table 1. Constitutional responsibilities of key state institutions in Iran

Institution	Primary Functions and Responsibilities
Assembly of Experts Joint Leader	Elected by popular vote for eight-year term; responsible for election of Leader. Appointment and termination of the six clerical members of Guardian Council, the Head of the Judiciary, the head of Radio and Television, the Chiefs of Staff, Commander of the IRGC, and the Commanders of Military and Security Forces; “determining general policies of the Islamic Republic of Iran after consultation with the Expediency Council”; determining the permanent and rotating members of the Expediency Council; supervising the execution of regime policies; ordering referenda; command of the armed forces; declaration of war and peace and military mobilization; signing the presidential decree after popular vote; termination of the President after determination of the latter’s indictment Majles or the Supreme Court; granting of pardon or clemency to criminals upon the suggestion of Judiciary head.
President	Head of the executive branch and “the second highest position after Leader”; responsible before the people, the Leader, and the Majles; must implement laws passed by the Majles or by referenda; signing of international treaties and agreements; responsible for all state budgetary and administrative matters; acceptance of credentials of foreign ambassadors and signing credentials of Iran’s ambassadors; nomination of cabinet ministers; supervision of the Council of Ministers; termination of cabinet ministers.
Council of Guardians	Guardianship of the principles of Islam and the Constitution in all laws passed by the Majles; interpretation of the Constitution; “supervision” of the elections of the Assembly of Experts, the presidency, and the Majles; reviews all Majles laws to ensure compliance with Islam and the Constitution; must be in session for Majles to have validity.
Majles branches	Legislation in all matters within the context of the Constitution; legal proposals passed by the Council of Ministers can be discussed in Majles upon suggestion of at least 15 deputies; approval of all international treaties and agreements; approval of cabinet ministers nominated by the president; impeachment of cabinet ministers; at least one third of deputies must vote to impeach the President; if two-thirds vote after the President’s appearance in Majles, case will be referred to Leader; receives and considers written complaints about judiciary and executive.
Expediency Council	Determination of the interests of the system in cases where the Majles and the Guardian Council cannot agree; consultation with the Leader in determining the general policies of the regime.

Table 1. Continued

Institution	Primary Functions and Responsibilities
Head of Judiciary	Senior cleric appointed by Leader for five-year term; hiring, promotion, or termination of all judges; nomination of the Minister of Justice to the President; appointment to five-year terms of the Head of the Supreme Court and the Attorney General, both from among senior clerics, after consultation with justices of the Supreme Court; nomination of the 6 non-clerical members of the Guardian Council to the Majles.

Assembly remains dominated by like-minded, conservative clerics. The AEL's deliberations are closed and secretive, and its meetings are not based on a pre-determined schedule. From among all of the elected organs of the state, the AEL appears most undemocratic. According to the AEL's head, Ayatollah 'Ali Meshkini, "Assembly members have love and affection for Islam, the Islamic system, the Leadership, and the Constitution. They have pity for the society, its happiness, its future, and resolving people's difficulties."²³

Diagram 1 outlines some of the most common ways in which the various institutions of the state are constitutionally designed to interact with one another. More importantly, as the diagram shows, the Constitution guarantees

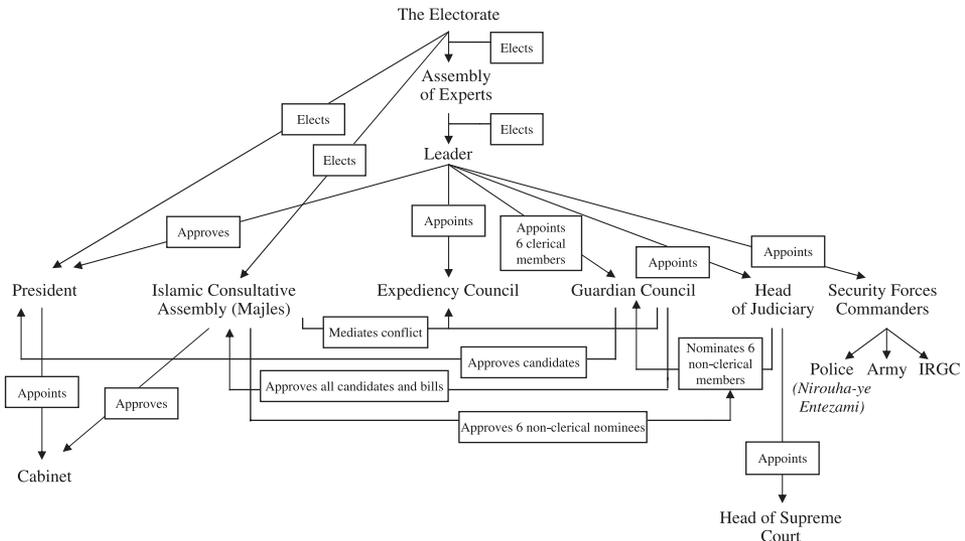


Diagram 1. Distribution of power in the Constitution

that most institutions be mutually interdependent. Many also have overlapping responsibilities. Take, for example, the division of labor within the executive between the Leader and the President. While the Leader is in charge of the system in its entirety, and commands the armed forces, the President has some independence in formulating and implementing domestic and foreign policies. Already, the potential for institutional conflict is apparent. Add to the mix ideological and/or personal differences, and the institutional frictions between the two bodies can easily result in frequent blockages and even outright paralysis. Nevertheless, both institutions need each other in order to viably operate, and neither can properly function without the other, or, for that matter, do away with it altogether.

The same holds true for the Guardian Council and the Majles, even after the creation of the Expediency Council. The Guardian Council must approve all candidates for election and all bills passed by the Majles. Majles bills could fail to win the approval of the Guardian Council if they are deemed to contravene *Shari'a* (Islamic) laws or provisions of the constitution. As provided by the constitution, all disputes between the Guardian Council and the Majles have to be resolved by the Expediency Council, a mainly conservative body that acts as the state's highest arbitration organ. At the same time, the Majles must also approve the Guardian Council's six non-clerical members who are nominated by the head of the judiciary (with the other six clerical members being appointed by the Leader). Again, the potential for blockage and interdependence coexist side-by-side. In March 2002, Khamenei decreed the appointment of new members to the Expediency Council for the next five years. The new Expediency Council includes vocal conservatives like Mohammad Reza Bahonar, former Tehran MP and a staunch anti-reform conservative. The reformists (i.e., what we have broadly called the "softliners" or the Left) expected a more balanced and representative membership in the Expediency Council since a majority of the Sixth Majles's deputies are reformist and Khatami has been reelected on a mandate for reform and change. Essentially, the stasis and suspended equilibrium between the hardline and softline camps is being deliberately perpetuated by the Leader, who is himself supportive of the hardliner agendas and positions.

As the foregoing analysis shows, without the introduction of other elements or considerations, the Iranian state is already prone to developing a situation of suspended equilibrium due to its constitutional design. There are a number of institutions with identical or similar functions and, as we shall see shortly, those institutions designed for conflict resolution — e.g. the Expediency Council — have themselves become part of the factional conflict. But this inherent proclivity toward stasis is further compounded by two additional considerations within the Iranian context. One is the coexistence of

multiple informal power centers throughout the Iranian body politic alongside formal institutions such as the presidency, the Majles, the Expediency and Guardian Councils, and others. These informal power centers can at times act as shadow state institutions and exert considerable influence from behind the scenes. Secondly, many of the institutions of the state, conflictual as their interactions already are, and some of the informal power centers, have become influential bases for the different factions in the Left and the Right. Thus, factionalism and informality have further increased the potential for suspended equilibrium already inherent in the design of the Iranian political system.

Informal Power Centers

In addition to the formal structure of power as outlined in the constitution, there are a number of informal power centers, all under the control of the Supreme Leader, that exert considerable power. In fact, these informal centers act as powerful instruments through which the Leader controls key institutions and/or resources within the system and, at the same time, guards against threats from within or from outside of the political establishment. As diagram 2 illustrates, the Supreme Leader is surrounded by a line-up of pressure groups through which the Leader's influence resonates throughout the system. These pressure groups act as informal power centers and intervene

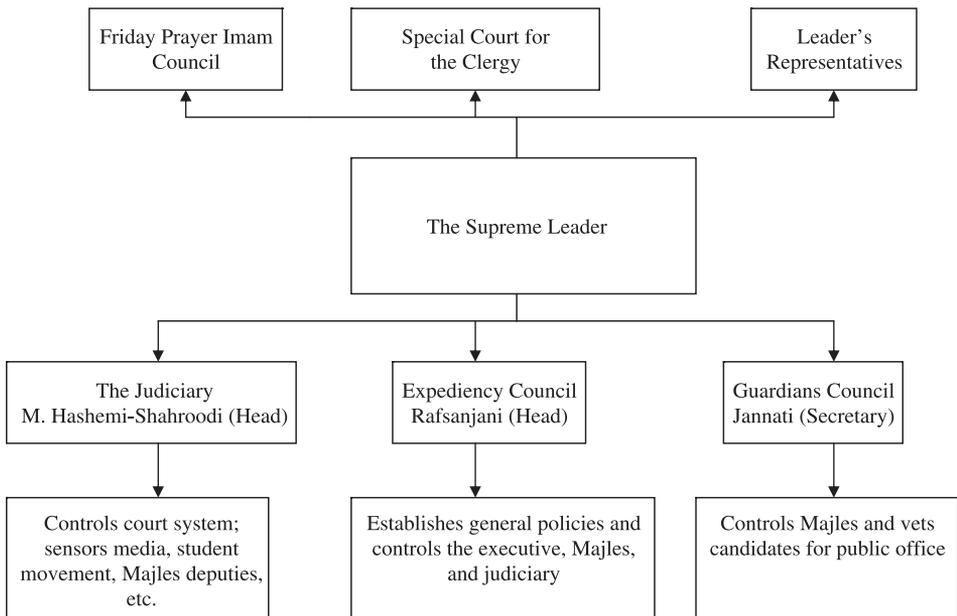


Diagram 2. Effective Structure of Power in Iran

on behalf of the Leader when and where his direct intervention could be politically costly. Of these various informal institutions, four are most important. They include the “Representatives of the Leader” (*Namayandegan-e Rabbar*) to the different organs of the state, including universities; the Special Court for the Clergy; the Friday Prayer Imams of each city; and government funded foundations called *Bonyads*, which report directly to the Leader and are technically under his direct control and supervision.

The Leader’s Representatives are found within literally every level of the political establishment. These individuals are chosen by the Leader, or by his office on his behalf, and report directly to him. Their primary function is to ensure that their assigned institution is in conformity with the Leader’s overall wishes and guidelines. They are placed within every single institution of the state, both civilian and military. In the security forces, the Leader’s Representative has a separate office of his own, called the Political and Ideological Bureau (*Edare-ye Aqidati va Siyasi*). Even the universities have a Leader’s Representative attached to them, including the country’s only private university, Daneshgah-e Azad-e Eslami, which has campuses in most major cities. This Representative can intervene in the contents of a course being taught or in the composition of the student body. As such, he plays a prominent role in the institution’s life, and closely monitors developments occurring within it from the inside.

The Leader also appoints directors for and representatives to the countless *Bonyads* and other institutions that have been created as appendages to the formal institutions of the state. *Bonyads* are powerful public enterprise foundations tasked with specific economic functions, such as charity (the Panzdah-e Khordad Foundation) or looking after the families of war martyrs (the Shahid and Janbazan *Bonyads*). Oftentimes, they operate parallel to the formal institutions of the government, but very infrequently do they coordinate their activities with the executive.²⁴ For example, although there is a Housing Ministry, the Housing Foundation (*Bonyad-e Maskan*) remains both active and influential in providing housing to needy families. The Literacy Movement (*Nebzat-e Savad-amoozi*) operates side-by-side with the Ministry of Education. The Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution (*Shoura-ye Aali-ye Enqelab-e Farhangi*), which sets overall cultural policy on behalf of the Leader, competes with the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. The same competition occurs between the Culture Ministry and the Islamic Propaganda Organization (*Sazman-e Tablighat-e Eslami*). Also powerful are the Land Allocation Committees (*Hay’at-haye Vagozari-ye Zamin*), which at times contradict the policies and objectives of the Ministry of Agriculture.

By far the biggest and most powerful of these is the Foundation for the Oppressed (*Bonyad-e Mostaz’afan*). According to the Foundation itself, it

is the largest economic section in Iran, second only to the government. With an annual turnover of \$3.5 billion, Bonyad and the affiliated organizations manage more than 400 companies and factories. Within Iran, Bonyad is active in the most outstanding industrial and business sectors: food and beverage, chemicals, cellulose items, metals, petrochemicals, construction materials, dams, lowers, civil development, farming, horticulture, animal husbandry, tourism, transportation, five-star hotels, commercial services, financing, joint ventures, etc. Added to these is the special legal status of Bonyad, which is considered to be the most unchallenged private enterprise in Iran. In import and export, we have come a long way by hard work, efficiency, discipline and accountability in such a way that few international corporations can offer such diversity in their economic activities.²⁵

While the executives continue to underwrite the sizeable budget of these foundations and semi-official organizations, these states-within-the-state have managed to develop their own clientele and answer only to the Supreme Leader. President Khatami and reformists in the Sixth Majles have tried to eliminate institutional duplications, but so far their efforts have been in vain. So far, only the two Ministries of Agriculture and Jihad Reconstruction have been amalgamated, resulting in the establishment of the Ministry of Jihad of Agriculture.

Equally important are the Friday Prayer Imams, who are appointed by the Leader from among a trusted cadre of clerics and who are charged with delivering the sermon after each Friday prayer ceremony.²⁶ Again, while the executive branch furnishes the budget that each Friday Prayer Imam has at his disposal, it has no control over the contents of the all-important sermons that they deliver every week. Provincial Friday Prayer Imams serve two important functions. To begin with, they are the personal representatives of the Leader to each of the country's cities, towns, and villages. In their capacity as the Leader's representatives, these clerics are, in effect, more powerful than the provincial governors, who are appointed by the Tehran-based executive branch. Moreover, the provincial Friday Prayer Imams deliver the all-important sermon during the communal Friday prayer, which are usually held in the city's largest mosque or another central location.

Nationwide, the general themes of Friday prayer ceremonies are chosen by the Friday Prayer Imam Council (FPIC, *Shura-ye A'eme-ye Jom'eh*). Established after the Revolution on the model of the Islamic state in Medina, Friday payer is a significant forum for the public enunciation and justification of state policies and for popular mobilization. In Tehran, the University of Tehran campus has been chosen as the site for the massive weekly gatherings until the completion of a mammoth Imam Khomeini

Mosque in central Tehran some time in the future. The choice of the campus of Tehran University for the Friday prayers was not accidental. As the nation's oldest secular institution of higher learning, Tehran University has always been a center of student activism, especially during the reign of the monarchy. It was picked for prayer as a conciliatory gesture by clergy eager to link *hozeh* (theological seminar schools) to *daneshgah* (university, secular centers for learning). During his lifetime, Khomeini used to call for the unity of seminary schools and universities (*vahdat-e hozeh va daneshgah*). Today, many of the pro-regime clergy hold teaching positions in various universities across the country. Also, for the ruling establishment, holding Tehran's Friday prayers at the nation's premier university was a symbolic reminder of the alliance of the religious and secular revolutionary forces that defeated the monarchy.

After the first few years of revolutionary romanticism, when the initial decentralization of political power was steadily reversed, the FPIC became yet another mechanism through which the Islamic Republican system consolidated itself among the masses. Friday prayer sermons across Iran became increasingly similar. With a handful of exceptions, the main message of all sermons gravitates toward three topics: praise for the Leader; criticism of the reform movement, non-conformist intellectuals, and Khatami's cabinet; and denouncement of the United States and its policies. Interestingly, all past clerical presidents had been promoted to the rank of "temporary Friday prayer Imam of Tehran" while in office and were given access to its powerful tribune. Khatami remains the sole exception. Also, since 1997, none of the clerical figures associated with the reform movement have been invited to address the pre-sermon allocution.

The Friday prayer ceremonies are free and powerful propaganda forums at the disposal of conservatives, especially during national elections. In the 1997 and to a lesser extent 2001 presidential elections, conservative regime clerics used the Friday Prayer sermons heavily in order to promote their candidates of choice, although with no success. Nevertheless, through appealing directly with a core of dedicated followers and indirectly with the nation through radio and television broadcasts, the sermons remain powerful mechanisms for advancing conservative agendas and/or undermining opponents in the Majles or in the executive branch. Moreover, the Friday prayer sermons in many ways influence — if not set — the tone and tenor of debate on important national issues. Nowhere is this more evident than in connection to Iranian foreign policy, in regard to which Rafsanjani and Khamenei routinely give Friday sermons with little or no regard to the efforts of the formal foreign policy establishment, most notably the Foreign Ministry and the President. Other figures such as the head of the judiciary and the

IRGC's leadership also routinely interfere in foreign policy matters, at times as invited guests from the Friday Prayer platform.²⁷

The Special Court for the Clergy (SCC) is another organ that functions outside of and yet parallel to the regular judiciary. Headed by the highly conservative cleric Mohsen Ezhē'i, the SCC reports directly to the Leader. As its name implies, it is a clerical court whose primary purpose is to prosecute and/or intimidate dissident clergy. More specifically, it seeks to combat or altogether eliminate emerging interpretations of Islam that could contradict and therefore undermine the official orthodoxy. Created during the Iran-Iraq war in order to save "the honor of the clergy" in public, the SCC has today emerged as one of the most powerful institutions of the regime insofar as it seeks to ensure ideological unity within the clergy and to stifle dissension within clerical ranks. Frequently denounced by the Left as an instrument of repression, the SCC has imprisoned a number of prominent reformist clerics such as Abdullah Nuri, confidante of Imam Khomeini and former Minister of Interior,²⁸ the scholar Mohsen Kadivar,²⁹ the cleric Hassan Yusefi-Ashkevari,³⁰ and a few dozen others.³¹ The Special Court, it should be mentioned, at times coordinates its actions with the regular judiciary, the latter often ordering papers to close down and jailing dissident secular intellectuals.

Factionalism and its Consequences

In post-revolutionary Iran, the triangular relationship between divinity, the clergy, and the people conditions all aspects of life. The clergy occupies the role of intermediary between God and the people. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the state has sought to institutionalize the guardianship of the sacred Message. In so doing, clerics are perceived to have the right to interpret the divine word in absence of the Twelfth Imam. Within this conception of authority, a "lieutenant" to the Twelfth Imam is chosen by the Assembly of Experts and will temporarily take over the destiny of the people.

In its capacity as the social and political interpreters of God's message, the clerical establishment as a whole finds itself in an ambiguous position. It captured power through a popular, mass-based revolution, with religion as its primary source of legitimacy. Nevertheless, its very utilization of religion for political purposes since the revolution, and the inevitable differences of opinion over the appropriate theological interpretations, soon led to the emergence of competing factions within the clergy, as well as, of course, among other former revolutionary allies. Competition over increasingly limited institutional and political resources and the departure of Khomeini's unifying presence from the scene accentuated emerging factional fault lines. With its corporate, revolutionary unity eroded and under increasing stress, the clergy today is confronted with a deepening crisis of political legitimacy. At the root

of this legitimacy crisis is an intense competition between two differing visions of Islamic theocracy.

During the first eighteen months of the life of the Islamic Republic, Islamist forces stood in direct competition with an array of secular liberal, communist, and nationalist groups who also expected to be part of the post-revolutionary establishment. With ruthless efficiency, the Islamists physically or politically eliminated all liberal, nationalist, and communist parties, as well as Islamic “leftist” and Marxist organizations, ethnic groups, and other centrifugal forces. Once the secular opponents were gone, the Islamic forces turned on each other. From about 1982 onward, new notions of “Left” (*Chap*) and “Right” (*Rast*) entered Iran’s political discourse, this time under the rubric of a consolidated Islamic Republican regime. The division of the two camps revolved mostly around economic questions; political issues were left uncontested.³²

With the waning of the First and especially Second Republics, the political and ideological fissures that had been pushed aside gradually came to the surface. As the new dividing lines became more clear and stark, it became evident that the new confrontation was between an “ideologically correct” faction (*Maktabi*), generally viewed by the electorate as the Right, and “others.” These other, non-*Maktabis* include both secular intellectuals and clerics whose interpretations of Islam differ from those of the conservative, official orthodoxy.³³ The public commonly lumps these non-*Maktabi* figures together under the label of “Left.” In the Third Republic, therefore, the labels of Right and Left have come to assume very different meanings as compared to what they meant in the two previous Republics. In years immediately following the revolution’s success, the “Left” referred to communist activists drawn mostly from groups such as the Fedayeen-e Khalq guerrillas or the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party. In the Second Republic, the Left became the designation for those within the IRI establishment who advocated active government intervention in the economy. The most notable example of this economically inspired categorization was the former prime minister Mir-Hussein Musavi. Today, in the Third Republic, the labels Left and Right denote competing ideological and political camps whose main differences revolve around competing ideological and political visions. Both are firm believers in the general outlines of the Islamic Republican political system. However, as will be shown shortly, the Right, which today happens to control most of the influential instruments of power, believes in a rather narrow, authoritarian conception of Islam, whereas the Left, in charge of no more than a handful of largely powerless institutions, advocates reform, modernity, and civil society. Essentially, the conflict within the Iranian regimes boils down to one between Islamist authoritarian and Islamist democrats.

The Right is itself divided into the “traditional Right” (*rast-e sonnati*) and the “radical Right” (*rast-e efrati*).³⁴ A third group, the “modern Right” (*rast-e modern*), straddles between the Right and the Left. The “traditional Right” is made-up of ultra-conservative clerics who oppose all forms of secularism in policy. By contrast, most members of the “radical Right” tend to be non-clerics, although they are mostly also virulently anti-Western, oppose capitalism, and staunchly resist all attempts to deviate from what they consider to be Khomeini’s pure vision of the Islamic revolution. The “modern Right” is generally less radical, includes educated professionals, and its members can be found in most of the institutions of the state. Nevertheless, it still resists what is seen as deviation from the original essence of the revolution. As importantly, it opposes the ideologically motivated interpretations of Islam popular with the Left.

There is also the powerful Association of Combatant Clergy (ACC, *Majm’a Robaniyat-e Mobarez*), which for years has been one of the most powerful organizations within the conservative camp. There are two other important components of the Right: the Islamic Coalition Society (*Jam’iyat Mo’talefeh Eslami*), and the Islamic Engineers Association (*Jame’e Eslami-ye Mobandessin*). Both are ostensibly non-clerical but are closely allied with the ACC. These and other groups on both the Left and the Right can be closely identified with a publication, as most daily papers (and some weeklies) are directly or indirectly tied to one group or another.³⁵

For its part, the Left is comparatively less fractious, although its lack of access to the state’s most powerful institutions — especially the judiciary, the Leadership, the Guardian’s Council, and the Expediency Council — has kept it at a relative disadvantage vis-à-vis the Right. By far the most organized representative of the Left is the Association of Combatant Clerics (ACCs, *Majm’a Robaniyon-e Mobarez*), which is comprised of a group of individuals who split from the conservative Association of Combatant Clergy. The ACCs was founded by several prominent individuals within the system, the most notable of whom include Mehdi Karroubi,³⁶ the current Speaker of the Parliament; President Mohammad Khatami; Mousavi Khoehniha, who is a Majles deputy and owner of the banned newspaper *Salam*; Mousavi Lari, current Minister of Interior; and Hadi Khamenei, Majles deputy and owner of the reformist newspaper *Hayat Now*. Hadi Khamenei is also brother of the Supreme Leader. Nearly a decade after losing power in the hands of conservatives, the Left astonished both the electorate at large and political insiders in May 1997, when Khatami convincingly defeated ‘Ali Akbar Nateq-Nuri, who was at the time Speaker of Majles and candidate of the Right.

Elected on an unorthodox platform — rights of women, youth, rule of law, dialogue, civic society, inclusion, and the like — Khatami’s presidency and the

larger phenomena that he symbolizes challenge the established order. Despite being constantly undermined by the Right and frequently contradicted by the Leader, Khatami and his cabinets have been able to foster a far more relaxed and less puritanical atmosphere, not only politically but also socially and culturally. Since 1997, the dominant intellectual discourse — with the explicit backing of the executive — has revolved around such themes as civilizational dialogue, civil society, and reforms. The new climate shows itself best in the flourishing and quality of the printed media. In the absence of strong political parties, the media, and to a lesser extent, a reluctant and justifiably timid student movement, have become the main vehicles for pushing forward the reform agenda.

The Leftist papers have been especially vocal in their critical discussions of subjects considered taboo not too long ago. The most notable of these included *Nesbat* and *Khordad* prior to their closures, and today, *Bonyan*, *Norowz*, and *Aftab-e Yazd*. Some of the sensitive issues that these and other Leftist papers have tackled include the long and bloody war with Iraq, crimes allegedly committed by government security services, and the complicity of prominent politicians, including former President Rafsanjani, in those crimes. Even the authority of the Supreme Leader has been scrutinized. Not surprisingly, the Right's reaction has been swift and often brutal, resulting in the assassination of several prominent writers and journalists in 1998. More common has been the mass closure and banning of reformist publications, and the imprisonment (or harassing) of journalists, students, intellectuals, and political personalities affiliated with the Left. In December 2001, even a Majles deputy was taken to court for allegedly having made inflammatory remarks on the floor of the assembly. In its attempt to undermine the Left and disrupt its platform of political and socio-cultural reform, the Right has resorted to using three tools: the judiciary; the police and security forces; and vigilantes. The zeal and impunity with which these three forces have in recent years sought to destroy the reform movement is unprecedented in the country's post-revolutionary history. However, the genie has already gotten out of the bottle. The best that the Right appears capable of doing is to stall the reform movement, but not to reverse it.

The two dominant factions are now standing face-to-face, locking horns at every opportunity. On one side stands the "Left." Given its Islamic reference point and its emphasis on the importance of civil society and democratic reforms (*eslahat*), this group may best be labeled as advocating "democratic Islamism." Politically, it calls for constitutional limitations on the powers of the *Faqih* (Jurisconsult), who it says ought to be popularly elected. It is ardently republican, and advocates a political renewal that would bring about a multi-party system and power sharing through such participatory mechanisms

as municipal councils and the Majles. In the cultural and religious spheres, it calls for freedom of worship; absence of control over individual and collective behavior; the acceptance of modernity; multiple interpretations of religion; and rationality. In the economic domain, the Left advocates the removal of monopolies related to personal/kinship relationship; the eradication of poverty; and the start of government assistance programs to women, the elderly, and students. As for the means to get to these ends — i.e., the method of struggle — the best options appear to be the disclosure of wrongdoings and misdeeds by influential figures; reasoned discourse; spread of the media and various community organizations; and also by directly appealing to the youth, women, students, intellectuals, and other educated members of the middle classes.

Standing in opposition to the Left is the Right, whose ideological proclivities and cultural sensibilities bestow on it the label of “authoritarian Islamism.” Ideologically, the Right views the Absolute Jurisconsult (*Velayat Faqih-e Mutlaq*) as being above the Constitution. As someone who is anointed by God, the *Faqih* is the source of legitimacy for all other entities in society. The political system, therefore, while republican in character, is above all *Islamic*. As such, power needs to be monopolized in order to safeguard the Islamic essence of the system. Multi-partyism, while attractive in certain settings, cannot be trusted to maintain the Islamic integrity of the system and therefore should be avoided. Instead, if the situation warrants, closed and secretive societies can be utilized in order to discuss potentially decisive issues and forge consensus.

In the cultural and religious spheres, the Right seeks to speak with a single voice. It calls for strict regulation of ethics and moralities; rejects dialogue and modernity as symbols of cultural aggression by the West; and maintains that only one correct interpretation of religion could exist. To ensure that this correct interpretation is the one governing public discourse, the Right calls for tight control of cultural activities by the government (in the form of programming by the national radio and television organization, the IRIB) and heavy censorship of cultural products before publication. All cultural organizations outside of the mosque are suspect, all the more so since they present forums where men and women may freely mingle. In fact, the Right advocates the proper observance of the *hejab* for women and the separation of females and males in universities, hospitals, and banks. Economically, the Right favors the privatization of the production sector. While it sees commerce as the primary engine of development, it also gives priority to social justice over economic development. As for the means to reach these ends, the Right does not mind the physical elimination of the adversary, through attacking their meetings or, more commonly, denouncing them through Friday prayer

sermons and the broadcasts of the national radio and television stations. The Right is also known to have resorted to the religious authorities, mosques, sympathetic merchants in the bazaar, and members of the government bureaucracy in order to bear pressure on its opponents.³⁷

The hostile and on rare occasions violent competition between the Right and the Left affects most aspects of life in Iran. From an institutional perspective, it has resulted in the continued perpetuation of a system of dual state structures over whose control the different sides compete. These institutions often replicate each other's functions and, since they are frequently used to forward the interests of the faction controlling them, tend to undermine the overall efficacy of the state. As demonstrated earlier, in the earliest days of the First Republic, the Islamic revolutionaries' mistrust of state structures prompted them to hastily create a number of parallel military, economic, political, and cultural institutions. Twenty-three years on, most of these structures continue to grow in size and function but still remain outside of the executive branch's control.

By and large, the Right resists attempts at the institutional consolidation of parallel organs and argues that it will result in undermining "the revolutionary character of the Islamic Republic." Not surprisingly, as demonstrated earlier, most of these parallel structures remain dominated by elements loyal to the Leader — the stalwart of the Right — and outside of the Leftist executive's purview. As a result, for example, the IRGC, seconded by the Volunteer Forces (the *Basij*), continue to evolve in parallel to the regular army. There are also numerous other revolutionary councils and organizations that continue to function alongside the various institutions of government. In many ways, post-revolutionary institutional routinization remains as yet elusive. These parallel structures have become refuge for many personalities from two predominant camps,³⁸ and are often a source of corruption, nepotism, and patronage.

Another side-effect of the continued conflict within the political establishment, and in turn a cause for the further perpetuation of this conflict, is a binary system of governance whereby several key power-holders are elected while others are appointed. Since President Khatami's election in 1997, an already divided Islamic leadership is confronted with a grave question: who is the source of legitimacy in the Islamic Republic? Dormant for a decade, the latent tensions between two differing conceptions of legitimate authority — and by implication visions of the future — have now come out into the open and require immediate attention. The two schools of thought regarding the sources of legitimate authority could not have been more at variance. The Left (or the "softliners") believes that the ultimate source of political legitimacy is the will of the people as exercised through democratic processes; legitimacy,

in other words, flows from bottom to top. This segment of the political leadership has succeeded in openly contested presidential, parliamentary, and municipal elections. The Right (or “hardliners”) refuse to accept such a politically determining role for people in both theory and practice. Instead, they view the masses as largely good only for providing the manpower necessary for the expansion of Islam. Legitimate decisions can only be made by the Supreme Leader, in the name of God and in the absence of the Twelfth Imam. In this top-down conception of legitimate authority, only the individuals appointed by the Leader are endowed with any legitimacy.

This vision of legitimate political authority, as articulated by the Islamic orthodoxy, is enshrined in the institutional arrangements of the Islamic Republic. In theory, the legitimate flow of political power emanates from the people, then to a second tier of institutions, which in turn appoint or elect a third tier of institutions (diagram 3). If this theoretical conception of legitimate authority were to prevail, the will of the electorate — or, more broadly, the people — would be the ultimate source of legitimacy. In practice, however, it is the third tier from whom political legitimacy is derived. In the case of the Leadership, for example, which is illustrated in diagram 4, the electorate (first tier) votes for the Assembly of Experts (second tier), who in turn elects the Supreme Leader (third tier). Instead of the Leader deriving his legitimacy from the other two layers who have confirmed him in his position, the other layers derive their legitimacy from the Leader. The very positioning of bodies such as the Leadership above the presidency, and the Council of Guardians and the

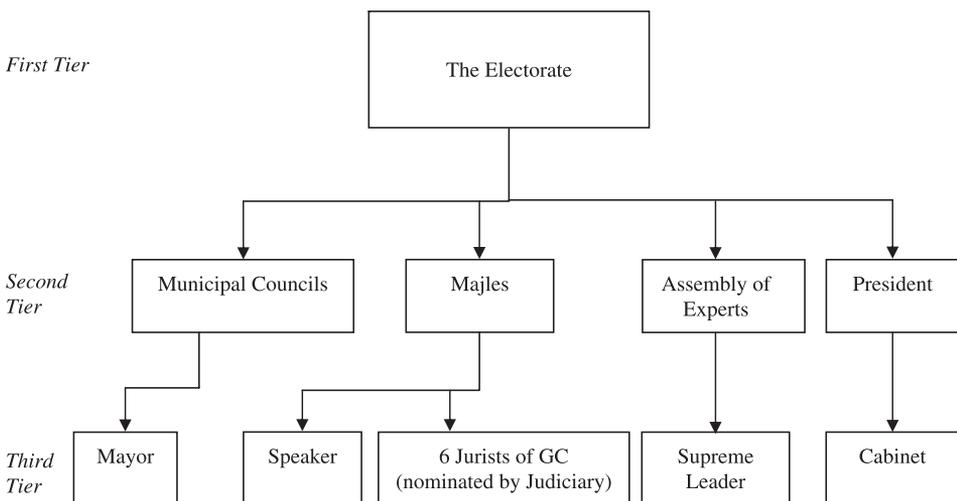


Diagram 3. Theoretical Flow of Legitimacy in the IRI

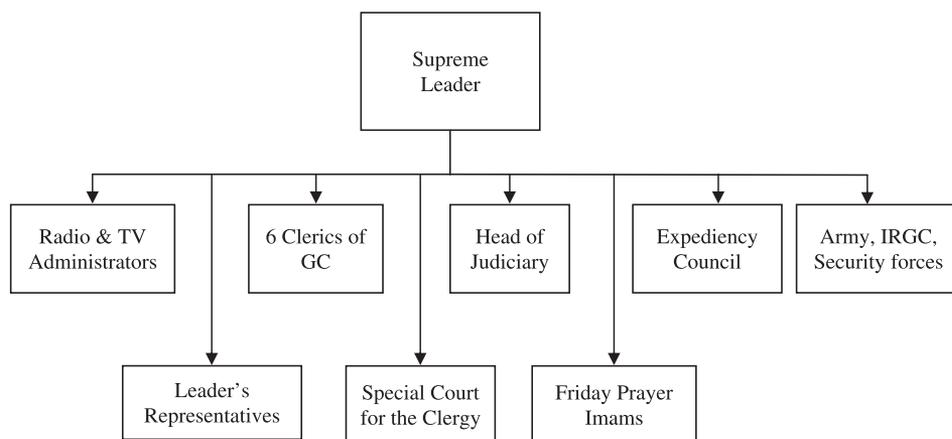


Diagram 4. The Actual Flow of Legitimacy in IRI

Expediency Council above both the elected parliament and the president, are manifestations of this duality. The result is institutional paralysis, a suspended equilibrium that, in the words of Khatami's advisor Saeed Hajjarian, manifests in "dysfunctional dual governance."³⁹

In the absence of any viable mechanisms for power redistribution and conflict resolution, a temporary solution to the tension has been reached in the form of a division of labor. Politics and culture — and by implication, the interpretation of the "proper" vision of Islam — have remained mainly under the control of hardline, non-elected players. This is best signified by the Right's tight and uncompromising control over the Leadership (the central font of power) and the regular judiciary and the Special Court for the Clergy (both watchdogs against possible "cultural corruption"). Economics, a poisonous gift, has gone to the state's elected organs, namely the presidency and the Majles, which happen to be under the control of the Left. Other administrative responsibilities are also left largely up to the executive. In the realms of foreign and national security policies, however, the President and the majles are forced to share decision-making responsibilities with the Supreme Leader and the plethora of organizations that he directly controls, although in reality the Leader's wishes are clearly far more dominant than those of the executive and the legislature combined.

Conclusion

With the election of President Khatami and the dawning of the Third Republic, observers of Iranian politics both inside and outside of the country

believed that a steady liberalization of the political system was at hand. The Iranian revolution, having reached its Thermidor, was finally entering the threshold of democratization. The sense of excitement and anticipation among members and sympathizers of the Left was especially palpable, believing that after of years of marginalization and forced compliance with revolutionary orthodoxy, their moment had finally arrived. Leftist newspapers were published with unprecedented vibrancy; the popular and elite discourse became concerned with civil society and reforms; and an increasingly disconnected and disinterested electorate realized that it could indeed use the officially sanctioned elections of the regime to bring about meaningful political change from within.

But the Right has shown no willingness to give up without a fight. In fact, within a year of Khatami's election, it struck at the proponents of reforms with deadly brutality when five of the country's most renowned literary figures on the Left were mysteriously murdered. The Special Court for the Clergy and the judiciary has seen to it that the remaining dissident clerics or oppositional papers are either silenced or intimidated. Thus, the defining character of the Third Republic, so far at least, has turned out to be not one of unqualified liberalization but rather one featuring a precarious, suspended equilibrium between the new champions of the popular will on the Left and the guardians of conservatism and orthodoxy on the Right. "Dissonant institutionalization," the "multiple biographies" of the revolution's early heirs, the continued prevalence and significance of parallel and competing power structures, and the waning of ideological and corporate cohesion among today's state actors have all combined to reinforce and perpetuate the suspended equilibrium engulfing the Iranian political system.

In Iran's relatively democratic system, in spite of the existence of a formal separation of powers and other constitutional provisions, power is not distributed on the basis of national sovereignty and popular will. Instead, legitimate power and authority are assumed to derive from divine will. According to the official interpretation, divine attributes, transcended to the Absolute Jurisconsult, provide legitimacy for the whole political system. This is precisely the Gordian node of the Islamic Republic. The system is a sum of contradictions. The binary nature of the political system satisfies neither the politically inclined Left and the Right nor the larger society. Hajjarian's stark warning that civil war or another revolution may be the only viable ways out of the present morass appears somewhat unrealistic, at least for now.⁴⁰ However, the politico-institutional paralysis and suspended equilibrium that presently characterize the political system cannot persist indefinitely. The extra institutional and "unhealthy" competition that is rampant within the political system is bound to come to a head in favor of one or the other of the two

camp. Sooner or later, the current, largely unworkable political formula has to change. One can only hope that the change does not lead to more chaos in a country only just emerging from more than two decades of revolutionary zealotry and political turmoil.

Endnotes

1. Daniel Brumberg. *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001). According to Brumberg, “dissonant institutionalization occurs when competing images of political community and the symbolic system legitimating them are reproduced in the formal and informal institutions of state and society, and in the political rhetoric or ideology of the ruling elite . . . Where dissonant institutionalization prevails, the appearance of one ‘path’ can hide alternative paths, each of which maintains a measure of autonomy from the other,” 33–34.
2. Joel Migdal. “Studying the State.” Mark Irving Lichbach and Alan S. Zuckerman, eds. *Comparative Politics: Rationality, Culture, and Structure*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 221. For more on the notion of limited autonomy, see, Peter Evans, *Embedded Autonomy: States and Industrial Transformation*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). Evans, it needs mentioning, uses the concept of state “embeddedness” in specific relationship to industrial capital, although he maintains (p. 17) that it can sometimes be “built around ties to multiple social groups.”
3. A “Negative equilibrium” is another useful way to conceptualize our usage of the term “suspended equilibrium.” Anyone familiar with Iranian history and politics knows that the term “negative equilibrium” was first given widespread currency in Iran by former Prime Minister Mohammad Mussadiq (1951–53) to denote a non-aligned, “neither British nor Soviet,” foreign policy line. While we readily acknowledge our debt as to the origins of the term, our operationalization of the concept, of course, is quite different.
4. For more “cohabitation” in France see, Ronald Tiersky, *France in the New Europe: Changing Yet Steadfast*. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1994), 56–61.
5. While all unitary, non-democratic states feature factional rivalries of one form or another, post-revolutionary states tend to exhibit lower levels of factionalism as long as the revolution’s “Leader” can project his charismatic authority over his lieutenants and the larger masses. See, Mehran Kamrava, *Revolutionary Politics*. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992), 71–3.
6. David Lane. *State and Politics in the USSR* (New York: NYU Press, 1985), 112–14.
7. H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz. “A Theory of Sultanism 1: A Type of Nondemocratic Rule.” H. E. Chehabi and Juan J. Linz, eds. *Sultanistic Regimes*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 11.
8. Seth Mydans. “The Fall of Suharto: The Final Days; When Friends Rebel, A Reign Ends Quickly.” *New York Times*. (May 24, 1998).
9. Adam Przeworski, *Democracy and the Markets: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1991), 57.
10. See, among others, Laurence Whitehead. “International Aspects of Democratization.” Guillermo O’Donnell, Philippe C. Schmitter, and Laurence Whitehead, eds. *Transitions from Authoritarian Rule: Comparative Perspectives*. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 3–46.
11. For an examination of Iran’s Second republic, see, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini: The Iranian Second Republic* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Henner Fürtig, “Iran — the ‘Second Islamic Republic?’” *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*. Vol. 20, No. 3, (Spring 1997), 20–45.

12. Ehteshami, *After Khomeini*, 46.

13. The concept of *velayat-e faqih* is not universally agreed upon by the Shi'a clerical hierarchy, and some of the Grand Ayatollahs (*Ayatollah 'uzma*) have either questioned it or have refrained from actively endorsing or supporting the notion. The tenor of the debate has become unusually tense since 1997, especially given Khamenei's lack of seniority. For an examination of some of the theoretical controversies surrounding the notion see, Oliver Roy, "The Crisis of Religious Legitimacy in Iran," *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 53, No. 2, (Spring 1999), 201–16. One of the most vocal critics of Khamenei and his lack of adequate credentials has been Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri, who was originally designated as Khomeini's successor but was removed from office shortly before Khomeini's death due to his increasingly sharp criticism of the regime. See, Geneive Abdo, "Re-Thinking the Islamic Republic: A 'Conversation' with Ayatollah Hossein 'Ali Montazeri," *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 55, No. 1, (Winter 2001), 9–24.

14. The notion of "three republics" is discussed in some length by Ebrahim Yazdi, longtime activist and head of the Iran Freedom Movement, in his recent book, *Se Jomburi* (Three Republics) (Tehran: Jame'eh Iranian, 1379/2000), 441–54.

15. See, for example, United Press International, "Floggings Spark Political Dispute." August 15, 2001.

16. Max Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 54, 61.

17. An example of Khomeini's continued desire to expand his charismatic authority even near the end of his life was the fatwa he declared against Salman Rushdie, which was as much politically motivated as by Rushdie's defamation of Islam in his book *The Satanic Verses*. For more on the controversy see, Daniel Pipes. *The Rushdie Affair: The Novel, the Ayatollah, and the West* (New York: Carol Publishing, 1990), 15–37.

18. In Weber's words, if charisma is to be transformed into a more permanent type of authority, its "anti-economic character should be altered." Weber. *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 60.

19. According to Weber, one of the ways in which the problem of leadership succession in charismatic movements is met is "by the search for a new charismatic leader on the basis of criteria of the qualities which will fit him for the position of authority." Weber, *On Charisma and Institution Building*, 55.

20. *Ibid.*, 58.

21. Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, 29–30.

22. For a discussion of the ensuing controversy among the clerical establishment see, Wilfred Buchta, *Who Rules Iran? The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2000), 51–5.

23. *Mellat Majles* (People Parliament), 15 March 2002.

24. Bahman Ahmadi. "Noqte-ye Qovvat ya Noqte-ye Za'af" (Point of Strength or Point of Weakness." *Iran Daily*, <http://news.gooya.com/2002/03/06/0603-08.php>. Accessed on March 31, 2002.

25. See Bonyad home page at: <http://www.iran-bonyad.org/htm/about.html>. (Accessed on March 31, 2002).

26. On rare occasions, the Leader's choice of Friday Prayer Imam ends up not towing the official line in his sermons. The most notable example of such a non-conformist Friday Prayer Imam is the aging Ayatollah Taheri Esfahani from the central city of Esfahan.

27. President Khatami and reformist Parliamentarians criticize the intrusion without success. They believe that "the existence of parallel organs in decision-making causes

disruption and difficulties." See IRNA, Feb 20, 2002. Kamal Kharrazi, Foreign Minister, complains about the anarchy by saying: "First we to prove being responsible of foreign policy." See *Asr Azadegan*, (March 16, 2000), 37.

28. For a complete text of Nuri's Defense at the Special Court for the Clergy, see Abdullah Nuri, *Shokaran-e Eslab* (Hemlock For Advocate of Reform) (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1999).

29. For a complete account of his trial see, Zahra Roudi (Kadivar), *Baba-ye Azadi* (Price of Freedom) (Tehran: Nashr-e Nei, 2000); see also, Zahra Roudi (Kadivar), *Naqd-e yek rouydad* (Critic of an Event) (Tehran: Nashr-e Nei, 2000).

30. See "A letter for Ashkevari from PEN", April 18, 2001 http://www.iraniannationalfront.org/htdocs/docs/2001/04_April/letter_for_ashkevari_from_pen.htm. Accessed on March 31, 2002.

31. For an analysis of SCC's responsibility in reformists-conservatives war of attrition, see, Akbar Ganji, *Tarik-khanebe Ashbab: Asid Shenasi Gozar be Dowlat-e Demokratik-e Tose'e-gara* (Ghosts' Darkhouse. Pathology of Transition to the Developmental Democratic State) (Tehran: Tarh-e No, 1999), 78–89.

32. For a discussion on the political factions see Mohammad Qouchani, *Bazi-e Bozorgan. Vaqa'ye Negari Jonbesh Eslabat Demoktatik dar Iran* (Play of Prominent. Chronology of Democratic Reform Movement in Iran) (Tehran: Jame'eh Iranian, 2000), Hojjat Mortaji. *Jenab-baye Siyasi dar Iran-e Emrooz* (Political Factions in Today's Iran), 4th ed. (Tehran: Naqsh-o-Negaar Editions, 2000). An extensive collection of terms are used to identify the two dominant political camps inside the Islamic system. Identifying these political camps in a fluid spectrum is a daunting task for any observer. Here are some examples: "Imam and reconstruction line and its opposite"; "Traditional/modern/radical right versus left/new left"; "adherent groups to authoritarian or democratic government"; "radical/moderate traditionalists vs. radical/moderate modernists"; "liberal, Hezbollah, middle-right, left, right"; and, "fundamentalist Islam, modernist Islam"; "Islamic left, technocrats, *Resalatis* (after the conservative newspaper by the same name), ultra-conservatives". Multiple reference and identity is common among members of the camps as well as those who observe them from the outside.

33. The non-*Maktabis* are also sometimes referred to by the public as the "*Motekhassasin*," or "professionals," especially if they are non-clerics, signifying the background and social status from which the public perceives them to come.

34. Farhang Rajaei, "A Thermidor of 'Islamic Yuppies'? Conflict and Compromise in Iran's Politics," *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 53, No. 2, (Spring 1999), 218.

35. *Resalat*, *Shoma*, *Quds*, *Abrar* and *Keyban* are the most prominent newspapers of conservative camp.

36. See Masood Behnood, "Who's Mehdi Karrubi?" <http://www.iran-emrooz.de/yaddasht/bkarrubi.html>. (Accessed on March 31, 2002). Karrubi, who is a cleric, represents a figure who was once an integral part of the revolutionary political establishment but is today seen as a threat to it. Earlier in his career, he had been the spiritual father to the so-called Students Following the Imam's Path who stormed the US embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats hostage for 444 days from November 1979 to January 1981.

37. See Masood Froozandeh, "Factions after Sixth Parliament," *Asr Azadegan*, (April 8, 2000), 9. Mortaji. *Jenab-baye Siyasi dar Iran-e Emrooz* (Political Factions in Today's Iran), 44–201; and excellent analysis of Mohammad Qouchani. *Yaqeb Sefidba. Jam'eh Shenasi Nabadbaye Madani dar Iran Emrooz* (White Colors: Sociology of Civic Foundations in Today's Iran) (Tehran: Naqsh-o-Negaar, 2001).

38. An example of someone from the Left assuming a position within one of these semi-official institutions is Ataollah Mohajerani, the former Culture Minister who was forced to resign after pressure from the Right. Mohajerani currently heads the International center for the Dialogue of Civilizations.

39. "Political strategies in present Iran," dialogue with Saeed Hajjarian, *Aftab*, No. 12, (January–February 2002), 12.

40. *Ibid.*

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