



**AP[®] Comparative
Government
and Politics**
Iran Briefing Paper

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Preface

On November 4, 1979, less than nine months after the victory of their revolution, a group of Islamic militants in Iran took over the United States embassy in Tehran and held 52 American diplomats hostage. The “Iranian hostage crisis” contributed mightily to the electoral defeat of incumbent President Jimmy Carter, who finally saw the hostages released on January 20, 1981, when he was handing over power to newly elected President Ronald Reagan. Moreover, in a State of the Union address in 2002, President George W. Bush referred to Iran as a rogue state and a member of the “Axis of Evil.” This designation and the earlier hostage crisis speak volumes about how the 1979 revolution in Iran strained the relationship between these two former allies.

The Iranian revolution of February 1979 was a watershed event that heralded the return of religious revolutions to the annals of modern history. The rapid downfall of a mighty autocratic regime, the use of religion as the primary agency of political mobilization, the tremendous level of animosity displayed against the West, and the establishment of a theocracy in the later decades of the twentieth century presented serious questions for students of comparative politics. The revolution helped to inaugurate a wave of political activism in the Muslim world that has been referred to as “Islamic fundamentalism,” “Islamic militancy,” or “Islamic radicalism.”

What makes the study of Iran fascinating for students of comparative politics is not just the above events or the fact that Iran is representative of a cultural area known as the Islamic World (made up of some 57 Islamic nations) which is becoming increasingly

important in global politics. Iran also provides us with a rather novel and indigenous experiment in political statecraft. The Islamic Republic of Iran is unique among contemporary political systems in the sense that it is a **theocracy** infused with strong democratic elements. As the world's only theocratic republic, Iran's political system is organized around the principle that Shi'ite clergy have a divine right to rule since they are the qualified interpreters of God's will. The country is led by a chief cleric who has the title of "**supreme leader**" and enjoys rather extensive powers.¹

Iran's political system, however, also has strong democratic elements in the sense that the constitution recognizes the principle of popular sovereignty and separation of powers, makes frequent references to individual rights, and bestows upon the electorate the right to elect the president, members of parliament, Assembly of Religious Experts, and local city and village councils. This blending of theocratic and democratic features in the Iranian constitution has led to tension over time. The Islamic Republic's legitimacy rests in part on popular sovereignty and in part on its conformity to a revealed body of religious law. Most policymakers are elected by the people, but they are overseen by clerics who are not themselves fully accountable to anything except their own religious conscience and one another. The Islamic Republic thus has a split in its bases of legitimation.

Finally, studying Iran—a country that may be described as the archetypal "Islamic" state in the "Western" imagination and one that has articulated some of the most vociferous calls for political independence and cultural authenticity in the developing

¹ We should bear in mind that there are some important conceptual differences between a theocracy and a liberal democracy. Theocracy assumes that an objectively true belief system must be promoted in public life. Liberalism has a thinner view of public life as a space for individuals to coexist despite their diverse private beliefs. Where liberal democracy presupposes that all citizens are eligible to hold all leadership positions, a theocratic system holds that top officials must be drawn from a minority of people specially trained in religious doctrine.

world—can be instructive for us in the sense that it poses numerous questions to Western political scientists who consider Middle Eastern/Islamic societies as totalitarian, closed, frozen, or static. The Iranian case helps us to understand that the histories, cultures, states, political movements, and ideas of these societies cannot be routinely discussed as if they were all instances of one single essence outside history.

Brief Overview

Country At-a-Glance



The following timeline presents a broad background, not a list of testable points.

Timeline: Brief History of Iran

559 BC	The first world empire, known as the Achaemenian Empire, is founded by Cyrus the Great.
330 BC	Alexander the Great ends the reign of the Achaemenian dynasty by defeating the Persian army.
250 BC–AD 226	Parthian dynasty.
226–651	Sassanian dynasty.
570–632	Life span of Prophet Muhammad.
637–651	Arab armies defeat Persia and introduce the religion of Islam to the country.
1501	The Safavid Empire is founded, and it establishes Shi'ism as the state religion of Persia.
1722	The overthrow of the Safavid dynasty by Afghan tribes.
1796–1925	The reign of the Qajar dynasty is marked by a weak central government and bureaucracy and the presence of powerful tribes.
1906	A constitutional revolution takes place in Persia that forces the king to allow a limited constitution modeled after that of Belgium.
1908	Oil is discovered in Persia.
1914	During World War I, Russian, British, and German troops occupy the country.
1925	Army officer Reza Khan abolishes the Qajar dynasty and declares himself shah; the Pahlavi dynasty begins. He creates a centralized bureaucratic state.
1935	Reza Shah changes the official name of the country from Persia to Iran.
1941	During World War II, Reza Shah Pahlavi is forced by Allied forces to abdicate his throne in favor of his son, Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, because of his perceived pro-German sentiments.
1950s	Prime Minister Muhammad Mossadegh nationalizes Iran's lucrative oil industry as Muhammad Reza Shah flees the country. In 1953, the shah, with the help of British and American intelligence services, overthrows Mossadegh and returns to power.
1960s/1970s	Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini lives in exile in Iraq. The shah embarks on a campaign to modernize and westernize his country.

1979

January Shah flees from increased unrest led by Shi'ite Muslims.

February 1 Khomeini arrives from exile.

February 11 Shah's regime falls.

April 1 Khomeini declares an Islamic Republic.

1980 The shah dies in exile.

1980–1988 War with Iraq.

1989 Khomeini dies and is succeeded by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

1997 Moderate cleric Muhammad Khatami is overwhelmingly elected president, besting hard-line candidates backed by the conservative Shi'ite clergy.

Fact Sheet (as of 2003)

Land and People

Capital: Tehran

Total area: 634,562 square miles

Population: 67 million

Under 15 population (%): 31

Annual population growth rate (%): 1.08 (1998)

Total fertility rate (children per woman): 1.9

Urban population (%): 66.4

Ethnic composition (% of total population):

Persians: 51

Azeri: 24

Gilaki and Mazandarani: 8

Kurd: 7

Arab: 3

Lur: 2

Baloch: 2

Turkmen: 2

Other: 1

Major languages (%):

Persian and Persian dialects: 58

Azeri and Turkic dialects: 26

Kurdish: 9

Luri: 2

Balochi: 1

Arabic: 1

Religious affiliation (%):

Shi'a Muslim: 89

Sunni Muslim: 10

Zoroastrians, Jewish, Christian, and Baha'i: 1

Economy

Domestic currency: Rial (IRR)
US \$1: 7,900 IRR (2004)

Total GDP (US\$): 458 billion

GDP per capita (US\$): 7000

GDP annual growth rate (%):

1997: 3.4

2000: 5.9

2003: 6.5

GDP composition by sector (1999):

Agriculture: 21%

Industry: 23%

Services: 48%

Oil: 8%

Military expenditure as percentage GDP: 3.1%

Unemployment rate: 16%

Labor force distribution (% of total):

Agriculture: 30

Industry: 25

Services: 45

Exports: \$24.8 billion

Imports: \$21.8 billion

External debt: \$8.7 billion

Society

Life expectancy at birth: 69.3

Infant mortality per 1,000 live births: 44

Adult literacy (%): 72

Male: 78.4

Female: 65.8

Access to information and communications (2003):

Mobile phones: 65,000

Main telephone lines: 6.3 million

Internet users: 1.3 million

Women in Government and the Economy

Female Population: 48.5%

Women in the national legislature:

Lower house (%): 4.1%

Women at ministerial level (%): 9.4%

Known as Persia until 1935, Iran (meaning “the land of the Aryans”) is a relatively large country enjoying a strategic position in the Persian Gulf. It is larger than Alaska and slightly smaller in size than France, Germany, Spain, and the United Kingdom combined. Most of the terrain is a plateau consisting of mountains and desert, with a continental climate marked by scarce precipitation and extreme temperature differences between summer and winter. These factors have made much of the country inhospitable to agriculture and have resulted in a rather skewed demographic distribution. As in much of Asia, the maintenance and control of irrigation infrastructure have been politically important throughout the country’s history. The most important resources are petroleum, natural gas, and mineral deposits. Iran is the second largest oil exporter within OPEC and the fourth largest oil producer in the world. Its proven oil reserves (estimated to be over 94 billion barrels, or 10 percent of the world total) are concentrated along the southern coast (Persian Gulf) and in the Caspian Sea in the north, both of which are areas of geopolitical rivalry and instability. Iran also possesses 15 percent of the world’s proven natural gas reserves, which places it second in the world after Russia. Bordering eight different countries from Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, the Middle East, and the Caucasus, it has ongoing territorial disputes with Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and neighbors in the Caspian basin. In 2003, Iran ranked 19 (out of 231 countries) in terms of its gross domestic product.

Iran is a lower-middle-income country that has the world’s seventeenth largest population (over 67 million people). Close to 70 percent of the country’s population live in less than 30 percent of the land, concentrated in the north and northwest of the country and such major cities as Tehran, Mashhad, Isfahan, Tabriz, Shiraz, Karaj, Ahvaz, and Qom. Much of the country is rural and historically had an important nomadic pastoral component

that came under state pressure to take up settled agriculture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The population is 89 percent Shi'ite Muslim, another 10 percent are Sunni Muslims, and the remainder (1 percent) are Christians, Baha'is, Jews, and Zoroastrians. Persian (or Farsi, as the Iranians refer to it) is the official and predominant language. There are more than a dozen different ethnic minorities in Iran, including Turkic-speaking Azeris in the north, Gilaki and Mazandarani in the north, Kurds in the northwest (part of a transnational Kurdish zone that cuts across Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria and sustains an independence movement that all these states have tried to suppress), Balochis in the southeast, and Arabs along the southwest coast. In this patchwork of identities, it is important to note that the cleavages of ethnicity, language, and religion often cut across one another rather than overlap.

Brief Political History

Iran, a country with a history spanning over three millennia, has one of the richest artistic, literary, and scholarly lineages of the Middle East. This tradition is due to the accumulated contributions of Persia's gifted craftsman, gnostic and hedonist poets, and learned men of philosophy, science, and religion. The country's rather complex political culture and sense of self-identity is heavily influenced by (a) a pre-Islamic notion of Iranian identity centered on nationalism, (b) intellectual loans acquired in the course of encounter with Western modernity, and (c) attachment to the minority branch of Islam known as Shi'ism. Each of these currents has served as a breeding ground for the formation of different types of political sentiments ranging from anti-Arab Iranian nationalism to secular humanism and finally radical Shi'ism.

The Shi'ite/Sunni split occurred soon after the advent of Islam, over the question of who was eligible to succeed Prophet Muhammad (d. 632) as the new caliph (loosely analogous to the Catholic papacy). Shi'ites (now some 15 percent of Muslims worldwide) believe that legitimate rulership of the entire Islamic community could descend only through the heirs of the Prophet Muhammad. They regard other early leaders, whom Sunnis revere, as usurpers. A resistance centered on the legitimate line of “**imams**” lasted for several generations, until the last imam mysteriously disappeared in the year 874. Since then, Shi'ites have held on to a messianic belief that the “hidden imam” will return at the end of time and restore a just order. Shi'ite political thinkers historically have held, based on these doctrines, that in the interim all secular authority is ultimately illegitimate.

Compared to Sunni Islam, Shi'ism has thus remained more critical of monarchs and less fully reconciled with political order for its own sake. At best, the Shi'ite clergy extended a provisional legitimacy to rulers who let Islamic institutions flourish unmolested. The clergy itself came to stand in collectively for the hidden imam, in his absence. Over the centuries, they functioned as the conscience of the Shi'ite community and thus occupied a role similar to that of the Christian priesthood in premodern Europe, or the Confucian mandarins in premodern China. Certain distinct features of church-state relations bear noting, however. Compared to the Confucian mandarins, the Shi'ite clerics were far more hostile to power holders and enjoyed more independence. Their religious functions were separate from the state and usually unaffected by it. They also enjoyed a strong institutional base. They were self-organized, in informal hierarchies that rested only on the esteem in which religious scholars held one another. They also had a secure income from the voluntary religious taxes paid by the believers as well as mosques and charitable endowments that were inviolable under Islamic law. Compared to the Christian priests,

Shi'ite clerics often refused to make peace with secular authorities based on a dividing line between church and state. Islamic doctrine has held that religion and politics flow into one another, as aspects of a comprehensive Islamic society. Rulership by monarchs other than the hidden imam was always viewed, therefore, as an unnatural condition—even if inevitable for the time being. The Shi'ite clergy's withdrawal from political life before modern times reflected a desire to be untainted by the prevailing injustice, not a sense that some spheres of life lay outside the scope of religion. Hence, the church-state relationship has always been problematic.

Legacy of Authoritarianism

While Islam was introduced into Iran in the seventh century subsequent to the Arab-Muslim conquest, Shi'ism was not officially recognized as the “state religion” until the beginning of the sixteenth century. Ironically enough, this took place right around the time when Martin Luther's movement led to the emergence of a schism in Christianity that eventually led to the secularization of political life in Europe. Soon after coming to power in 1501, the Safavid dynasty declared Shi'ism as the state religion as a way of distinguishing themselves from the rulers of the Sunni-dominated Ottoman Empire next door, who considered themselves as the sole Islamic Caliphs. During the period of their reign, which lasted for more than two centuries, the Safavids managed to create the first modern Iranian nation-state. They were finally overthrown in 1722 by a group of Afghan tribes. The eighteenth century witnessed the rise and fall of a number of other dynasties in Persia before the Qajar dynasty was established in 1794. The reign of this latter dynasty, which lasted until 1925, was marked by the feebleness of the state at a time when colonialism was at its height. A couple of ill-advised conflicts with neighboring states like Russia led to

embarrassing territorial concessions for Persia. It was against this background that in 1921 a military officer named Reza Khan seized power and four years later abolished the Qajar dynasty and declared himself the king (or *shah*) of a new dynasty named the Pahlavi dynasty. Reza Shah managed to create a centralized bureaucratic state by modernizing the economy and secularizing the political life of the country. However, he was forced to abdicate his throne in 1941 because of his pro-German sympathies during World War II. The Allied forces recognized his son Muhammad Reza Pahlavi as the new monarch when he was only 22 years old.

Muhammad Reza Shah continued his father's policy of authoritarian modernization while being extremely pro-Western in his foreign policy. The shah's disagreement with his nationalist prime minister Muhammad Mossadegh who was attempting to nationalize Iran's lucrative oil industry, forced the shah to leave the country in 1953. A few months later, the shah, with the help of British and American intelligence services, overthrew Mossadegh and returned to power. The 1953 coup, by putting an end to organized legal political opposition, inadvertently transferred the locus of opposition from factories and work sites to such places as high schools, universities, and even mosques. This development was only natural, since the government could outlaw political parties and threaten striking workers with termination of employment. What the government could not do, however, was storm the mosques, outlaw prayers, or close the universities indefinitely, since the state itself depended upon university graduates to staff its own bureaucratic machinery.

The shah's government saw its revenue from oil increase from \$555 million in 1963-64 to over \$20 billion in 1975-76. Oil revenue as a percentage of total government revenue jumped from 11 percent in 1948 to 41 percent in 1960, and up to 84.3 percent in 1974-75.

By this time, oil revenue comprised 45 percent of Iran's gross domestic product (GDP) and 89.4 percent of its foreign export receipts. Thanks to accumulating oil revenue, Iran's gross national product (GNP) grew at the annual rate of 8 percent in 1962–1970, 14 percent in 1972–73, and 30 percent in 1973–74. Between 1972 and 1978, Iran's GNP grew from \$17.3 billion to an estimated \$54.6 billion, giving it one of the highest GNP growth rates in the “Third World.” The income from oil made Iran into a textbook example of a **rentier state**—a state that derives a substantial portion of its revenue on a regular basis from payments by foreign concerns in the form of rent. The rentier state is in itself a subsystem of a **rentier economy**, which is an economy heavily supported by state expenditure, while the state itself continuously receives rent from abroad. Thanks to the massive infusion of new wealth generated from the export of oil, the state no longer had to rely on agricultural surplus for capital accumulation. Instead, it embarked on a fast-paced modernization process. The end result of this process was the transformation of the Iranian economy from one based on agriculture and commerce to a one-product economy based on oil. Meanwhile, as the Mexican ruling elite had done, the shah adopted import substitution industrialization, which placed emphasis on capital-intensive industries and led to the neglect of small-scale production and the agricultural sector.

While the shah and his lieutenants embarked on rapid modernization of the socioeconomic infrastructure of the country, there was no serious attempt to create a dynamic and open political system. It seemed as if the shah had borrowed the slogan of the turn of the century Mexican leader Porfirio Díaz regarding “plenty of administration and no politics.” Following the advice of a number of his American-educated advisors, the shah founded his **Rastakhiz (Resurgence) Party** in 1975 as a “mass party” encompassing the entire Iranian population and encouraged everyone to join. At a time when all the legal

channels of participation were closed to the opposition—who were subjected to harassment, imprisonment, and torture—this call only proved to be a cruel joke. The shah failed to realize that even among the nouveaux riches, rapid modernization would foster a sense of deprivation in terms of political participation, rational decision making, and national independence. And, more importantly for the lower classes, such questions as wealth distribution, conspicuous consumption, and moral decadence would prove to generate strong antistate emotions.

Hence, the rentier nature of Iran's economy and the actual policies of the regime caused the gradual erosion of the bonds linking the state and civil society. The state viewed itself as independent from civil society, and failed to exercise any ideological hegemony over its constituents. Muhammad Reza Shah's regime was viewed throughout, by most Iranian and Western observers, as modernizing, secular, and stable. Yet, at its hour of destiny, it collapsed swiftly at the hands of a political adversary. Its demise once again exposed the fragile nature of stability and of the claims to legitimacy emblematic of most Middle-Eastern ruling classes.

The 1979 Revolution

The 1979 Iranian revolution has been called the last of the great modern social revolutions, such as the French and Russian. Yet, this was also a peculiar revolution on at least three accounts: (1) the first revolution in which the dominant ideology, forms of organization, and leadership cadres were religious in form and aspiration; (2) the first contemporary revolution that has led to the establishment of a theocracy, while all other modern revolutions were against state *and* church; and (3) the only modern social revolution in which the peasantry and rural guerrillas played a marginal role.

The Iranian revolution, which was the most popular revolution since the Chinese revolution in terms of sheer number of participants, is also a classic case of how ideas and structures interact to produce social change. The revolution came out of conditions created by Muhammad Reza Shah in the decades after World War II. Determined to westernize Iran and turn it into a Middle Eastern version of Japan, the shah embarked on a massive program of modernization. The so-called “White Revolution” of the early 1960s was made up of a dozen administrative, economic, and social reform initiatives. The centerpiece of this reform package was a land reform that dealt with some peasant grievances, but also transferred capital and the regime’s support base from rural landowners to the urban bourgeoisie. A modern economic sector emerged alongside more traditional ways of life. Aiming to undercut the public importance of Islam—which he regarded as a backward influence—the shah cultivated both a Western image that many conservative Iranians found offensive, and some pre-Islamic versions of Iranian identity that centered on nationalism rather than religion. Not unlike Mexico under Porfirio Diaz, Iran under the shah had all the hallmarks of a neopatrimonial state. By intervening in all significant decision-making policies and demanding absolute loyalty, the shah stripped

the state of any corporatist potential and managed to establish a patron-client relationship with the citizenry courtesy of huge oil revenues.

All these measures opened up an economic and cultural chasm between two Irans. On one side stood the shah and the upper-middle class of liberal technocrats, on the other, the traditionally minded lower classes and clergy. The polarization between the liberal regime and the clergy was an especially volatile situation. It meant that Iran had two rival elites, each of which saw the other as illegitimate.

Two main factors combined to bring about a revolutionary crisis. First, a 10 percent decline in oil prices in the late 1970s plus a 20 percent rise in consumer prices dented earlier rates of economic growth, leading to widespread discontent. This is a case of the J-curve theory of revolutions, in which a crisis occurs when a period of improvement and rising expectations suddenly gives way to disappointment. Second, the Carter administration's new emphasis on human rights coupled with criticism from Western media and human rights organizations led to some American pressure on the shah to lift restraints on the opposition. The economic and cultural discontent began to surge up politically. Both of these factors show the interaction between international and domestic conditions.

A broad revolutionary coalition started to crystallize. It consisted of: (a) the urban poor, especially recent rural-urban migrants who experienced the cultural chasm between tradition and modernity quite intensely; (b) the moderate middle classes, concerned with political freedoms; (c) the leftist opposition, including Marxists whom Western analysts at first saw as the likely winners of the revolution; (d) the bazaar merchants who contributed broad networks and the ability to bring the economy to a standstill in many sectors as needed; and (e) the clergy as a moral

focal point, with a solid centralized and hierarchical internal structure, strong communication networks, capable orators and liturgists, wide mobilizing networks (mosques, seminaries, Islamic associations, religious foundations), populist slogans, financial independence from the state, and not least the credibility that came from decades of opposition to the shah. The clerics, in other words, were fulfilling the functions of the Leninist vanguard party, even if such a party did not actually exist.

Demonstrations and strikes snowballed through 1978 and into early 1979. The state's capacity to repress resistance began to break down. Eventually a period of "dual sovereignty" emerged, in which some areas and institutions stuck with the shah while others transferred loyalty to or were captured by the opposition. The shah's conscript-based armed forces, which, in contrast to that of the tsar's in 1917, had remained poised and unwavering until the monarch departed the country, began to show cracks. The shah was finished once the armed forces, faced with chaos and the prospect of being ordered to fire on the public, declared that they were now "neutral" and would not defend the regime. Most observers expected the clergy to withdraw from politics soon after victory. Liberal and Marxist currents within the revolutionary coalition were in a strong position to dominate a post-shah order. Indeed, the first postrevolutionary government headed by Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan was overwhelmingly made up of lay liberal-minded Muslims and nationalists. However, as it happened in the case of the French Revolution, a broad moderate coalition in the early stages gave way to progressively more ideological and radical factions. The fact that there had been little ideological consensus among the revolutionaries from the start beyond overthrowing the shah made it possible for Bazargan's provincial governments to soon be overtaken by the more

radical revolutionaries. In a series of maneuvers over the course of two years, the secular bloc was forced out. The clergy set up a state with theocratic niches in which it would have an ongoing role. The course of events in Iran once again demonstrated that revolutions deal not only with overthrowing a previous regime, but also with which of the opposition currents ultimately triumphs and imprints its own agenda on the revolution as a whole.

Political Institutions

In addition to the institutions it had inherited from the *ancien* regime—state ministries, public universities, schools, courts, parliament, etc.—the Islamic Republic felt compelled to manufacture a plethora of assemblies, committees, councils, courts, foundations, and organs to exert its control. On many occasions, they had to create parallel revolutionary organizations since they could not entirely trust the institutions they had inherited. So, for example, the Revolutionary Guards were formed vis-à-vis the regular army. Over time, however, as they became arenas for factional infighting, overlapping responsibilities, and conflicting policies, the government decided to consolidate the revolutionary organizations into more established and bureaucratic agencies. Moreover, the ideological belief systems of the new ruling elites compelled them to establish altogether new institutions. Guardian Council, Expediency Council, Assembly of Religious Experts, and special courts for clerics (so that they do not have to stand trial in regular courts) are just a few examples. The appropriation of the inherited institutions and the invented new organs modified the contours of Iranian statecraft by making the state even more Byzantine and “muscular.” The ambiguities about where sovereignty resides, and

how the theocratic and democratic institutions are to be reconciled, continue to plague the Islamic Republic.

Branches of Government

Many features of the Iranian political system are similar to other modern polities, and thus unremarkable. There is a president and a unicameral legislature, both elected directly by voters. Originally the system was loosely parliamentary, with a prime minister and a figurehead president. However, in 1989 a number of constitutional changes took place. One of these amendments led to the abolishment of the office of prime minister and instead strengthened the office of the presidency. The **president** is elected by universal suffrage based on receiving an absolute majority of votes. His term of office is four years, and he is subject to a term limit of no more than eight years. The president chooses the members of his cabinet, presents legislation to the parliament, and is entrusted with the task of upholding the constitution and coordinating government decisions. However, unlike in France or Russia where the president is strong enough to thoroughly dominate both the government and the legislature, or in Nigeria where the president is the dominant figure in politics, the Iranian president has rather truncated powers. This is due to the fact that the executive power is bifurcated between the president and the supreme leader.

The **supreme leader** is the country's most powerful political figure and is expected to act as a trustee of the community by supervising politics and ensuring that laws conform to Islam. He has the authority to overrule or dismiss the president, appoint the head of the judiciary and half of the members of the Guardian Council, and appoint the top echelons of the military all in the name of upholding the Islamic state. Initially, the supreme leader was required to be one of the highest-ranking Shi'ite clerics who was

elected and periodically reconfirmed by the Assembly of Experts. While Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was alive, he was the undisputed supreme leader. Upon Khomeini's death in 1989, another important amendment besides the abolishment of the office of prime minister was introduced. In a triumph of political convenience over doctrinal coherence, the qualification for the supreme leader was changed from being the highest-ranking Shi'ite cleric to whoever was merely an established member of the clergy. In other words, charisma yielded to formal office holding as the basis of legitimacy, as the outgoing president Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamene'i, a longtime lieutenant of Ayatollah Khomeini, was chosen by the Assembly of Religious Experts as the successor. Hence, the rather smooth transition of power in Iran had none of the hallmarks of the succession crises previously besetting Soviet Union or China.

The **Council of Guardians** (or **Guardian Council**) is a 12-member council that jointly with the supreme leader has veto power over any legislation passed by the parliament that they deem to be at odds with the basic tenants of the Islamic faith. In a sense, the Guardian Council operates like an upper house of parliament. Another important power granted to this council is the right to determine who can run in local, presidential, parliamentary, and Assembly of Religious Experts elections. The council is made up of six clerical members who are appointed by the supreme leader and six lay members (lawyers) who are recommended by the head of the judiciary, subject to the approval of the parliament. While the six lawyers vote mainly on the question of the constitutionality of legislations, the clerical members consider the conformity of legislation to Islamic principles. Each member serves six-year terms in the council.

The **Assembly of Religious Experts** (or **Majles-e Khebregan**) is an 86-member male (no females allowed) assembly that drafted the 1979 revolution and is charged with

evaluating the performance of the supreme leader. The Assembly of Experts is itself popularly elected, but consists overwhelmingly of clerics, because candidates must pass an examination on religious knowledge to be eligible.

The Iranian **parliament** is officially called the Islamic Consultative Assembly (better know as **Majles**). It is made up of some 290 deputies who are elected by direct and secret ballot for four-year terms. In contrast to the prerevolutionary parliament under the shah or its counterparts in the former Communist states or most contemporary parliaments in the Arab world, the Iranian parliament is not a rubber-stamp institution. Thanks to the constant state of factional infighting among the postrevolutionary elite, the Majles has been a rather boisterous arena where acrimonious debates (even fistfights) take place. The government is often obliged to lobby strongly to move legislation through this chamber. The regularity of elections has helped to institutionalize the place of parliament in Iranian political life. The parliamentary elections can also serve as a barometer of electoral sentiments in Iran. This barometer seems to indicate that anticlericalism is on the rise, as attested to by the fact that fewer and fewer clerics are being elected to the Majles—a 37 percent drop between 1980 and 2000.

Faced with the fact that there were serious policy disputes between the Guardian Council and the parliament, the ruling elite decided to create yet another council in 1988 known as the Council for the Expediency of the State (or **Expediency Council**). Composed of some two dozen leading political personalities in the country, this body is entrusted with the task of resolving any policy disputes in a way that best serves the interest of the entire system. It also advises national leaders on matters of grave national importance. The council, whose members are appointed for three-year terms, is composed of the heads of the three branches of government, the six clerical members of the Guardian

Council, and those appointed by the supreme leader. Majles committee chairs and cabinet ministers can serve as temporary members based on the nature of the issue at hand.

Finally, mention should be made of the judiciary, which, along with the supreme leadership and the Guardian Council, is the third citadel of clerical political power. The Iranian judiciary is perhaps the most controversial of the three classical branches of government. The controversy starts with the fact that the supreme leader appoints the head of the judiciary, who by definition has to be a cleric. According to the constitution, the court system is supposedly independent, but its political role in practice reflects the ideological composition of judges who are quite uniformly conservative clerics who are either wholly opposed to or rather suspicious of opening the floodgates of legal reform. They fear that removing brakes on dissent and personal behavior will allow the public sphere, and eventually the state, to be hijacked by liberal opponents. In the meantime, religious zealots known as **Hezbollahis** (members of the Party of God)—who are recruited mainly from the ranks of the urban poor, the **bazaaris**, the petty criminals, and the ruffians—serve as the unofficial watchdogs and storm troopers of the clerical establishment. These vigilantes are responsible for everything from assaults on dissidents to harassment of women who bend the rules of Islamic attire. They are hardly ever prosecuted by Iran's legal machinery, proving once again that institutions may matter less than who staffs them and the agendas they serve. The Iranian judiciary has been criticized by a wide variety of international human-rights organizations for abuses committed against the regime's political opponents. The court system also enforces censorship laws to curtail public debates. Between 1997 and 2004, more than 100 newspapers and magazines were ordered to shut down by the judiciary in a concerted crackdown on the press, even though the limits of political acceptability are not clearly defined.

Parties

One of the ironies of Iranian politics is the fact that despite having a “hyper-politicized” polity, Iranian citizens do not benefit from the presence of recognized, legitimate, or effective political parties. The most important postrevolutionary political party, the Islamic Republican Party, which was established in 1979, was dissolved in 1987 on the order of Ayatollah Khomeini due to factional infighting in its ranks. For the next decade or so, there was a ban on any party formation. Political parties were finally legalized in 1998, but they are still at an early stage of development and policy formation, and party discipline remains embryonic. These “parties” more resemble professional groupings engaged in political ventures rather than full-fledged groups of full-time activists. The largest reform party is the Islamic Iran Participation Front, which was formed after the victory of President Khatami in 1997 by his reformist colleagues. The Servants of Construction Party is a grouping of technocrats who are allied with former president Hashemi Rafsanjani. Other well-established political entities that function more or less as political parties are as follows: the reformists are represented by the Assembly of the Combatant Clerics (to which President Khatami belongs), Assembly of the Followers of the Imam’s Line, and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization, while the conservative are represented by the Society for Militant Clergy, Islamic Coalition Party, and Coalition for the Development of Islamic Iran. While some “loyal opposition” groups like the Freedom Movement are somewhat tolerated, the armed opposition political parties like the People’s Mojahedin of Iran, the People’s Fedayeen of Iran, and the Kurdish Democratic Party have been severely dealt with.

Elections

Due to its revolutionary pedigree and claims that it represents the voice of the people, the Iranian regime has managed to institutionalize elections. During its first 25 years in power, the Islamic Republic has had 24 parliamentary, presidential, Experts Assembly, and village/city council elections. Having almost one election a year, one can say that electoral politics is now an ingrained part of the Iranian polity. Elections reflect the influence of various power centers at the top and have also become a way of integrating various social groups into the political system. These functions should be understood against the background of the country's dramatic demographic transformation. Considering that originally anyone over the age of 15 (and now 16) can vote in Iran, the total number of eligible voters has increased from 20 million people in 1979 to over 46 million in 2004.

Iranian elections are competitive, typically with high voter turnout (despite the frequency of elections) and a candidate-to-seat ratio of better than 10:1. Both the contestation and participation dimensions of democracy are present, therefore, unlike in nearly all of the Arab Middle East. Yet elections are not synonymous with democratic governance. Not unlike elections under communist rule, voters have to choose from a set of handpicked candidates. Candidates for office must be approved by the Guardian Council, based on their familiarity with Islamic doctrine and their broad acceptance of the principles of the revolution. This leads to prior disqualification of many presidential and legislative candidates in each election without the need for the Guardian Council to provide detailed explanation for its actions. For example, prior to the February 2004 Majles elections, more than 30 percent of registered candidates (almost all reformist) were

disqualified by the Guardian Council to insure that the Seventh Majles would be dominated by conservative deputies.

Constitution

After the 1979 revolution, as a backlash against the shah's secular modernization strategy, **Shari'ah** was restored as the core of the legal system, supplemented by laws to address modern conditions. A constitution ratified in December 1979 codified "Islamic law" as "state law." Yet this constitution was riddled with oddities and paradoxes, as it simultaneously affirmed religious and secular principles, democratic and antidemocratic tendencies, and populist and elitist predilections. While the constitution helped to codify a theocracy where religion is an axiom of political life, the eclectic qualities of Iranian society was such that secular agents, aspirations, ideas, institutions, language, and motifs continued to survive and—more importantly—manifest their significance in the realms of private and public space. These paradoxes gave rise to numerous debates concerning the politics of Iranian legal arrangements. For example, according to the constitution, the president has to be from the Shi'ite sect and be a "well-known political personality." The sectarian qualification automatically disenfranchises Sunni Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrian, and other religious minorities. Furthermore, the "well-known political personality" clause has so far been interpreted to mean that it only applies to men, thereby allowing the Guardian Council to bar those women who wish to stand for election as president. Critics complain of many other inequities in how Shari'ah handles women's rights and family law above and beyond restrictions on political behavior. While some controversial practices are due more to traditional and patriarchal social conditions than to

Shari'ah as such, still there are rigidities in Shari'ah that cannot adequately be overcome through revisions, given the understanding of its sources.

In the age-old tradition of political tokenism, the constitution mandates that small, “recognized” religious minorities—Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians—have a few seats (five total) reserved to them in the parliament. This qualification also means that nonrecognized religious minorities like the **Baha'is** can neither be represented in the parliament nor enjoy the right to ever become a president.

Bureaucracy

There is a large and less than efficiently managed public sector, dating back to the expansion of the shah's era and the state expropriation of property at the time of the revolution. In the early years of its rule, the Islamic regime ensured effective control over the civil service by purging, denying employment, and forcing into early retirement those whom it viewed as unsympathetic to its revolutionary cause. Thereafter, the bureaucracy has been staffed by a group of lay technocrats who are culturally orthodox and maintain close ties with the clergy. These so-called “second stratum” of the Islamic state, who gained education and upward mobility under the Islamic Republic, mainly come from humble backgrounds. Today, these docile functionaries and apolitical careerists run Iran's bloated bureaucracy, which is plagued by clientelism, corruption, mismanagement, patronage, and ideological-filial nepotism.

The military establishment is made up of the regular army and the Revolutionary Guards. The Guards are entrusted with maintaining internal security, while the army safeguards the borders. Unlike Nigeria, which has had a long history of military coups and rule by corrupt military leaders, Iran's military has not played an interventionist role in the

country's politics. Through all the political turmoil of the postrevolutionary period, the military has respected the orderly transfer of power, thereby abiding by Ayatollah Khomeini's dictum that the military should stay out of politics. While the rank-and-file members of the Revolutionary Guards are reported to be divided among reformists and conservative, the top brass of the Guards is extremely loyal to the supreme leader.

Citizens and Society

Cleavages

Like in many other developing countries, the cleavages of class, ethnicity, language, and religion often cut across one another rather than overlap in Iran. The country's social classes have fared differently in the postrevolutionary period. The peasantry and urban lower-middle class, who are strong bases of religious orthodoxy, benefited somewhat from the patronage of revolutionary organizations and the state bureaucracy, who provided them with such amenities as electricity and paved roads. However, they have their own discontents because of the overall poor economic performance of the country's economy.

Resistance to clerical rule by fiat has been most evident among Iran's stoic, and predominantly secular, middle class. As the middle class's economic capital has drastically shrunk in the turbulent postrevolutionary Iran—resulting from the gap between the cost of living and annual wages—they hang on more than ever to their most precious badge of honor: their “cultural capital,” the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills that are passed from one generation to the next. The Iranian middle class, which has been able to perpetuate itself thanks to increasing rates of urbanization, literacy, and bureaucratization of state power, is culturally westernized and irreconcilably hostile to the

clergy. Along with the parts of the upper classes that did not leave Iran after the revolution, they are the strongest source of opposition to the regime.

Other important social groups that have been politically relevant throughout the postrevolutionary era include the clergy and various ethnic groups. While the establishment of a theocratic state improved the social standing and economic well-being of a good number of clerics, it also came to hurt many others. The corruption and unseemly luxurious lifestyle of those clergymen who could skim off revenue from state and semiofficial foundations called clerical legitimacy into question. As religion became tainted with the impurities and utilitarian compromises of politics while clerics were serving as civil servants, the public began to view them as a group of traditionalists, with ill-informed, corrupt, power hungry, and opportunistic elements. Iranians managed to undermine or at least dilute the severity of the clergy's edicts by resorting to adroit humor, conspiracy theories, cynicism, dissimulation, irreverence, nostalgic rehabilitation of the old regime, perversion of the laws, secrecy, symbolic discourse, and outright dissent. Meanwhile, the exposure of the clerics to these admonishments as well as the ongoing theoretical debates has led to the formation of various intellectual currents in their ranks.

In a multiethnic polity like Iran, the historically dominant definition of what constitutes a "nation" has been an ethno-linguistic one. Ironically, even though Persian emerged as the language of the political and literary elite, it never replaced the local languages, which maintained their own grammar and speech forms. The campaign to define "Persian" as the pillar of Iranian nationalism had historically alienated Azeri Turks, Kurds, and other ethnic minorities. The grievances of various ethnic minorities, who also happen to live on the country's geographic periphery, against the central government in Tehran continued after the revolution as well. After failing to peacefully resolve their grievances,

the clerical regime moved swiftly to subdue its ethnic opponents in the volatile political ambiance of the early 1980s. Various uprisings by the Arabs, Balochis, Kurds, and Turkmen were put down, and it now seems that ethnic tensions do not pose a serious threat to political stability in Iran like they do in Nigeria.

Civil Society

As the new revolutionary regime consolidated its authority, it showed no restraints in its power to ingress upon individual and civil rights or to devour civic initiatives and institutions all in the name of “safeguarding the welfare of the community.” After the revolution, the clergy attempted to reinstall orthodoxy into public life. Just like their Maoist counterparts in China, the Shi'ite revolutionary elites in Iran launched a campaign of **Cultural Revolution**. The education system at all levels was to impress the values of the Islamic state on students. The universities were cleared of “liberals” and restaffed with faculty who supported the new regime. China’s “Red versus expert” debate was reincarnated in the shape of “Islamic versus [Western] technocratic” debate. However, while the coming to power of a muscular state—which proved to be both omnipotent and omnipresent—forced Iran’s civil society into retreat, it did not cause it to entirely wither away. Many factors are responsible for why Iran’s civil society continues to wage a tenacious fight. Chief among these factors is the demographic transformation of a country that is becoming increasingly urbanized, educated, and young. Moreover, the growing distance from experience of the shah’s rule and the revolution has made many Iranian youths see the values in question as moribund. Westernized sectors of the population retain an outward orientation to modern entertainment and global liberal ideology. The clergy’s efforts to restrict what they see as contaminating influences via satellite television and the

Internet have proved fruitless. In their “home territory,” many members of Iran’s middle and upper classes treat the specter of Western popular culture—with its dynamic, modern, and youthful qualities—as an invisible guest. In other words, Western cultural traditions and icons may have been driven underground, but their presence can still be felt.

Another one of the paradoxes of postrevolutionary politics in Iran is the fact that the citizenry has come to enjoy an era of intellectual prosperity while living under a politically repressive state. The last two decades have seen an explosion of publications, a booming translation industry, and a thriving cinema industry emerge in Iran. These forums have insured that the country has a fairly lively public sphere. However, the boundaries of press freedom in Iran are clear on certain issues and blurred on others. There can be no criticism of Islamic doctrines or its revered personalities. No criticism of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his cult of personality is permitted. Critical reportage of the treatment accorded to religious minorities are simply off limits, as was the prolonged war with Iraq. Discussing sensitive issues of “national security” is not tolerated either. While poking fun at or denigrating officials and revolutionary organizations is punishable by law, no such guarantees are reserved for the opposition groups and individuals.

Notwithstanding this war against intellectual dissent and the pernicious brands of state and self-imposed censorship, Iranians enjoy a lively and interesting print media. Besides the government-owned and opposition newspapers, there are also over 200 general and professional journals dealing with, among other subjects, sports, economics, cinema, linguistics, health care, technology, and the fine arts. Many of these journals, which are privately owned, manage to articulate a nonpolitical yet subtle criticism of the government in their respective areas of expertise. Compared with other regimes in the region, the Iranian press has relative freedom to criticize the government’s domestic and

foreign policies. Exposing the country's social ills or the government's managerial ineptitude, economic blunders, and foreign policy flip-flops are legitimate journalistic practices. This freedom is required in light of the considerable factionalism that exists among the Iranian ruling elite.

Participation

Political socialization in Iran over the second half of the twentieth century can best be described as fragmented. Huge gaps existed between the values of different social groups. Western influence under the shah extended through the upper and middle classes, who embraced liberal and technocratic values and showed some willingness to repress opponents for the sake of orderly modernization. Much Western influence came through Iranians who studied abroad. During the 1970s, the number of Iranians studying in the West, especially the United States, was comparable to the numbers of Chinese or Indians in the late 1990s. The postrevolutionary state has had to deal with the candid calls of a critical mass of secular-minded technocrats, professionals, and industrialists demanding the liberalization of the educational system, relaxation of artistic and cultural restraints, abandonment of cultural xenophobia toward the West, and legal moderation.

As mentioned before, millions of Iranians participated in revolutionary demonstrations that brought down the shah's government, and millions more took part in more than two dozen postrevolutionary elections. In this ambiance, students and youth in general have gained enormous political weight, as K-12 and university students have come to comprise almost a third of Iran's total population. Thanks to an electoral system that used to set the suffrage age at 15, the 1997 presidential elections that brought President Khatami to power marked the largest voter turnout in Iranian history, as 29

million people or 83 percent of the public cast its vote. While a cleric himself, Khatami appealed to such a wide constituency by promoting such ideas as the liberalization of social mores, especially regarding women and girls, the normalization of relations with the outside world, and the “rule of law.”

As elsewhere in the world, students have proved crucial in every social upheaval as well. In 1999, the postrevolutionary state witnessed its most important student uprising, which took place more or less for the same reasons that brought Chinese students into the Tiananmen square exactly a decade earlier. While both the Chinese and the Iranian governments survived the student uprisings, their political capital suffered both domestically and internationally.

In addition to the students and the youth, women’s participation in Iranian public life has also gone up. As the size of the nuclear family has decreased, women’s demands for greater educational and employment opportunities as well as social participation have risen. This has contributed to the further democratization of family life, which can in turn plant the seed for institutionalization of political democracy in Iran.

Belief Systems

The central theoretical principle of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the theory of ***velayat-e faqih*** (“jurist’s guardianship”), which was developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He was perhaps the most consistent political opponent to the shah—with the possible exception of the Communists. During his 15 years of exile in Turkey and Iraq, he articulated a system of political thought that was regarded as innovative within the confines of traditional Shi’ite doctrine and remains a minority position among the highest ranking Shi’a theologians to this day. Breaking from the pattern of withdrawal from politics

as a realm of injustice, Khomeini argued that the clergy must take a leading role in a modern Islamic state. At the core of his theory lay the concept of *velayat-e faqih*. According to this theory, a modern Islamic state should be overseen by those familiar with Islamic theology and law, which for practical purposes meant the upper ranks of the Shi'ite clergy. Khomeini's thinking was influenced by Plato's ideal of the philosopher-kings, specially educated elite who would rule justly within a hierarchical social order.

Like Mao and Lenin before him, Khomeini managed to emerge as the theorist, organizational mastermind, and first leader of the postrevolutionary state. His charisma, imbued with all sorts of revolutionary credentials and religious mythology, led to the formation of a personality cult that has outlived him.

The postrevolutionary regime eventually accepted and then attempted to disseminate Khomeini's views on Iran's identity, public affairs, and political socialization. This caused a number of major disagreements within the polity. One bone of contention between the clerically dominated state and its secular opponents was the issue of nationalism and pre-Islamic Iranian identity. The Islamic regime initially had a troublesome relationship with ancient Persian lineage, customs, traditions, artifacts, and festivals. In their attempt to properly "Islamicize" the cultural reference point of many Iranians, they felt that they had to fight Western cultural influences while deprogramming Iranians from any attachment to their notions of pre-Islamic values and ideas. They soon realized that diluting the richness of Persian culture was not an easy task, and therefore they somewhat relented their cultural offensive against Iran's pre-Islamic traditions and icons. The new leaders reluctantly learned that they had no choice but to coexist with pre-Islamic Iranian culture, symbols, practices, and identity since Iranians were in no hurry to abandon their collective memory of a glorious past that was still sufficiently attractive.

They also had to digest a speedy ideological rapprochement with Iranian nationalism as the war with Iraq broke out in 1980. Those who had lamented nationalism as an insidious ideology for Muslims now had to wrap themselves in its mantle, embrace its iconography, and partake in its passionate discourse. While the war with Iraq enabled the clergy to consolidate their power and subdue their opponents, the hostilities also bolstered Iranians' sense of self-confidence and "national" pride.

Iran's political barometer indicates that despite its propaganda and bravado, the Islamic Republic has failed to inundate its nationalist and leftist opponents, who continue to champion a modernist subculture and a secularist discourse as the clerical leadership is beset by theoretical and political hazards.

Elites

The clerical polity in Iran contrasts in important ways with Islamist ("fundamentalist") movements elsewhere and with the states that they would likely establish if they came to power. Most of the differences relate in some way to its Shi'ite character, unlike the Sunni movements that predominate. The greater importance of the clergy in Shi'ite Islam is reflected in the semi-theocratic form of the Iranian state. Islamist movements elsewhere rest on a pious but lay stratum of intellectuals and lower-middle-class activists. Given the collaboration of much of the Sunni clergy with secular authoritarian states, such resistance has often been quite suspicious of clerics. Sunni Islamism has tended to be quite austere and rigidly defined by a vision of Shari'ah law. The Iranian clergy, both historically and in its current political role, has shown itself more disposed to innovate. While the clerical leadership has claimed to protect tradition, it has had to amend and break numerous age-old religious protocols for the sake of state

expediency. The esoteric tradition, in which the Shi'ite clergy saw itself as having access to sophisticated hidden meanings within Islam, undoubtedly has something to do with this flexibility. Also important are the highly unstructured nature of clerical oligarchy and the permissive character of Shi'a theological reasoning. Given its high-culture origins, the Iranian clergy has also proved quite cosmopolitan and more willing than other Islamists to pursue intercivilizational dialogue.

The intellectual rifts within the ranks of the Iranian officialdom have led to an ongoing tug of war between the reformers and the conservatives. This has produced not only a contentious domestic scene but also a fundamental change in the political culture and discourse of the country. Iranians are presently involved in an internal conversation regarding the merits (or lack thereof) of such political systems as a theocracy, a democracy infused with religious sensibilities, and a secular state. In this regard, it is important to note that opposition to the present regime has a range of contents. Most people in what we might call the "loyal opposition" aim to reform the system, while retaining the basic principle of an Islamic state. Some see changing the Islamic Republic as part of a larger effort to revitalize Islam for modern conditions. An influential group of critics, including the remnants of the pre-1979 upper and middle classes, seek a more radical break with clerical rule and a return to secularism. The uncertain extent of political westernization among urban youth may prove crucial. The political opposition, across all of these differences, remains fragmented and thus weak. Its breadth means that it has no coherent ideology that can tap into popular discontent. Nor has any branch of the opposition, loyal-Islamic or radical-secular, made many inroads into crucial groups like the clergy and the military. Against this background, the divisions within the state and across political subcultures continue to deepen.

Gender

In the decades before 1979, the shah's regime changed a number of legal and social practices, in an effort to align Iranian gender relations with a Western secular model. Family and divorce laws were changed, for example, and Western attire and mixed gatherings in public became normal custom for the upper and middle classes. Since the revolution, the Islamic Republic has sought to address women's concerns within a framework of Islamic law and gender complementarity, or "equality-with-difference." Many of the shah's reforms were nullified. Divorce and custody laws now follow Islamic standards, and the restrictions on women's attire—at least a scarf and a long coat in public—are seen as repressive by many women of a liberal temper. It should be appreciated, of course, that these new regulations were mainly a restoration for all women of traditional practices that the more conservative lower and middle classes had never abandoned. General restrictions on feminist advocacy persist, including a ban on public discussion of women's issues in a way that contradicts the basic framework of Islamic law. There are legal restrictions on women's ability to leave the country without the consent of male relatives. Occasional stonings for adultery have also taken place in the country, though the government did recently issue a judicial directive banning them. There have been a rash of husband-killings and suicides by women due to the difficulty they face in initiating divorce under Islamic law. The legal system enforces sexual restraint in principle. The number of runaway girls has skyrocketed, and prostitution is widespread. Moreover, legal loopholes have permitted the practice of *mut'ah* (temporary marriage), which allows men to marry women for a mutually agreed-upon period of time.

The selection of Shirin Ebadi as the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace Prize was emblematic of yet another paradox of Iranian political life. In a society where women's rights have been trampled upon, women continue to make serious strides into the educational, cultural, and employment domains, thereby increasing awareness of women's rights and issues at the social level. A number of social indicators of women's position have shown marked improvement over the last two decades because of the postrevolutionary emphasis on social justice. While women constitute only 27 percent of the total labor force, school enrollment rates for boys and girls are now close to parity. Women's opportunities for education and professional advancement have expanded in many ways. More than one-third of medical students are now female. There are also a few female clerics. Women make up 4 percent of the national legislature, which is lower than the rate for Britain, China, Mexico, Russia, and England while slightly higher than the one for Nigeria. The limits on political participation remain blurry, however, because some debate lingers over whether a woman can constitutionally be elected as president. Tensions remain unresolved between women who subscribe to the Islamic and the secular versions of feminism. Overall, the logic of equality-with-difference imposes restrictions on women but also allows entry to the Islamic Republic's public sphere within a framework of cultural respectability. Iranian society is rather more accommodating of women's interests than are many other Muslim countries.

Political Economy

Role of Government in Economy

When the clergy consolidated its political power in the early 1980s, it found itself in a distinct position. It was a religious elite that had expanded its role horizontally, so to

speak, to become a political elite too. Yet it lacked any practical experience of the demands involved in governing. In its long history of eschewing involvement with secular authority, the Shi'ite clergy had never held political power itself. It thus had few resources on which to draw when fulfilling the largely economic responsibilities of any modern state. Ayatollah Khomeini's infamous statement that "economics is for donkeys" was illustrative of the cleric's inexperience in the field of economic statecraft. Added to this inexperience were several pressures that worsened Iran's economic situation in the early 1980s: (a) the nationalization of many large firms, (b) massive emigration of skilled professionals and entrepreneurs who opposed the regime, (c) a decline in foreign investment from the West, (d) a drop in oil prices on the international market, and (e) restructuring for the war effort and the burdens of the eight-year war with Iraq. All were complex pressures that cut across the domestic and international spheres.

Coupled with these demands was an intense ideological debate among factions of the clergy. The economic implications and agenda of the revolution had not been defined at the outset. Different factions could thus attach to it whatever meanings they preferred. The three major currents are usually identified as pragmatists, radicals, and conservatives. Pragmatists saw economic recovery as Iran's highest priority. They favored liberal economic policies such as restoring foreign trade, removing state controls, facilitating direct foreign investment, privatizing state-owned companies and banks, etc., and were willing to turn over economic management to liberally inclined technocrats. Radicals, with their base among younger and more militant clerics, called for measures to enhance social justice through traditional state intervention, price controls, wealth redistribution, etc. In their eyes, the revolution belonged to Iran's poorer strata, which could suffer under free-market economics. Land redistribution and assertion of national economic

independence—with the accompanying suspicion of economic ties to the West—figured among their demands. We might draw loose comparisons between the radicals' sense of Islamic social justice and the interpretation of Christianity by liberation theologians in Latin America during the same period who emphasized the need to look after the interests of the disenfranchised.

The higher-ranking conservative clerics, many of whom had personal ties to the bazaaris and rural landowners, reacted strongly against the radicals' vision. They affirmed private property and a higher level of economic inequality as protected under Islamic law. Tensions among these factions persisted through the postrevolutionary period, driven by the intersection between ideology and social base. This debate over economic priorities and justice is a good case of the “social question” that comes to the fore in any revolution.

Formal Economy

The 1979 revolution did not alter Iran's status as a rentier state, as oil still accounts for 85 percent of Iran's export commodities, two-thirds of the country's hard currency earnings, and 40 to 50 percent of the government's revenue. The list of the country's economic woes includes disruption caused by the revolution; the devastation caused by the eight-year war with Iraq; legal uncertainties, meting out of revolutionary justice, and political and ideological infighting among the ruling elite; low labor productivity; shortage of investment capital, raw materials, and spare parts; brain drain and flight of capital; peasant migration to the cities; and fluctuations in the global price of oil. However, Iran's most formidable economic problems are inflation and unemployment. Iran suffers from high unemployment (at least 16 percent) because of the youth bulge, and a high and unstable rate of inflation (estimated to be 15.3 percent in 2002). The cumulative impact of

these economic ills has been a dramatic rise in the number of unhappy and unemployed people, falling incomes, rising debts, and unrelenting job insecurity.

Recognizing that economic failures can invariably discredit the prevailing political system, Iran's new ruling elite managed some progress on the social-justice front during the 1980s and 1990s. Education and basic health care improved. In the 1990s, the Rafsanjani era saw a shift toward market-oriented pragmatism. Large numbers of Western-educated technocrats—less concerned with ideology than with economic performance—were appointed to policymaking posts. Foreign trade expanded, especially with a broad and thus politically unthreatening range of developed countries in Europe and East Asia. The economy remained under severe pressure throughout the 1990s, nonetheless, with half the population below the poverty line and a rising foreign debt requiring frequent rescheduling. Its finances squeezed by plunging oil prices, the Iranian government had to adopt an austerity budget that included huge tax hikes, spending cuts, and import suppression imposed to conserve foreign exchange while meeting its high external debt-repayment obligations.

Thanks to the cushion provided by the constant flow of petrodollars, there have been no economic catastrophes like the Great Leap Forward program in China; however, the Iranian government needs a Herculean effort to invigorate its economy. To revitalize the economy, the government needs to lower inflation, increase foreign exchange reserves, improve domestic productivity, create job opportunities, expand foreign and domestic investment, boost nonoil exports, strengthen the national currency, increase popular purchasing power, streamline the bureaucracy, reduce government expenditures, and decrease the foreign debt. Accomplishing even a few of these goals is a tall order, particularly in light of such impediments as the relegation of the private sector to small-

scale economic activities, the agricultural sector's dwindling significance, the considerable volume of cash in private hands, and the relatively low portion of public sector jobs—only 33 percent of total employment in Iran.

Informal Economy

It is a fact that Iran has a state-dominated and highly politicized economic system where power is concentrated in the hands of the public sector. However, the informal economy is no less politicized. In Iran, the bazaar merchants have been historically central to the economy and society, as they have constituted the backbone of economic flows throughout the country. Faced by the challenge posed by the more modern sectors of the economy under the shah and the fact that they did not enjoy political representation equal to their economic weight, the bazaar merchants allied themselves with the clergy against the shah and financed many of the revolutionary activities. After the revolution, they came to enjoy a great deal of political and economic power, especially considering the fact that they controlled the lucrative black market. However, their fortunes have also been negatively impacted over the course of the last two decades due to a host of factors, such as the changing class structure of the country (i.e., expansion of a modern middle class), the rise in literacy rates, economic regulations, and the broader restructuring of trade patterns, which have taken on a more modern and impersonal coloring. The cumulative effect of these changes has been to loosen their networks and mutual trust and decline their political mobilizing capacity.

Any discussion of Iran's informal economy should make mention of the role of myriad quasi-private foundations and **religious endowments** (called *Bonyads*) that manage state-owned enterprises. These large, state-affiliated conglomerates, which are

often run by clerics and their lay allies, have a firm grip on Iran's economy through their monopolistic and rent-seeking transactions. Vast amounts of property expropriated from the shah's family and other members of the old elite passed to state-run foundations and *Bonyads*, charged with aiding the poor. These foundations became a key patronage mechanism, locking in the clergy's leverage over large sectors of the economy. The track record of these foundations seems to prove the accuracy of the Italian proverb that states, "Public money is like holy water; everyone helps himself to it."

Finally, we should bear in mind that due to the citizenry's multiple occupations and rapid turnover rate in employment—caused by the unstable nature of Iran's market economy—guild organizations and professional identities in Iran are rather weak.

Interface with Global Economy

As an ideological state, postrevolutionary Iran adopted a worldview of Islamic internationalism. Throughout the 1980s, it gave extensive aid to Islamist movements elsewhere. The clergy tended to view the country as a springboard for pan-Islamic revolution, a third pole outside both the Western and Soviet blocs. While pragmatists gained ground against ideologues during the 1990s, an undercurrent of suspicion persisted against the West and especially the United States, whose two-decades-long trade embargo has starved Iran of much-needed foreign investment. As a middle-income country, Iran's need for trade access and foreign investment works against the ideologically driven concern for self-reliance. The attitude toward supranational organizations such as the UN, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization is mixed. On the one hand, Iran has nothing against development cooperation and international law. On the other hand, Western dominance in such forums tends to cause apprehension. Probably the most

important international membership is in OPEC. As a leading oil producer less wealthy than the Persian Gulf states, Iran has favored keeping global oil prices high through quotas.

The government frequently runs large budget deficits, driven by military spending in an insecure regional environment, operating less-than-productive firms and foundations, and subsidizing various essential commodities that reportedly take up some 20 percent of the GDP. The rise in oil prices contributes to moderate growth, but reliance on one principal export creates long-term vulnerabilities. Despite being one of the world's largest oil producers, when oil prices plunge, the government faces severe cash shortages, fluctuation on social spending, and other financial squeezes. Many within the regime favor cultivating warmer ties with foreign investors, including those from the U.S. who have been barred since the revolution. This debate reflects a broader contest between economic agendas. The radical social-justice faction that prevailed in the early years of the revolution and advocated economic self-sufficiency as a goal has gradually been replaced by pragmatists and technocrats, who are eager to pursue a rapprochement with the West. This later group realizes that the demands of the world capitalist market dictate that the Islamic Republic put its political and socioeconomic house in order. Numerous corrective measures are necessary if the government is to receive loans and credits, attract investment by foreign firms or Iranian expatriates, reverse the flight of domestic capital, revitalize the dormant tourism industry, or join such global institutions as the World Trade Organization. Considering that Iran's oil output is now below the peak levels of the late 1970s boom (in part because of damage to infrastructure during the 1980s war with Iraq), it is clear that Iran will not be able to reach its goal of doubling its oil output to eight million barrels a day by 2020 without help from the outside world. Meanwhile, the bureaucracy,

the slow pace of political reforms, legal uncertainties, and poor liberalization plans keep many foreign businesses out of Iran. In short, the economic issues tie in with broader clashes over cultural openness and the risks of Westernization.

Public Policy

Common Issues

Iran's ruling clergy after the revolution could be classified as an ideological elite, who subjugated politics and public policy to religious convictions and made practical material issues take a back seat to a comprehensive vision of Iranian society. Pragmatists and technocrats have become much more influential since the early 1990s. Generally, the pro-market forces that favor a rapprochement with the West are connected with more modern business interests. The upper clergy has close personal ties to conservative bazaar merchants. The radical clergy of the early postrevolutionary years had its base in the lower middle class.

Policymaking today involves the democratically elected legislature, the clerical overseers, and the "second stratum." The latter play a crucial mediating role between the clergy and the public. The main tension in the Iranian political system today is between moderate reformers and the conservative clergy. Any concerted reforms are difficult because of the fragmentation of power. Views on economic and cultural changes are cross-cutting. The liberal-technocratic camp on economic issues does not necessarily favor political liberalization. The intense factionalism of postrevolutionary Iran has more often than not caused gridlock in policymaking.

Social welfare in Iran, as elsewhere in the Islamic world, was traditionally a matter of private charity and funding from *waqf* endowments. The 1979 revolution affected

indexes of social well-being in a number of ways. Many medical personnel were lost in the mass emigration of upper- and middle-class professionals. Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic made social welfare a high priority, viewing it as a precondition for spiritual well-being. The expropriated assets of the former regime were transferred to new humanitarian foundations. The social justice legacy of the revolution has been manifested in two decades of massive effort in education and health especially. Educational opportunities, including for women, have greatly expanded. The losses of medical personnel have been replaced. While they have managed to train many women doctors, the plan to create two parallel health systems segregated by gender, in accordance with Islamic principles, has gotten nowhere (except in the case of OB-GYN). Moreover, despite all the improvements, in 2000 Iran's health care system was still ranked 93 out of 155 by the World Health Organization. The country faces major problems, including a large subculture of drug users (estimated at over two million) and the AIDS infection rate, for which they are mostly responsible. In 2003, reportedly some 20,000 people were living with AIDS, and the HIV/AIDS adult prevalence rate was 0.10 percent.

One area of public policy where the government has been impressively successful is the bringing down of the birth rate. Births surged in a pronatalist campaign in the early 1980s, which was embraced in part because of certain interpretations of Islam and in part to replace heavy losses in the war with Iraq (over half a million casualties). Eventually, however, this policy caused demographic pressure from a youth bulge. Faced with the challenges of high unemployment and the political discontent of the fast-growing workforce (over 21 million), the clergy approved policies to lower the birth rate and reduce long-term burdens from overpopulation. Beginning in the late 1980s, the government reversed course and discouraged having large families. Thanks to a series of initiatives and

social trends such as mandatory sex education classes for couples getting married, a rise in the marriage age, and the greater educational and professional opportunities open to women, the government managed to bring the fertility rate down (especially in urban areas) by one full percentage point to its current 1.9 percent. The youth bulge from earlier years means the population will continue growing for some time, but the demographic transition is well under way.

Iranian environmental protection efforts during the latter years of the Pahlavi regime focused on conservation, including wildlife preservation and the founding of national parks. The Islamic Republic has paid lip service to ecological concerns, but they were pushed to the margins by the 1980s war and prolonged economic hardship. The country suffers from deforestation, desertification, and water contamination. Especially serious is urban air pollution. Around Teheran it is often made worse by the mountainous terrain and drives people to wear face masks. The vast majority of this air pollution comes from the large number of old, diesel-fueled cars. Initial moves have been made toward requiring unleaded fuel. Given Iran's abundance of oil and gas resources, it subsidizes many kinds of energy consumption and thus gives little incentive to increase efficiency or develop renewable energy sources. Iran did not sign the Kyoto treaty, though it has received some international aid for environmental purposes through the World Bank. Reducing air pollution is now among the government's top economic planning priorities. A small Green Party was formed in the late 1990s that blends environmental advocacy with other opposition themes.

Iran's human rights record leaves much to be desired. In the 1980s, the state used the pretext of the war with Iraq to put down any internal dissent from ethnic, leftist, and monarchist forces. The state also carried out the assassination of over 100 opposition

leaders living in exile in the West. To this day there are still numerous and continued human rights violations, including the lack of an independent judiciary, the use of the death penalty, the use of torture in prisons and other detention centers, the use of amputations and other cruel punishments, a continuing campaign against journalists and intellectuals, and a culture of impunity for vigilantes who commit abuses against regime opponents and ordinary citizens who do not conform to strict Islamic codes of conduct. President Khatami was elected in 1997 partly on a platform of enhancing rule of law. During his term in office, personal freedoms expanded, especially in the invisible private sphere that is broadly tolerated. Three kinds of restrictions on individuals draw criticism. Secular feminists object to the regulations on women's rights, including attire, that are derived from an Islamic framework. Information flows are also regulated. International Internet links are monitored and filtered, and satellite dishes banned for much of the population, to keep out Western cultural pollution. A range of tolerated opposition viewpoints from the Islamic left to the religious-nationalist right are still represented, however. The ownership structure of the media also allows some sustained pluralism. Finally, the orthodox Islamic character of the state means the political marginalization of religious minorities and even active persecution of the Baha'is as a heretical sect.

Unique Issues

A rather unique problem facing Iran has been the fact that while it hosts one of the largest refugee population in the world, many of its own citizens have decided to flee the country. Thanks to the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the subsequent turmoil in that country, as well as the Iran-Iraq war and the tragedies besetting Iraq's population over the last two decades, more than two million refugees from Afghanistan and Iraq sought

safe haven in Iran. These people mainly lived in refugee camps set up by the Iranian government and held low-paying jobs.

In the meantime, the 1979 revolution caused a wave of emigration by large parts of Iran's upper middle class who were either linked to the shah's regime or apprehensive of the new religious climate. This was the continuation of a trend started in the 1960s and 1970s, when huge numbers of skilled professionals left Iran for higher education, creating one of the largest educated diasporas in the world. Estimates put the number of expatriate Iranians between two and three million. Cognizant of the fact that their know-how, capital, and foreign networks can potentially be important in Iranian politics, the government has attempted to court these expatriates, but so far it has been largely unsuccessful. The Iranians living in diaspora are demanding such things as general amnesty, return of their confiscated properties, legal guarantees, greater personal freedoms, relaxation of rules of contact with the West, etc., which the Iranian government does not seem to be able to provide at this juncture, considering its ongoing ideological rifts and factionalism.

Major Challenges

Domestic Challenges

The balance sheet of the postrevolutionary period in Iran is interestingly bewildering—unprecedented progress juxtaposed against regressive changes. The negative traits of this era include human rights abuses, fundamentalism, economic hardships, and political violence, while the more positive developments include deep-rooted socioeconomic changes and the emergence of a self-defining, vibrant, and critical public discourse. The intellectual effervescence in today's Iran cannot be contested. The

increasing friction between religious intellectuals and the clerical class on the one hand, and clerics with one another on the other hand, is important.

As described in this paper, a set of rather complex undercurrents are changing the Iranian political scene. Iranians are presently engaged in a novel battle to establish some form of democratic rule. Indeed, the major challenge facing the country is how to reconcile a theocracy with a democracy and provide answers to such questions as whether all individuals are equal before the law regardless of gender or faith and whether the Shari'ah is compatible with human rights and individual freedom. There are now very loud and earnest demands for accountability, civil rights, democracy, human rights, liberty, limited state, political heterogeneity, social justice, tolerance, and transparency. Furthermore, some of the long-standing features of Iranian political life, such as authoritarianism, censorship, clientalism, cult of personality, *etatism*, fanaticism, influence peddling, partisanship, and violence, are being called into question. All of these can bode well for Iran's future.

In the economic domain, the greatest pressure is a demographic one, considering that at the time of the 1979 revolution, Iran's population stood at 37 million, and in 2004, it is over 67 million. Population growth has put a burden on public services and has created a large pool of surplus labor, thereby contributing to the fact that half of all Iranians today live below the poverty line. Considering that Iranians have a healthy dose of skepticism about their rulers, unlike in Nigeria, the above problems can further erode the legitimacy of the ruling elite. The revolution of rising expectations among Iran's increasingly urban, literate, and young population deserves our attention for some time to come.

Challenges from Globalization

After 1979, Iran took on many features of an “ideological state” in the international order. Its government ostensibly was motivated more by an ideological vision than by economic or geopolitical interests. Other factors, such as Iranian’s sense of national pride and historic sense of grievance and their desire to remain the dominant power in the Persian Gulf, led them to embrace a basically revisionist view of world order that wished to transform rather than preserve international power dynamics. Still, the new state faced an inherent tension in its foreign policy. On the one hand, its ideology suggested a pan-Islamic universalism, in which Iran was but one arena for a broader revolutionary project: political Islam’s first conquest. On the other hand, the clerical regime had to work within the nation-state system, which imposed demands at odds with a true ideological universalism. During the 1980s, Iran extended aid to Shi’ite movements in Lebanon and elsewhere, through its perhaps over-ambitiously named Office of Global Revolution. The war with Iraq, while partly over territorial and geopolitical matters, also had an ideological coloring: the Islamic Republic versus the secular authoritarianism of Saddam Hussein’s Ba’ath Party. Over the long term, however, the logic of national interest has tended to win out over ideological fervor. After Khomeini’s death in 1989, the government took a pragmatic turn and normalized most of its diplomatic relations. This trend exemplifies the “iron law” of eventual moderation in any revolutionary state, as the pressures of the nation-state system, geopolitics, and economics come to bear. A recent increase in foreign pressure—such as Iran’s inclusion in the “Axis of Evil”—also highlights the ever more limited leeway that ideological states have in the global order.

Appendixes:

Glossary

Assembly of Religious Experts (*Majles-e Khebragan*). A male-dominated (no female allowed to sit) assembly that drafted the 1979 revolution and is charged with evaluating the performance of the supreme leader.

ayatollah. “Sign of God,” a title conferred upon leading Shi'ite *mojtaheds*.

Baha'is. Members of a religious minority originating in nineteenth-century Iran who are considered as heretics or defectors from Islam by mainstream Shi'ites.

Bonyads. Quasi-private foundations and religious endowments that are charged with aiding the poor by managing many state-owned enterprises.

bazaaris. Traditional merchants.

Cultural Revolution. A campaign that started in 1980 to purge revolutionary forces from university campuses. Led to the closure of Iranian universities for a number of years.

ejtehad. Exercise of independent reasoning in the (re)interpretation of Islamic law.

Expediency Council. A committee with the mandate to resolve differences between the parliament and the Guardian Council.

faqih (*pl. foqaha*). Jurist, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence.

fatva. Binding religious edict issued by a qualified *mojtahed*.

Guardian Council. A clerically dominated council that determines who can run in elections and decides whether laws passed by the parliament are compatible with Islam.

hojjatoleslam. “Proof of Islam,” clerical rank immediately below *ayatollah*.

imam. Spiritual leader; for Ja'fari Shi'ites one of the 12 infallible heirs to the Prophet descended from Ali.

jihad. Holy war.

Majles. The Iranian parliament, which has some 290 seats.

mojtahed. One who exercises *ejtehad*.

mullah. A low-ranking cleric trained in traditional law.

Quran. The holy book of Islam.

religious endowments. Large, state-affiliated conglomerates run by clerics and their lay allies, mainly set up for philanthropic purposes, which have a firm grip on Iran's economy through their monopolistic and rent-seeking transactions.

rentier state. A state that derives a substantial portion of its revenue on a regular basis from payments by foreign concerns in the form of rent.

Sayyid. A descendant of the Prophet.

shah. King, the undisputed leader.

Shari'ah. The canonical law of Islam.

Shi'a. The partisans of Ali.

supreme leader. The country's most powerful political figure, who has the authority to overrule or dismiss the president, appoints members of the Guardian Council, and has personal representatives in the army, universities, etc.

Supreme National Security Council. Organization responsible for Iran's intelligence, military, security, and strategic policies.

ulema. The collective term for religious leaders.

umma. The Islamic community.

velayat-e faqih. The doctrine of guardianship of the jurisconsult, popularized by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Suggested Thematic Readings

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www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/5314.htm

Statistical Center of Iran

www.sci.or.ir/index.htm

The Economist Country Briefing on Iran

www.economist.com/countries/Iran/index.cfm

Maps

www.lib.utexas.edu/Libs/PCL/Map_collection/middle_east.html

News

News and Views About Iran

www.Iranian.com

News Site on Iran

www.iranmania.com

Radio Farda

www.radiofarda.com

Iran Daily

www.iran-daily.com

Economist Country Briefing on Iran

www.economist.com/countries/Iran/index.cfm

IranMania

www.iranmania.com

Iranian Media Directory

www.gooya.com

Government

Governments on the WWW: Iran
www.gksoft.com/govt/en/ir.html

Iranian Mission to the United Nations
www.un.int/iran/

Iranian Parliament
<http://mellat.Majles.ir/>

Presidency of the Islamic Republic
www.president.ir

Structure of the Iranian Government and Who's Who
www.netiran.com

Others

Encyclopædia Iranica
www.iranica.com

Iranian Women's Home Page
www.zan.org

Films

- *Bashu: The Little Stranger* (115 minutes): A film about racial tolerance and family
- *Divorce Iranian Style* (80 minutes): A documentary about divorce in Iranian courts
- *Color of Paradise* (90 minutes): A film about blindness in Iran
- *Leila* (102 minutes): A film about polygamy

Videos

- *Iran: A Revolution Betrayed* (60 minutes): A documentary about the 1979 revolution
- *Mystic Iran: The Unseen World* (52 minutes): A documentary about religious life in Iran
- *Zinat, One Special Day* (54 minutes): An Iranian women running for elected office
<http://frif.com/new2002/zin.html>
- *Iran, Veiled Appearances* (58 minutes): Depicts cleave between secular and religious forces
<http://frif.com/new2003/iranv.html>