

## GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN IRAN

“This is the voice of Iran, the voice of the true Iran,  
the voice of the Islamic Revolution.”

Iran National Radio  
February 11, 1979

This dramatic announcement came on Iran’s national radio the first evening after the coup d’etat that deposed Muhammad Reza Shah, who had followed his father in ruling Iran with an iron fist for more than half a century. The announcement struck fear into the hearts of many westerners who today see the 1979 Revolution in Iran as the beginning of a great conflict between the West and Islamic civilizations. According to this line of reasoning, the events of 1979 started a great fundamentalist movement that spread throughout the Islamic world and eventually culminated in the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Towers and the Pentagon in the United States. For some political scientists, Samuel Huntington foresaw this situation in his 1993 article in Foreign Affairs magazine called, “The Clash of Civilizations.”

This view of Iran’s role in modern world politics, however, ignores the complexities of Iran’s political culture. Iran’s identity is steeped in thousands of years of history that not only includes a deep attachment to Islam, but also a popular revolution in the early 20th century that resulted in a western-style constitution that was intact until 1979. These influences are still at odds today, and they shape the major challenges that face the political system. Is democracy incompatible with Islam, or is true Islam actually based on popular support? The first impulse leads Iran toward a theocracy, or a government ruled strictly by religion, and the second leads the country toward secularization, or the belief that religion and government should be separated. These political questions are complicated by Iraq’s developing economy that squarely places it in the global market, but is heavily reliant on one product. Iran is the second largest oil producer in the Middle East and the fourth largest in the world. Should these resources be controlled by clerics, or do economic matters require an expertise outside the realm of religious leaders?

In many ways, Iran is a unique addition to the AP Comparative Government and Politics course because it is the only one of the six countries that currently is governed as a theocracy. However, Iran shares a characteristic with Mexico and Nigeria in its possession of that all-important modern resource - oil. Like Mexico, its economy may be labeled “developing” rather than “less developed,” as is the case with Nigeria. China also may be seen as having a rapidly “developing” economy. Similar to all the other five countries, Iran’s political system is multi-faceted, and cannot be boiled down simply to a monolithic representation of the Islamic world.

## SOVEREIGNTY, AUTHORITY, AND POWER

An early Iranian concept of sovereignty can be traced to the days of the ancient Achaemenian Empire (called Persia by the Greeks) that existed as the world’s largest empire from its founding by Cyrus in the 6th century B.C.E. till its defeat some 200 years later. Iran’s greatest rival was ancient Greece, and the two civilizations couldn’t have been more different. Greece was divided into quarreling city-states and its economy and transportation was heavily reliant on the sea. In contrast, Iran emerged from the dry lands north of the Persian Gulf and spread its power through highly centralized military leadership by land as far as the Aegean Sea, where its interests conflicted with those of the Greeks. The clash between two great civilizations may be seen as the first act of a drama that has played out over the centuries: West vs. East. Ironically, both civilizations were conquered by a Macedonian, Alexander the Great, but Alexander’s affinity for the Greeks led him to spread their culture to lands that he conquered. Less well known is the fact that Alexander much admired the Persian political structure, and left it largely in place as he conquered their lands.

The Iranian sovereigns were always hereditary military leaders who very much enjoyed the trappings of royalty. One king, Darius, built a magnificent capital at Persepolis, and joined his new city to many parts of the ancient world by an intricate system of roads that carried his armies all over and allowed people from many lands to pay tribute to him. His title was “The Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of countries,” and he referred to everyone, even the Persian nobility, as “my slaves.” The king’s authority was supported by a strong military as well as a state-sponsored religion, Zoroastrianism.

Although none of the rulers of empires that followed were able to centralize power so successfully as the Achemenians did, the stage was set for the authoritarian state. Zoroastrianism did not survive as a major religion, but it continued to be sponsored by rulers for centuries, including those of the Sassanid Dynasty (226-651 C.E.)

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SHI’ISM

From the 7th to 16th centuries C.E., the geographical region of Iran had little political unity, and experienced numerous invasions, including that of the Arabs, who brought Islam to the area. What emerged was a new glue that held the Persians together - not political, but religious in nature. As a result, even when their caliphate (an Islamic empire put in place by the Arabs) was defeated by the mighty Mongols in the 13th century, the religion survived the chaos as the invaders converted to the religion of the conquered. Despite the political leadership changing hands many times over the years, the religion of Islam continued to be a source of identity for the Iranians.

The brand of Islam that distinguishes Iran from its neighbors today - Shi’ism - was established as the state religion in the 16th century by Ismail, the founder of the Safavid Empire. Ismail and his qizilbash (“redheads,” because of their colorful turbans) were supporters of this sect of Islam that had quarreled bitterly with Sunni Muslims for centuries. The division originated after the religion’s founder, Muhammad, died without a designated heir, a significant problem since his armies had conquered many lands. The Sunnis favored choosing the caliph (leader) from the accepted leadership (the Sunni), but the Shi’ites argued that the mantle should be hereditary, and should pass to Muhammad’s son-in-law, Ali. When Ali was killed in the dispute, the Shi’ite opinion became a minority one, but they kept their separate identity, and carried the belief that the true heirs of Islam were the descendants of Ali. These heirs, called imams, continued until the 9th century, when the 12th descendant disappeared as a child, only to become known as the “Hidden Imam.”

When Ismail established Iran as a Shi’ite state in the 16th century, he distinguished it as different from all Sunni states around him, a characteristic that still exists today. He gave political legitimacy to the belief that the “Hidden Imam” would eventually return, but until he did, the rulers of Iran stood in his place as the true heirs of Islam.

## LEGITIMACY IN THE MODERN STATE

To a remarkable extent, these historical influences still shape the modern state. Authoritarian leaders played an important role in the 20th century as the Pahlavi shahs (“King of Kings,” or “shah in shah”) ruled from 1925 to 1979. Their attempts to secularize the state, though, were undone by a charismatic leader - the Ayatollah Khomeini - who personified the union of political and religious interests from ancient days. His appeal may be likened to that of Ismail - the protector of the “true faith” that unites the Shi’ite religion with the power of the state. The Ayatollah was hailed as the “Leader of the Revolution, Founder of the Islamic Republic, Guide of the Oppressed Masses, Commander of the Armed Forces, and Imam of the Muslim World” - titles that blend the historical influences into the persona of one very powerful religious/political leader.

The Ayatollah Khomeini led the Revolution of 1979, an event that transformed the legitimacy of the state, anchoring it once again in principles of Shi’ism. The most important document that legitimizes the state today is the Constitution of 1979, along with its amendments of 1989, written during the last months of the Ayatollah Khomeini’s life. The document and its 40 amendments is a highly complex mixture of theocracy and democracy. Its preamble reflects the importance of religion for the legitimacy of the state, affirming faith in God, Divine Justice, the Qur’an, the Prophet Muhammad, the Twelve Imams, and the eventual return of Hidden Imam. Khomeini’s doctrine of jurist’s guardianship (which we’ll define later) is included along with the other “divine principles.”

## POLITICAL CULTURE

Although the Safavid Empire was followed by centuries of weak political organization in Iran, Shi'ism continued as an important unifying thread to the political culture. However, the dynasty that followed - the Qajars - did not claim the imam's mantle, so Shi'i clerical leaders came to be the main interpreters of Islam, and a separation between religion and politics developed. Although the Qajars were never very strong, they did not succumb to European imperialism, and they ruled until the 20th century. These complex historical influences - with roots back to ancient times - have formed a multi-faceted political culture characterized by:

- Authoritarianism, but not totalitarianism - Beginning with the Safavid Empire, the central political leaders did not control all areas of individuals' lives. While the leaders claimed to be all-powerful, in reality they were not, and people became accustomed to paying attention to local officials and/or to leading their own lives within civil society.
- Union of political and religious authority - From the days of the ancient Persians, political and religious leaders were often one and the same.
- Shi'ism and shari'a as central components - Today 90% of all Iranians identify themselves as Shi'ite, a fact that links citizens to the government, which is officially a theocracy. Islamic law, the shari'a, is an important source of legitimacy that the modern government particularly emphasizes.
- Escape from European colonization - Unlike most countries of Asia, Africa, and South America, Iran was never officially colonized by Europeans during the imperialistic era of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the area did feel European influence, imperialism did not have the same direct impact on Iran that it had on Mexico and Nigeria.
- Geographic limitations - A great deal of Iran's land space is unusable for agriculture, with a vast central desert plain, and mountains to the north and northeast. Such geographic restrictions caused the early Persians to seek better lands to the west by expansion and conquest. In modern day, the population of Iran is unevenly distributed, with most living in cities and in the northwest, where the most arable land is located.
- The influence of ancient Persia - Differences between Iran and neighboring countries is not only based on Shi'ite vs. Sunni Islam. Even after the Arabs invaded Iran, the people continued to speak Persian rather than Arabic, and many of their other cultural habits remained as well, including distinctive architecture, literary works, poetry, and decorative arts (such as "Persian rugs"). This identity shapes Iranian nationalism today.

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CHANGE

Not surprisingly, with Iran's long, complex history, political and economic change has taken many forms, including both evolution and revolution. Politically, Iran established itself as the first large empire in world history - a military powerhouse with strong leaders and centralized governing structures. Despite the continuity of religious and political union, a gradual separation of religion from politics resulted in declining centralization of political power over time before the 20th century. The 20th century saw two revolutions: one in 1905-1909 that set democratic impulses in place, and one in 1979 that reunified religion with politics into the modern theocracy.

Economically, Iran has both suffered and benefited from natural resources. A lack of arable land meant that the agricultural basis of the empires was never secure, and geographical location also caused Iran to emphasize trade by land. When world commerce turned to sea-based powers beginning in the 16th century, Iran was marginalized. Although Iran maintained its independence during the age of European imperialism, it did not prosper until its greatest modern natural resource was discovered. However, oil has brought its own set of economic problems to Iran - that of managing this necessary commodity for industrialization in such a way that it benefits not only the state but its people as well.

We will follow political and economic change through four eras: The Safavids (1501-1722); The Qajars (1794-1925); the Pahlavis (1925-1979); and the Islamic Revolution and Republic (1979-the Present).

#### THE SAFAVIDS (1501-1722)

As discussed in the previous section, modern Iran traces its Shi'ite identity to the Safavid Empire that began in the 16th century. By the mid-17th century, the Safavids had succeeded in converting nearly 90% of their subjects to Shi'ism. Sunnism has survived to modern day among ethnic groups along the borders: Kurds in the northwest, Turkmen in the northeast, Baluchis in the southeast, and Arabs in the southwest. Despite their religious fervor, the Safavids tolerated the Sunnis, as well as smaller numbers of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Christians. They shared with other Muslim rulers a special regard for People of the Book - monotheistic people who subjected their lives to holy books similar to the Qur'an. They respected all these religions because they had their own books: Jews, the Torah; Christians, the Bible; and Zoroastrians, the Avesta.

The Safavids ruled from Isfahan, a Persian-speaking city, and most of their bureaucrats were Persian scribes. However, the Safavids had serious economic constraints. Trade routes from Iran to the ancient Silk Route had broken up, and world trade had shifted to the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Isfahan was far inland with little access to sea-based trade, and agricultural production was hampered by lack of arable land. These economic problems affected the Safavids' ability to rule, since they did not have money for a large bureaucracy or a standing army. As a result, they had to rely largely on local rulers to keep order and collect taxes. In theory, the Safavids claimed absolute power, but in reality they lacked a central state and had to seek the cooperation of semi-independent local leaders. Geographic features fragmented the empire, particularly the mountains, and many clerics lived safely outside the reach of the government. As a result of both political and economic factors, the monarchy became separated from society and had lost a great deal of their power by 1722.

#### THE QAJARS (1794-1925)

The Safavid Empire ended when Afghan tribesmen invaded Isfahan in 1722. Iran was in disarray for more than a half century, until the land was finally reconquered by another Turkish group, the Qajars. The Qajars moved the capital to Tehran, and they retained Shi'ism as the official state religion. However, the Qajar rule marked an important political change. Whereas the Safavids claimed to be the descendants of the Twelve Imams, the Qajars obviously could not tie their legitimacy to such a link. As a result, the Shi'i clerical leaders could claim to be the main interpreters of Islam, and the separation between government and religion widened significantly.

Economically and politically Iran's power eclipsed during the 19th century. The Qajars ruled during the era of European imperialism, and they suffered land losses to the north and northwest to the growing power of Russia. They sold oil-drilling rights in the southwest to Britain, and they borrowed heavily from European banks to meet their considerable court expenses. By the end of the 19th century, the shah had led the country into serious debt, and many Iranians were upset by his lavish lifestyle.

These problems encouraged the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909. The revolution began with business owners and bankers demonstrating against the Qajar's move to hand over their customs collections to Europeans. Although the Qajars were attempting to settle their debts, the middle class was fed up, particularly because they suspected that the shah would sacrifice paying domestic debts in order to repay European loans. In 1906 the merchants and local industrialists, affected by British liberalism, demanded a written constitution from the shah. The British, who had many business interests in Iran, encouraged the shah to concede, particularly since Iran did not have an army to effectively put down an insurrection.

The Constitution of 1906 was modeled after western ones, and included such democratic features as:

- Elections
- Separation of powers
- Laws made by an elected legislature
- Popular sovereignty

- A Bill of Rights guaranteeing citizens equality before the law, protections for those accused of crimes, and freedom of expression

The revolution sparked a debate about separation of religion from the government – the trend that the Qajars themselves had initiated. The constitution retained the monarchy, but it created a strong legislature to balance executive power. The new assembly was called the Majles, and seats were guaranteed to the “People of the Book”: Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians. The Majles not only had the authority to make and pass laws, but it also controlled cabinet ministers, who reported to the legislature, not the shah.

The Constitution of 1906 did not turn away from Shi’ism completely. Shi’ism was declared the official state religion, and only Shi’is could hold cabinet positions. The constitution also created a Guardian Council of clerics that had the power to veto any legislation passed by the Majles.

These political reforms could do nothing, however, for Iran’s economic woes. World events of the early 20th century led to Iran’s division into three parts, with one piece for themselves, but another piece occupied by Russia, and another by Britain during World War I. By 1921 Iran was in political and economic disarray, with quarreling factions polarizing the Majles into an ineffective ruling body. The country was ready for a strong leader to deliver them from complete chaos.

#### THE PAHLAVIS (1925-1979)

The Cossack Brigade had been one of the few areas of strength in the latter days of the Qajars, since it was the only force that resembled a real army. The brigade’s commander, Colonel Reza Khan, carried out a successful coup d’état against the weakened political state in 1921, and declared himself shah-in-shah in 1925, establishing his own Pahlavi dynasty, using a name of an ancient language from Iran’s glorious past.

Under Reza Shah, the Majles lost its power, and authoritarian rule was reestablished in Iran. He ruled with absolute authority until he turned over power to his son, Muhammad Reza Shah in 1941. Despite the fact that the Pahlavis reestablished order in Iran, the democratic experimentation resulting from the Constitution of 1906 was not forgotten, and the second shah had to confront some democratic opposition. One group that challenged the shah was the communist Tudeh (Masses) Party that gained most of its support from working class trade unions. A second group was the National Front, led by Muhammad Mosaddeq, whose life influenced many later political leaders in Iran. The National Front drew its support from middle class people who emphasized Iranian nationalism. Mosaddeq advocated nationalizing the British-owned company that monopolized Iran’s oil business, and he also wanted to take the armed forces out from under the shah’s control. Mosaddeq was elected prime minister in 1951, and his power grew so that the shah was forced to flee the country in 1953. Mosaddeq’s career was cut short when the British struck back by sponsoring an overthrow of Mosaddeq, and restoring the shah to full power again. The U.S., ever mindful of keeping Soviet power contained in these Cold War days, helped the British to reinstall the shah. As a result, many Iranians came to see Britain and the U.S. as supporters of autocracy, and the shah as a weak pawn of foreign powers.

Economically, Iran was transformed into a rentier state under the Pahlavis because of the increasing amount of income coming in from oil. A rentier economy is heavily supported by state expenditure, while the state receives rent from other countries. Iran received an increasing amount of income by exporting its oil and leasing out oil fields to foreign countries. The income became so great by the 1970s that the government no longer had to rely on internal taxes for its support, but paid most of its expenses through oil income. In short, the government didn’t need the people anymore. Iran was quickly transformed into a one-product economy, and was heavily dependent on oil to keep the government afloat. Even though the shah did adopt import substitution industrialization by encouraging domestic industries to provide products that the population needed, by 1979, oil and its associated industries made up a large percentage of Iran’s GNP, and provided 97% of the country’s foreign exchange.

#### The White Revolution

During their rule, the two Pahlavi shahs built a highly centralized state, the first since the ancient days of the Persian Empire. The state controlled banks, the national radio-television network, and most important, the National Iranian Oil Company. The armed forces grew into the fifth largest army in the world by 1979, and came to include

a large navy and air force as well. The central bureaucracy gained control of local governments, and the Majles became a rubber-stamp legislature that let the shah rule as he pleased. Whereas Iran remained a religious state, its courts became fully secularized, with a European-style judicial system and law codes in place. Most controversial of all was the shah's White Revolution (so named because it was meant to counter communist, or "red" influences) that focused on land reform, with the government buying land from large absentee owners and selling it to small farmers at affordable prices. The purpose was to encourage farmers to become modern entrepreneurs with irrigation canals, dams, and tractors. The White Revolution secularized Iran further by extending voting rights to women, restricting polygamy, and allowing women to work outside the home.

#### Patronage and the Resurgence Party

Both Pahlavi shahs bolstered their own personal wealth first by seizing other people's property, and eventually through establishing the tax-exempt Pahlavi Foundation, a patronage system that controlled large companies that fed the pocketbooks of the shah and his supporters. In 1975 Muhammad Reza Shah announced the formation of the Resurgence Party, and declared Iran to be a one-party state with himself as its head. He replaced the Islamic calendar with a new one, and bestowed two new titles to himself: "Guide to the New Great Civilization," and "Light of the Aryans." The shah also dared to create a Religious Corps, whose duty it was to teach Iranian peasants "true Islam."

#### THE ISLAMIC REVOLUTION AND THE REPUBLIC (1979-Present)

Great revolutions have shaken the world in many places since the late 18th century, and the causes and consequences of Iran's 1979 revolution are in some ways very similar to those in Russia, China, and Mexico in the 20th century. However, Iran's revolution is unique in that it was almost completely religious in nature. The dominant ideology was religion, whereas revolutions in Russia and China revolved around communism. Although the Catholic Church was very much involved in the revolutionary era (early 20th century) in Mexico, the Church did not direct the military, and PRI quickly sidelined the Church once the party gained control of the country. In Iran, the dominant ideology was Shi'ism, and the most important revolutionary leader was a cleric, who in turned ruled Iran for ten years following the revolution. Perhaps most significantly, Iran's revolution resulted in the establishment of a theocracy, while other revolutions generally were against religious control of the government.

The shah's behavior disturbed Iranians largely because from many people's points of view, he overstepped the bounds of the political culture in three ways:

- He was perceived as being totalitarian, not just authoritarian, as shahs before the Pahlavis had been. Not unlike Porfirio Diaz in Mexico, the shah set about to create a patrimonial state, with patron-clientelism in place, but without any real input from interest groups. As a result, true corporatism did not develop.
- He broke the balance between the secular and the religious state by secularizing Iran too much and too fast, certainly from the point of view of the clergy.
- His ties to the west (particularly the United States) offended Iranian nationalists as well as the clergy.

In many ways, the shah created a divide in the political culture, with one side supporting modernization in the sense of establishing closer ties to the West, and the other side staunchly defending traditional ways, in particular Shi'ism. An elite of clerics rose to oppose the shah, lead a revolution, and eventually take over the government.

One more ingredient for the success of the revolution was the charisma of its leader, the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. He not only defended Islamic fundamentalism, which emphasized literal interpretation of Islamic texts, social conservatism, and political traditionalism, but he also articulated resentments against the elite and the United States. His depiction of the United States as the "Great Satan" puzzled many Americans, but resonated with many frustrated people in Iran. The Ayatollah gave new meaning to an old Shi'i term *velayat-e faqih* (jurist's guardianship). The principle originally gave the senior clergy (including himself) broad authority over the unfortunate people (widows, orphans, mentally unstable) in the society, but Khomeini claimed that the true meaning of jurist's guardianship gives the clergy authority over the entire Shi'ia community.

#### The Revolution Begins

Revolutions generally need a spark to begin the crisis. Although discontent had been building for a long time, two factors brought the situation to explode in revolution:

- Oil prices decreased by about 10% in the late 1970s at the same time that consumer prices increased about 20% in Iran. According to the theory of the revolution of rising expectations, revolutions are most likely to occur when people are doing better than they once were, but some type of setback happens. Iran fits this classic model in the early days of 1979.
- The United States put pressure on the shah to loosen his restraints on the opposition. President Jimmy Carter was a big promoter of human rights around the globe, and the shah's tight control on Iranian civil society was worrisome to his administration. However, in the situation, when the shah did let his opponents speak, it encouraged others to voice their frustrations.

Once the reins loosened, many groups supported the revolution – political parties, labor organizations, professional associations, bazaar (merchant) guilds, college students, and oil workers. In late 1978, hundreds of unarmed demonstrators were killed in a central square in Tehran, and oil workers had gone on strike, paralyzing the oil industry. Anti-regime rallies were attracting as many as 2 million protestors. It is important to note that the rallies were organized and led by the clerics, but were broadly supported by people from many sectors of society. Although Khomeini was in exile in Paris, audiotapes of his speeches were passed out freely at the rallies, where people called for the abolition of the monarchy. The shah fled the country at the beginning of February 1979, and his government officially ended on February 11 with the famous announcement from the national television-radio station quoted at the beginning of this chapter.

### The Islamic Republic

In late April 1979, a national referendum was held, and the Iranian people officially voted out the monarchy and established the Islamic Republic in its place. A constitution was drawn up late in the year by the Assembly of Religious Experts, a 73-man assembly of clerics elected directly by the people. The constitution gave broad authority to Khomeini and the clergy, although Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan strongly objected. Bazargan advocated a presidential republic that would be based in Islam, but would be democratic in structure. However, Khomeini's constitution was presented to the people in the midst of the U.S. hostage crisis, a time of high hostility toward Americans. The result was not surprising: 99% of the electorate endorsed it, even though only 75% of the eligible voters actually voted.

Until the Ayatollah Khomeini's death in 1989, the clerics consolidated and built their power. Their success was cemented by several important factors that brought them popular support:

- World petroleum prices rebounded, so Iran's economy improved accordingly. The government was able to afford social programs for the people, such as modern improvements for housing and medical clinics.
- Iraq (under Saddam Hussein) invaded Iran in 1980, beginning a war between the two countries that continued throughout the decade. The people rallied around the government in response to this threat.
- The charisma of Khomeini remained strong, and the power of his presence inspired faith in the government.

Khomeini's death in 1989 marked the beginning of a new era for the Republic. His successor, Ali Khamenei, does not have the same magnetism of personality, nor does he have the academic credentials that Khomeini had. The Iran-Iraq War ended in 1988, and world oil prices fell again during the 1990s. Most importantly, many in the population began to criticize the authoritarian rule of the clerics, and to advocate a more democratic government.

## GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS IN IRAN

Iranian citizens have had little direct experience with democracy, but they generally do understand the importance

of civil society. Until the Pahlavi shahs of the 20th century, the authoritarian rulers had very little power to reach into citizens' everyday lives. Local officials were a presence, to be sure, and religious law, shari'a, set strict rules for behavior. The democratic experiment after the Constitution of 1906 did create an elected legislature, the Majles, but the new government was so unable to solve the country's problems that chaos followed, inviting authoritarian rule to return with the Pahlavis.

## CLEAVAGES

Major divisions in Iran include:

- Religion - 89% of all Iranians are Shi'a Muslims, but 10% are Sunni, and 1% are a combination of Jews, Christians, Zoroastrian, and Baha'i. Although the constitution recognizes religious minorities and guarantees their basic rights, many religious minorities have left the country since the founding of the Republic in 1979. The Baha'i faith, which many Shi'ites believe to be an unholy offshoot of Islam, has been a particular object of religious persecution. Their leaders have been executed, imprisoned, and tortured, their schools closed, and their community property taken by the state. Many Baha'is have immigrated to Canada, as have a large number of Jews and Armenian Christians. The constitution does not mention Sunnis, and so their rights are often unclear.
- Ethnicity - Ethnicity is closely tied to religion, but other cultural differences distinguish minorities in Iran. 51% may be considered Persian, speaking Persian (Farsi) as their first language; 24% are Azeri; 8% are Gilaki and Mazandarani; 7% are Kurds; 3% are Arabi; and the remaining percentages are a mixture of other groups. Many Azeris live in the northwest close to the former Soviet republic of Azerbaijan, creating a worry for the Iranian government that the Azeris will want to form a larger state by taking territory away from Iran. The Azeris do not speak Persian, but they are strongly Shi'ite, and the leader than followed Khomeini in 1989 - Ali Khomeini - is Azeri. Kurds and Arabs tend to be Sunni Muslim, so the religious cleavage is reinforced by ethnicity.
- Social class - The peasantry and lower middle class are sources of support for the regime, partly because they have benefited from the government's social programs that have provided them with electricity and paved roads. However, middle and upper-middle class people are largely secularized, and so they tend to be highly critical of the clerics and their control of the society. Many middle class people have not fared well economically during the years since the Republic was founded. As a result, their cultural and political views of secularism are reinforced by their economic problems, creating discontent and opposition to the regime.
- Reformers v. conservatives - A fundamental cleavage in the political culture since the founding of the Republic has to do with a debate about the merits of a theocracy v. a democracy. The conservatives want to keep the regime as it is, under the control of clerics and shari'a law, and the reformers would like to see more secularization and democracy. Most reformers do not want to do away with the basic principles of an Islamic state, but they display a wide array of opinions about how much and where secularization and democracy should be infused into the system.

## CIVIL SOCIETY

A major source of unhappiness with the rule of the Pahlavi shahs was the government's incursion into private lives of citizens - the civil society. However, civil society has not been restored under the current regime, and this fact tends to create discontent, especially among middle class people. The Shi'ite revolutionary elites launched a campaign that may be compared to Mao's Cultural Revolution in that they sought to enforce values of the Islamic state on the general population. University professors with reputations for western preferences were fired and replaced with people that clearly supported the regime. Other professionals quietly left the country to seek refuge in western nations. However, the desire to preserve civil society did not disappear - it was too large an influence on the political culture before the takeover by Reza Shah in the early 1920s.

One indication that civil society is alive and well in Iran may be found among Iran's growing number of young people. Demographically, the young have grown in proportion to old at very dramatic rates, partly because of the Republic's encouragement of large families during the first years after it was founded. Many are the sons and daughters of disillusioned middle class professionals, and they appear to be very attracted to western popular



culture - music, dress, cars, and computers. The regime has shown some signs of tolerating this behavior, especially under the presidency of Sayyid Muhammad Khatami from 1997 to 2005. With the 2005 election of the more conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, it is not clear whether or not the regime will reshape its relationship to civil society in the near future.

## POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Despite the fact that guarantees for civil liberties and rights were written into the 1979 constitution, the Islamic Republic from the beginning closed down newspapers, labor unions, private organizations, and political parties. Due process principles were ignored as many were imprisoned without trials. Political reformers were executed, and others fled the country. The regime also banned demonstrations and public meetings.

## PROTESTS AND DEMONSTRATIONS

The Republic's actions against public demonstrations did not curtail them, particularly on college campuses. In 1999, protests erupted in universities all across the country when the government shut down a reformist newspaper. In late 2002, similar demonstrations broke out among students when the courts ruled a death sentence for a reformist academic. In Iran in the summer of 2003, student demonstrations escalated into mass protests over the privatization of the university system. The protestors called for the overthrow and even death of Iran's religious and political leaders. Thousands were arrested over 4 days of protest in June. Because more than half of all Iranians alive today have been born since the Revolution of 1979, these youthful protesters may be a force for change in the future. Factory workers also tend to participate in rallies against the government. Their concerns are high unemployment rates, low wages, and unsatisfactory labor laws.

## WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL SYSTEM

One of the most frequently heard criticisms of Iran by westerners is the regime's treatment of women. The veil has become a symbol of oppression, but probably more for westerners than for Iranian women themselves. The wearing of veils predates the birth of Islam as a religion in the 7th century, and women of many other religions in Southwest Asia have also worn veils. However, traditionally women in Islamic cultures have stayed home, and often been offered little education or opportunity to work outside the home. 20th century Iran is something of an exception because women have had better access to education. Educated women harbor particular resentments toward the regime. Their educations have led them to expect better job opportunities and more political rights than they have been granted. Judges often interpret the shari'a narrowly, so that women are often considered to be wards of their male relatives. However, today more than half of all college students are women, and they are also well represented as doctors and government employees.

The Islamic Republic calls its policy toward women "equality-with-difference," meaning that divorce and custody laws now follow Islamic standards that favor males. Women must wear scarves and long coats in public, and they cannot leave the country without the consent of male relatives. Occasional stonings of women for adultery have also taken place, though the government recently issued a ban on them. However, women are allowed educations and entrance to at least some occupations. Women now constitute about 27% of the total labor force.

## WOMEN IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

Country	Lower House % Women	Upper House % Women
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China	20.2	-----*
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Iran	4.1	-----*
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Mexico	24.2	21.9
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Nigeria	6.4	3.7
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Russia	9.8	3.4
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United Kingdom	18.1	17.8
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\*No directly comparable upper house

Source: Women in National Parliaments, [www.ipu.org](http://www.ipu.org)

Iranian women are not well represented in the Majles, as the chart above shows. Mexico's large representation is partly due to the recent parity laws that require political parties to run women candidates for office. Nigeria's low representation is probably reflective of traditional society there, although President Obasanjo made it a part of his reelection campaign in 2003 to include more women in his cabinet and top bureaucratic positions.

## POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS IN IRAN

The political system of Iran is unlike any other in the world today in that it blends a theocracy with a democracy. The theocracy is represented in the national government by a position called the Supreme Leader, and governmental bodies called the Guardian Council and the Expediency Council. The president, The Assembly of Religious Experts, and the national assembly (the Majles) are democratically elected. Linkage institutions are in various stages of development, and tend to be fluid in nature.

### LINKAGE INSTITUTIONS

The constitution guarantees citizens the right to organize and to express themselves, so some institutions that link people to the government have developed. Some organizations, such as interest groups and the press, had developed long before 1979 and continue till today. Others, like political parties, had to begin all over again.

### POLITICAL PARTIES

The constitution provides for political parties, but the government did not allow them until Muhammad Khatami's election as president in 1997. Since then, multiple parties have formed, with most of them organized around personalities, not issues.

A number of new parties appeared for the Majles elections of 2004 and the presidential elections of 2005, and only a few carried over from previous elections, so current parties are highly unstable and very likely to change in the near future. However, some of the current parties are:

- The Iranian Militant Clerics Society is a left wing pro-reform party led by Muhammad Khatami, president of the Republic from 1997 to 2005. Several other prominent politicians belong to this party, including a former Majles speaker, and a vice-president. Their candidate for president in 2005, Mehdi Karroubi, came in third in the first round and so did not advance to the second round.
- The Islamic Iran Participation Front is a reformist party led by Muhammad Khatami's brother, Muhammad Reza Khatami. The party was founded in 1998 with the motto, "Iran for all Iranians." This party did well in the 2000 Majles election, but the Guardian Council barred many of its candidates from running in 2004, so their representation slipped considerably.
- The Executives of Construction Party was founded by several members of former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's cabinet. The party is considered one of the most important supporters of Rafsanjani and his politics. Rafsanjani was a second round contender in the presidential election, but the party's future is unsure since Rafsanjani lost the election runoff to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad by a big margin.
- The Islamic Society of Engineers is a member of the conservative alliance, and its most famous member is the current president of the Republic, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who won the presidential election of June 2005. However, the society did not support him as their candidate; they supported Ali Larijani instead, who lost in the first round of the election.

A number of reformist parties - including the Iranian Militant Clerics Society, and the Islamic Iran Participation Front formed an alliance called the Khordad Front in the presidential election of 2000, winning reelection for reformer Muhammad Khatami. The Second Khordad Front did not survive the Guardian Council's banning of

many reformist candidates for the Majles election of 2004, when 70% of the seats went to conservative candidates. In 2005 the conservative presidential candidate Mahmoud Ahmadinejad won, with the reformers splitting their votes among several candidates.

Many political parties of former dissidents are now in exile but still active. The Liberation Movement, a moderate Islamic party, was established by Mehdi Bazargan (Khomeini's first prime minister) in 1961, but was banned in 2002 as a subversive organization. The National Front, headed by the shah's dissident Prime Minister Mossadeq in the 1950 was banned in the late 1980s. Other parties in exile are the Mojahedin, a guerilla organization that fought the shah's regime; the Fedayin, a Marxist guerilla group that modeled itself after Latin American hero Che Guevara; and Tudeh, a communist party.

## ELECTIONS

On the national level, citizens over the age of fifteen may vote for members of the Assembly of Religious Experts, representatives to the Majles, and the president of the Republic. The Republic is a highly centralized regime, although citizens may also vote for officials on the local level. Elections to the Majles and for the president are according to plurality, or winner-take-all, and no proportional representation is used. However, elections consist of two rounds, so that one of the two contenders left in the second round will get a majority of the votes.

### The Majles Election of 2004

The first round of the last elections to the Majles were held on February 20, 2004, but they took place after the Council of Guardians banned thousands of candidates from running, mainly from the reformist parties. Particularly hard hit was the Islamic Iran Participation Front. Out of a possible 285 seats (5 seats are reserved for religious minorities), reformist parties could only introduce 191 candidates. Some reformists refused to vote, and the official turnout was only about 51%. Not surprisingly, conservative candidates won about 70% of the seats.

### The Presidential Election of 2005

The constitution provides that presidents may not run for more than two terms of office, so President Khatami had to step down in 2005. The Guardian Council disqualified about 1000 candidates, leaving only seven to run, some with the support of a party, and some not. The results of the first round were very close, with two candidates going on to the second round: Akbar Hasemi Rafsanjani, a former president known for his moderate and pragmatic views (21% of the vote); and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the conservative mayor of Tehran (19.5% of the vote). Ahmadinejad won in the second round with almost 62% of the vote, since Rafsanjani was not able to organize the reformist vote behind him. Ahmadinejad is known for his populist views, and he announced after his victory that he meant for prosperity to be shared among all classes, not just the elite.

## INTEREST GROUPS

Since political parties are ill defined in Iran, it is often difficult to draw the line between parties and interest groups. A large number of groups have registered with the government, including an Islamic Association of Women and a Green Coalition. The parties in exile, such as the National Front, the Liberation Movement, and the Mojahedin also have members still in Iran that work for their benefit.

An important interest group for factory workers is called Workers' House, that operates with the help of its affiliated newspaper, Kar va Kargar (Work and Worker). Their political party, Islamic Labor Party, backed Khatami in the 2000 election, but their coalition with other reform parties was broken up by the Guardian Council's banning of reformist candidates in 2004 (Majles election), and 2005 (presidential election). Workers' House holds a May Day rally most years, and in 1999 their rally turned into a protest when workers marched to parliament to denounce conservatives for watering down labor laws. When bus drivers joined the protest, most of central Tehran was shut down.

## MASS MEDIA

Over 20 newspapers were shut down shortly after the Revolution in 1979, and by 1981 an additional seven were closed. In 1981 the Majles passed a law making it a criminal offense to use "pen and speech" against the

government. In more recent years, some of the restrictions have been lifted. The Rafsanjani government permitted some debate in the press on controversial issues during the 1990s, and the Khatami administration installed in 1997 issued permits to dozens of new publications, apparently hoping to establish an independent press. However, freedom of the press is still a major issue between conservatives and reformists, and the large-scale student demonstrations in 1999 were sparked by newly imposed restrictions on the media. Shortly after the 2000 Majles elections, when many reformists were elected, the outgoing Majles approved a press control law, which the Council of Guardians ruled could not be overturned by the new legislature. Some 60 pro-reform newspapers were shut down by 2002.

Radio and television are government-run by the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB), but many newspapers and magazines are privately owned. Compared with other regimes in the region, the Iranian press has more freedom to criticize the government. Iran's elite is well educated, and many of these publications cater to their needs as professional journals, sports magazines, and publications for the fine arts, cinema, and health care. Most are nonpolitical, however. A semipublic institution whose directors are appointed by the Supreme Leader runs the country's two leading newspapers, Ettela'at and Kayhan.

## GOVERNMENT INSTITUTIONS

Iran is a highly centralized state, but it is divided administratively into provinces, districts, subdistricts, and local areas. The Islamic constitution promises elected councils on each level of administration, and it also requires governors and other regional officials (who are all appointed) to consult local councils. No steps were taken to hold council elections until 1999 when President Khatami insisted on holding nationwide local elections. The election resulted in a landslide for reformists, presenting a challenge for the conservative clergy.

The government structure of Iran is complex, but the most important thing to remember is that it is an attempt to blend theocratic ideals with democratic ones. Every structure has a purpose in terms of one or both of these principles.

## JURIST'S GUARDIANSHIP

The Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, the Assembly of Religious Experts, and the Expediency Council do not fit into a three-branch arrangement of government institutions. All three have broad executive, legislative, and judicial powers that allow them to supersede all other positions and bodies. They abide by the Ayatollah Khomeini's overarching principle of velayat-e-faqih (jurist's guardianship) in that they have all-encompassing authority over the whole community based on their ability to understand the shari'a and their commitment to champion the rights of the people.

### The Supreme Leader

This position at the top of Iran's government structure was clearly meant to be filled by the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 Revolution. The Supreme Leader was clearly seen as the imam of the whole community, and he represents the pinnacle of theocratic principles of the state. The constitution specifically put Khomeini in the position for life, and stated that after his death, his authority would pass to a leadership council of two or three senior clerics. This did not occur when Khomeini died in 1989 because his followers did not trust the clerics, so instead they selected as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, a cleric of the middle rank who had none of Khomeini's formal credentials. Khamenei also was appointed for life, and continues as Supreme Leader to the present.

The constitution gives the Supreme Leader many powers. First and foremost, he is the faqih, or the leading Islamic jurist to interpret the meaning of religious documents and shari'a, Islamic law. He links the three branches of government together, may mediate among them, and is charged with "determining the interests of Islam." His many powers include:

- Elimination of presidential candidates
- Dismissal of the president
- Command of the armed forces

- Declaration of war and peace
- Appointment and removal of major administrators and judges
- Nomination of six members of the Guardian Council
- Appointment of many non-governmental directors, such as the national radio-television network and semi-public foundations

#### The Guardian Council

A body that also represents theocratic principles is the Guardian Council, which consists of twelve male clerics. Six are appointed by the Supreme Leader, and the other six are nominated by the chief judge and approved by the Majles. Bills passed by the Majles are reviewed by the Guardian Council to ensure that they conform to the shari'a, and the council also has the power to decide who can compete in elections. In 2004 and 2005 they disqualified 1000s of candidates for both the Majles and the presidential elections.

Together the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council exercise the principle of jurist's guardianship, making sure that the democratic bodies always adhere to Islamic beliefs and laws.

#### The Assembly of Religious Experts

In 1989 a smaller Assembly of Religious Experts was expanded to be a 86 man house directly elected by the people every four years. The Assembly is given the responsibility, along with the Supreme Leader and the Guardian Council, of broad constitutional interpretation. One of the new Assembly's first actions was to elect Ali Khamenei as Khomeini's replacement as Supreme Leader. The Assembly also reserved the right to dismiss him if he was unable to fill Khomeini's shoes. So far, that has not happened. The Assembly's members were required to have a seminary degree equivalent to a master's degree, but in 1998 revisions were made that allowed nonclerics to stand for the Assembly, but the candidates are still subject to approval by the Council of Guardians

#### The Expediency Council

Because the Guardian Council can overturn decisions and proposals for law made by the Majles, the two bodies often argued fiercely during the days of the early republic, so Khomeini created a body to referee their disputes. It began as a council with thirteen clerics, including the president, the chief judge, the speaker of the Majles, and six jurists from the Guardian Council. The Expediency Council eventually passed some compromise bills, and was institutionalized by the 1989 constitutional amendments. Today it consists of 32 members, and it has many more powers than it had originally. For example, it now may originate its own legislation. Not all of its members today are clerics, but they are still appointed by the Supreme Leader (Ali Khamenei). Collectively they are the most powerful men in Iran.

### THE EXECUTIVE

Iran does not have a presidential system, so the head of the executive branch does not have the same authority as presidents in countries that have a presidential system, such as the U.S., Mexico, and Nigeria. However, the president does represent the highest official representing democratic principles in Iran.

#### The President and the Cabinet

The president is the chief executive and the highest state official after the Supreme Leader. He is directly elected every four years by Iranian citizens, and he is limited to two consecutive terms in office. Although he is democratically elected, the constitution still requires him to be a pious Shi'i that upholds Islamic principles.

Some of the president's powers include:

- Devising the budget
- Supervising economic matters
- Proposing legislation to the Majles

- Executing policies
- Signing of treaties, laws, and agreements
- Chairing the National Security Council
- Selecting vice presidents and cabinet ministers
- Appointing provincial governors, town mayors, and ambassadors

All of the six presidents of the Islamic Republic have been clerics, except for one: Abol-Hasan Bani-Sadr, who was ousted in 1981 for criticizing the regime as a dictatorship.

The cabinet conducts the real day-to-day work of governance. Practically all new laws and the budget are initiated and devised by cabinet members, and then submitted to parliament for approval, modification, or rejection.

### The Bureaucracy

The president heads a huge bureaucracy that has expanded over the years to provide jobs for college and high school graduates. It has doubled in numbers since 1979. Some of the newer ministries include: Culture and Islamic Guidance, that censors the media; Intelligence, that serves as the chief security organization. ; Heavy Industry, that manages nationalized factories; and Reconstruction, that expands social services and sees that Islam extends into the countryside. The clergy dominate the bureaucracy, just as the presidency. The most senior ministries - Intelligence, Interior, Justice, and Cultural and Islamic Guidance - are headed by clerics, and other posts are often given to their relatives.

### Semipublic Institutions

These groups are theoretically autonomous, but they are directed by clerics appointed personally by the Supreme Leader. They are generally called "foundations," with such names as the "Foundation for the Oppressed," the "Martyrs Foundation," and the "Foundation for the Publication of Imam Khomeini's Works." They are tax exempt and are reputed to have a great deal of income. Most of the property they supervise was confiscated from the pre-1979 elite.

### THE LEGISLATURE (The Majles)

For most of its recent history Iran has had a unicameral legislature, the Majles, although in some ways the Assembly of Religious Experts has functioned as an upper house since 1989, when its membership was expanded to 86 elected representatives. Both the Majles and the Assembly are directly elected by the people.

The Majles was first created by the Constitution of 1906, when it was part of Iran's early 20th century experiment with democracy. The Majles survived the turmoil of its early days as well as the dictatorship of the Pahlavi shahs, and was retained as the central legislative body by the Constitution of 1979. Although the 1989 constitutional amendments weakened the Majles in relationship to the presidency, it is still an important political institution with significant powers. Some of those powers are:

- Enacting or changing laws (with the approval of the Guardian Council)
- Interpretation of legislation, as long as they do not contradict the judicial authorities
- Appointment of six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, chosen from a list drawn up by the chief judge
- Investigation of the cabinet ministers and public complaints against the executive and judiciary
- Removal of cabinet ministers, but not the president
- Approval of the budget, cabinet appointments, treaties, and loans

The Majles has 290 seats, all directly elected through single member districts by citizens over the age of fifteen. The election of 2000 saw many reformists fill the seats through a coalition of reformist parties called the Khordad Front. They won 80 percent of the vote in a campaign that drew over 70 percent of the electorate. Many supporters of secular parties, all banned from the campaign, voted for the reformers, since they saw them as better alternatives to the religious conservatives. Before the 2004 elections, the Guardian Council banned many reformist candidates

from entering the race, and the result was an overwhelming victory for the conservatives. Significantly, control of the Majles flip-flopped dramatically from the hands of the reformers to the religious conservatives.

## THE JUDICIARY

Two very important things to remember about Iran's judiciary are: 1) the distinction between two types of law: shari'a and qanun; and 2) the principle of jurist's guardianship means that the Supreme Leader, the Guardian Council, and the Assembly of Religious Experts have the final say regarding interpretation of law.

Two types of law are:

- Shari'a, or Islamic law, was built up over several centuries after the death of the religion's founder, Muhammad, in the 7th century. The shari'a is considered to be the foundation of all Islamic civilization, so its authority goes far beyond Iran's borders. It has incorporated the ideas of many legal scholars, and captures what many Muslims believe to be the essence of Muhammad himself. Overall, the shari'a is meant to embody a vision of a community in which all Muslims are brothers and sisters and subscribe to the same moral values. The very foundations of Iran's political system rest in the belief that shari'a supersedes all other types of law, and its interpretation is the most important of all responsibilities for political and religious leaders. The principle of jurist's guardianship reflects reverence for shari'a, and much of the legitimacy of the Supreme Leader is based in his ultimate authority as the interpreter of this sacred law.
- qanun - Unlike shari'a, qanun has no sacred basis, but instead is a body of statutes made by legislative bodies. In Iran, qanun are passed by the Majles, and they have no sacred meaning. Shari'a, then, is divine law, derived from God, and qanun, are laws made by the people's elected representatives. Of course, qanun must in no way contradict shari'a, so it becomes the responsibility of the Majles to pass responsible qanun, but an important job for the Guardian Council (and ultimately the Supreme Leader) is to review the work of the legislature and to apply the interpretation of shari'a to all laws passed.

In a very different way than we have seen it applied in other countries, judicial review does exist in Iran. However, ultimate legal authority does not rest in the constitution, but in shari'a law itself. Because shari'a is so complex, its interpretation is not an easy task, and it has been applied in many different ways. In Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini's importance in shaping the political system is that his interpretation of shari'a came to be the standard that influenced all leaders that followed him - Supreme Leader Khamenei, the six presidents, and all other high officials.

The Islamic Republic Islamized the judiciary code by interpreting the shari'a very strictly. They passed the Retribution Law, which permitted families to demand "blood money" (compensation to the victim's family from those responsible for someone's death), and mandated the death penalty for a whole range of activities, including adultery, homosexuality, drug dealing, and alcoholism. The law also set up unequal legal treatment of men and women, and Muslim and non-Muslim. The government also banned interest rates on loans, condemning them as "usury," which implies that people in need of loans are taken advantage of by the lenders.

Although Khomeini argued that the spirit of shari'a calls for local judges to pronounce final decisions, the regime did realize that a centralized judicial system was needed to tend to matters of justice in an orderly fashion. The regime retained the court structure from the shah's government, keeping the appeals system, the hierarchy of state courts, and the central government's right to appoint and dismiss judges. Furthermore, the interpretation of the shari'a has broadened gradually, so that the harsh corporal punishments outlined in the Retribution Law are rarely carried out today. Modern methods of punishment are much more common than harsh public retributions, so that most law breakers are fined or imprisoned rather than flogged in the town square.

## THE MILITARY

Immediately after the 1979 Revolution the Ayatollah Khomeini established the Revolutionary Guards, an elite military force whose commanders are appointed by the Supreme Leader. The shah had built up the regular army, navy, and air forces, and so the Revolutionary Guards was created as a parallel force with its own budgets, weapons, and uniforms, to safeguard the Republic from any subterfuge within the military. The Supreme Leader is

the commander in chief, and also appoints the chiefs of staff and the top commanders of the regular military. According to the Constitution, the regular army defends the borders, while the Revolutionary Guards protect the republic. Both regular armed forces and the Revolutionary Guards were greatly taxed during the war with Iraq that finally ended in 1988.

Iran currently has about 540,000 active troops, making it the eighth largest military in the world. Much about the military is kept secret but its advanced abilities and technologies have been shown through the building of long-range missiles. U.S. President George W. Bush alleged in 2002 that Iran might be developing nuclear weapons, but as of mid-2005, no clear proof has been found.

## THEOCRATIC AND DEMOCRATIC ELEMENTS IN IRAN'S GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Structure/Position	Theocratic Characteristics	Democratic Characteristics
Supreme Leader	Jurist guardianship; ultimate interpreter of shari'a; appointed for life	
Guardian Council	Jurist guardianship; interpreter of shari'a	6 members selected by the Majles
Assembly of Religious Experts	Jurist guardianship; interpreter of shari'a	6 members selected by the Supreme Leader which is directly elected; indirect democratic tie
Expediency Council	Appointed by the Supreme Leader	Not all members are clerics; most members are clerics
Majles	Responsibility to uphold shari'a	Directly elected by the people; pass qanun (statutes)
Judiciary	Courts held to shari'a law; subject to the judicial judgments of the Supreme Leader, Guardian Council	Court structure similar to those in democracies; "modern" penalties, such as fines and imprisonment

## PUBLIC POLICY IN IRAN

The policy-making process in Iran is highly complex because laws can originate in many places (not just the legislature), and can also be blocked by other state institutions. Also, policies are subject to change depending on factional control.

### POLICY-MAKING FACTIONS

The leaders of the Revolution of 1979 and their supporters agreed on one thing: they wanted the shah to abdicate. Most people also wanted the Ayatollah Khomeini to lead the country after the shah left. After that, the disagreements began and continue until this day. Two types of factions are:

- Conservative vs. reformist - By and large, these factions are created by the often contradictory influences of theocracy and democracy. Conservatives uphold the principles of the regime as set up in 1979, with its basis in strict shari'a law with a minimum of modern modifications. They are wary of influence from western countries and warn that modernization may threaten the tenets of Shi'ism that provide the moral basis for society, politics, and the economy. They support the right and responsibility of clerics to run the political system, and they believe that political and religious decisions should be one and the same.



Reformists, on the other hand, believe that the political system needs significant reform, although they disagree on exactly what the reforms should be. They are less wary of western influence, and tend to advocate some degree of international involvement with countries of the west. Most reformers support Shi'ism and believe it to be an important basis of Iranian society, but they often support the idea that political leaders do not necessarily have to be clerics.

- Statists vs. free-marketers - This rift cuts across conservatives and reformers, and has taken different meanings over the years. Basically, though, the statists believe that the government should take an active role in controlling the economy - redistributing land and wealth, eliminating unemployment, financing social welfare programs, and placing price ceilings on consumer goods. We have seen this point of view at work in Mexico under Lazaro Cardenas during the 1930s, and in Russia and China under communism. Statists are not necessarily communists (and few in Iran are), but the same philosophy directed the economy of the Soviet Union with its Five-Year Plans, and continues to direct China's "socialist market economy." On the other hand, the free-marketers want to remove price controls, lower business taxes, encourage private enterprise, and balance the budget. In many ways they believe in many of the same market principles that guide the United States, but they envision it working within the context of the theocratic/democratic state.

These factional disputes have often brought about gridlock and instability, such as the flip-flop that occurred in the Majles between the election of 2000 and 2004 from reformist to conservative control. The disputes among the factions have led many of Iran's best and brightest to leave the country, and have deprived the reformists in particular of some potentially good leadership. Factions have also led to confusion on the international scene as well. For example, after the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, President Khatami almost immediately extended his condolences to the American people. However, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei forbid any public debate about improving relations with the United States, and also implied that Americans had brought the situation on themselves.

## ECONOMIC ISSUES

The factional disagreements within the political elite are apparent in Iran's struggles with economic policy-making. On the international scene in 2002, a bill was drafted in the Majles that would have permitted foreigners to own as much as 100 percent (up from 48%) of any firm in the country. Not surprisingly, the bill came from the reformists. Predictably, the bill was not approved by the Guardian Council, a reflection of the tug of war between reformists and conservatives. Domestically, most Iranian leaders want improved standards of living for the people, but conservatives are cautious about the influence of secular prosperity on devout Shi'ism.

Oil has created a vertical divide in the society, particularly among the elites. On one side are elites with close ties to the oil state. On the other side is the traditional sector of the clergy. It was this divide that was clearly evident during the Revolution of 1979, and despite the fact that the clerics won, the secularists have not gone away. Almost no one denies the benefits that oil has brought to Iran. Money from the rentier state that grew under Muhammad Reza Shah helped to build the economic infrastructure and fuel the growth of a middle class. By the 1970s Iran was clearly an industrializing country with increasing prosperity, and its economy was integrated into the world economy.

The Ayatollah Khomeini famously stated that "economics is for donkeys," disdaining the importance of economics for policy-makers and affirming the superiority of religious, rather than secular leaders. Even conservatives today don't deny the importance of economic policy decisions, but the factions don't agree on whether or not secularists should be allowed to make policy. The main economic problem plaguing the Islamic Republic has been the instability in the price of oil. The country suffered greatly when oil prices plunged in the early 1980s, rebounded somewhat, and then dropped again in the 1990s. Prices stayed relatively low until the end of the century. Since then, oil prices have rebounded, and the Iranian economy has benefited.

The attitudes toward supranational organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization is mixed. Iran's application to join the WTO in 1996 failed in part because of the difficulties in making foreign investments within the country's borders. Their application also failed because the United States opposed it, so these hostilities between the two countries have reverberated into many areas of international economic policy. Iran's most important international membership is probably in OPEC (Organization for Petroleum

Exporting Countries) that controls the price of oil exported from its member states.

## NUCLEAR WEAPONS?

"States like these [Iran, Iraq, and North Korea], and their terrorist allies, constitute an axis of evil, arming to threaten the peace of the world. By seeking weapons of mass destruction, these regimes pose a grave and growing danger. They could provide these arms to terrorists, giving them the means to match their hatred. They could attack our allies or attempt to blackmail the United States."

U.S. President George W. Bush

State of the Union Address

January 29, 2002

President Bush's "axis of evil" statement quoted above created a stir of controversy regarding Iran's international relations with western countries. Iran's nuclear program goes back many decades, but this program has been under serious scrutiny by western nations since the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Iran has maintained that the purpose of its nuclear program was for the generation of power, not for use as weapons. However, in August 2002, a leading critic of the regime revealed two secret nuclear sites, a uranium enrichment facility in Natanz and a heavy water facility in Arak. Late in 2003, the U.S. insisted that Iran be "held accountable" for allegedly seeking to build nuclear arms in violation of international treaties, including the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that Iran had signed. Then in November 2004, Iran's chief nuclear negotiator announced that Iran had temporarily suspended the uranium enrichment program after pressure from the European Union. This dispute boiled over in August 2005, when the International Atomic Energy Agency announced that Iran had broken seals on one of its nuclear sites - seals that had been placed there by the United Nations in 2004. However, after several years of controversy, no conclusive evidence has been found that Iran has a nuclear weapons program.

Iran's complex political culture and internal factional debates make it very difficult to predict its future. Oil continues to fill the government's coffers with income, but the economy's dependence on one product is worrisome to economists and politicians alike. Iran's unique political system is a bold experiment, and tests the question as to whether or not it is possible for a theocracy to be democratic. Another major theme in government and politics that Iran's case raises is the relationship between religion and politics. Is a democracy possible without separating the two into different spheres? Does the state benefit from being based in religious principles that are meant to guide human life in general? On the other hand, does religion increase tensions in the relationship between citizens and state so that the government loses its objectivity and essential fairness to its citizens? For these reasons and more, the evolution of Iran's political system is interesting to watch and vital to understand.