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Islam, Theocratic Republicanism, and Governance in Iran

Islam, Republik Teokratis, dan Tata Kelola Pemerintahan di Iran

Farhang Morady
University of Westminster, United Kingdom

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Abstract

Iran represents a unique theocratic republic that integrates Islamic governance with republican principles. The political system is based on the concept of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist), at the core of its political system, which grants significant authority to Islamic scholars. This doctrine asserts that in the absence of the Hidden Imam, a qualified Islamic jurist should lead the state and society to ensure adherence to Islamic law. This system is designed to combine Islamic principles with modern governance; it simultaneously generates ongoing debates and tensions regarding the balance between religious authority and democratic processes. Through an analysis of Shia political thought and its manifestations within the Islamic Republic, this paper evaluates the adaptability and flexibility of Islamic principles to modern governance structures.

Keywords Iran, *Velayat-e Faqih,* Shia Islam, Revolution, Theocratic Democracy, Political Islam, Guardian Council, Supreme Leader

Abstract

Iran merepresentasikan suatu bentuk republik teokratis yang unik, yang menyatukan antara prinsip-prinsip pemerintahan Islam dan asas-asas kenegaraan republik modern. Sistem politiknya bertumpu pada konsep Wilāyat al-Faqīh (Kepemimpinan Faqih), sebuah doktrin inti yang menempatkan otoritas ulama Islam sebagai penjaga utama arah negara. Dalam perspektif ini, selama masa kegaiban Imām al-Mahdī yang tersembunyi, kepemimpinan atas negara dan masyarakat seyogianya dijalankan oleh seorang faqih yang memenuhi syarat, guna menjamin keberlangsungan hukum-hukum Islam dalam kehidupan publik.

Model pemerintahan ini dibangun untuk menjadi sintesis antara nilai-nilai ilahiah dan realitas administrasi kontemporer, namun pada saat yang sama menciptakan ketegangan yang terus-menerus antara otoritas keagamaan dan prinsip-prinsip demokrasi partisipatif. Melalui pembacaan historis-filosofis terhadap pemikiran politik Syiah dan realisasinya dalam kerangka Republik Islam, tulisan ini menelaah sejauh mana prinsip-prinsip Islam memiliki kapasitas adaptif dan fleksibilitas dalam menjawab tantangan struktur pemerintahan modern.

Keywords Iran, *Wilāyat al-Faqīh,* Islam Syiah, Revolusi, Demokrasi Teokratis, Islam Politik, Dewan Penjaga, dan Pemimpin Tertinggi

***Corresponding Author**
Farhang Morady, F.Morady@Westminster.ac.uk

Introduction

The 1979 Iranian Revolution defied the prevailing assumptions that modernisation would inevitably lead to secularisation. Instead, Iran emerged as an Islamic Republic governed predominantly by clerical authorities. Islamists have openly dismissed the principles of Western rationalism and modernism, choosing to uphold traditional Islamic values as the cornerstone of their worldview.[1] Nevertheless, these dynamics have evolved over time, resulting in notable shifts in the ideological perspectives of the Iranian clerical elite, who have had to navigate the delicate balance between maintaining religious authority and addressing contemporary political challenges. This ongoing contradiction underscores the complexities of modern Iranian society, where the interplay between faith and governance has continued to shape the country's trajectory. Like everywhere else, religion can be used as an ideological tool for control as well as a means of mobilisation. In revolutionary settings, religion has also motivated people to struggle for social justice, against oppression, and to expel foreign aggression. The Islamic discourse on justice and the struggle for resistance against imperialism has provided a general ideological framework for expressing material concerns. However, when the Islamic Republic of Iran seized power, it was more concerned with establishing clerical supremacy and shaping the new world system.[2]

The Iranian Revolution changed the role of the clergy, transitioning them from religious leaders to direct political rulers. This change has resulted in a system in which Islamic jurisprudence began playing an essential role in making laws, regulating social relations, and allocating economic and political resources in such a way as to alter the political economy of Iran fundamentally. Soon after returning to Iran, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini declared that the country had to be run by Islamic and clerical authority. He famously said that "the recent religious movement was one hundred per cent Islamic and was founded by clerics alone".[3] However, once in power, the Islamic Republic found itself facing significant challenges of governing a modern and complex state.[4]

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[1] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini,* trans. and ed. Hamid Algar, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 56–60. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1–3; Hamid Algar, *Roots of the Islamic Revolution in Iran*, (New York: Islamic Publications International, 1983), 9–11; Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 100–105.

[2] Nikki R. Keddie, *Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), pp. 215–218. Abbas Morady, "Iran's Political Culture: Continuity and Change," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 5 (2011): pp. 575–578. Abbas Morady, *Power, Legitimacy and the Public Sphere: The Iranian Political Order from Khomeini to the Islamic State,* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 129–132.

[3] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini,* trans. and ed. Hamid Algar, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), pp. 33.

[4] Abbas Morady, *Power, Legitimacy and the Public Sphere: The Iranian Political Order from Khomeini to the Islamic State,* (London: Routledge, 2020), pp. 129.

In response, Islamist leaders had to invent new interpretations of Islamic theology and jurisprudence that could be used to justify political decisions and policies that would determine Iran's future.

The establishment of the Islamic Republic was a direct outcome of a revolutionary movement fuelled by millions of Iranians who fought to overthrow a dictatorial regime characterised by widespread economic and political injustices. This Revolution was not a monolithic effort; it brought together a diverse coalition of social forces, each with its own interests and ideas about the future. Within the religious sphere, different factions emerged, representing various social classes and ideologies.

The Islamist leaders asserted their connections to the Shia branch of Islam, albeit with diverse interpretations. Those who held power effectively legitimised their policy decisions through Islamic principles, thereby managing state authority in alignment with religious beliefs.

This article contests the notion that Islam, and specifically Shia Islam, is a static entity. Instead, it argues that Islam has evolved significantly and has developed diverse interpretations to engage with and respond to contemporary transitions. It explores the evolving relationship between Islam and governance in Iran, focusing on its ideological foundations, historical transformations, and modern political challenges. It examines pre-revolutionary Shia political thought, emphasising the views of notable Islamist scholars within a historical context, illustrating their evolution by demonstrating flexibility to adapt to economic and political circumstances. The second section evaluates how these theories reconcile Islamic jurisprudence with the realities of political authority in post-revolutionary Iran. It examines the establishment of the Theocratic Republic and the challenges and opportunities in aligning religious governance with state structures.

Finding and Discussion

Historical Transformations of Shia Islam

Shia Islam has undergone profound transformations over the centuries, shaped by theological developments, political shifts, and socio-economic changes. These transformations are particularly evident in Iran, where Twelver Shia Islam[5] evolved from a persecuted sect into a dominant political and religious force. The historical trajectory of Shia Islam demonstrates its adaptability to changing political situations, particularly in response to state patronage, institutional developments, and external influences. This evolution

[5] Shia Islam is the largest branch of the Islamic faith, with Twelver Shia Islam being the most prominent, particularly in countries such as Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain. Other branches, like the Ismailis, diverged from the Twelvers after the sixth imam, while the Zaydis believe that any qualified descendant of Ali can assume leadership; they are primarily located in Yemen. Additionally, there are various offshoots of Shia Islam, including the Alawites, Alevis, and Druze, each characterized by unique beliefs that combine Islamic principles with local traditions. These groups are mainly found in Syria, Turkey, and Lebanon. See Momen, 1985.

provides insight into the dynamic interplay between religious doctrine and governance.

The theological foundations of Shia Islam distinguish it from Sunni Islam in fundamental ways, particularly in the concept of the Imamate. Shia Islam claims that Muhammad's last Prophet designated Ali ibn Abi Talib and his descendants as his rightful successors. The caliphate system, which was historically more common among Sunnis, was one of consensus or force. The doctrine of Shia is that divine guidance is through a lineage of twelve imams. The occultation of the twelfth imam led to a theological dilemma regarding political authority in his absence. This resulted in ulama acting as intermediaries between divine authority and the political order, a concept also foundational to later developments such as *Velayat-e Faqih.*[6]

Shia Islam emerged as a dominant political force in Iran during the Safavid in the 16th century. Before this era, Shia Muslims constituted a small minority within the broader Islamic world. The first king of the Safavid dynasty, Shah Ismail I, initiated a significant transformation by declaring Twelver Shia Islam as the state religion, which fundamentally altered the religious and political landscape of Iran.

The Safavid relationship with Shiʻa Islam was, in many ways, a marriage of convenience that became an ideological and political foundation for the Iranian state. They adopted this to strengthen their position of power and create a fundamental shift in Iran's religious and political leadership. Leaders of the Safavid, originally a Sufi order, wanted to distinguish themselves from their Sunni rivals, including the Ottoman Empire in the west and the Uzbeks in the east. The Shah Ismail I (1487-1524) unified his diverse empire and established divine legitimacy for his rule, portraying himself as the divinely chosen leader, a concept rooted in Shiʻa beliefs regarding the Imamate.[7] The Safavids used religious forces to endorse their rule and assist in implementing their new spiritual vision. However, there were no strong indigenous Shiʻa clerical groups in Iran. Consequently, Safavid had to invite Shiʻa scholars from Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain to establish a new religious elite to help shape Shiʻa jurisprudence, education, and governance. The mutual relationship between the Safavid and the Shiʻa clergy conferred legitimacy upon the former while establishing a structured religious hierarchy that countered the influence of powerful tribal factions. In exchange, the Shiʻa

[6] Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 43–55; Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, *Shi'ite Islam,* trans. and ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), pp. 175–179.

[7] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 75–79. Andrew J. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Rebirth of a Persian Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 19–25.

clergy received state support, facilitating the institutionalisation of Shi'ism as the prevailing faith in Iran.[8]

Converting Iran into a Shi'a-majority state was not an organic process; it involved mass coercion and persecution of Sunnis. State-mandated practices that further embedded Shi'ism into the fabric of Iranian society included public rituals like cursing the first three Sunni caliphs. Over time, a strategic shift became a genuine religious transformation, especially under the rulers of Shah Abbas the First (1588–1629). He institutionalised Shi'ism through endowments, religious schools, and shrine-building projects.[9] While the Safavids and Shi'a clerics found their alliance mutually beneficial, it was not without tension. The clerical establishment did, however, grow more powerful over time and started to assert greater religious authority than the absolute power of the shahs. This development laid the groundwork for the Qajar period (1794–1925) and the 1979 Revolution, during which Shi'a clerics took direct control of the state.[10]

During the Qajar period, the *ulama's* power increased as the state became more dependent on religious sanction.[11] The Safavid rulers directly controlled religious institutions, but the Qajars did it passively, and the clergy was able to expand its influence over legal, social, and political life. The senior religious scholars gained authority by developing the *Marja-e Taqlid* (Source of Imitation) doctrine[12], leading Shia Muslims to follow the ruling of the most learned cleric.

Clerical control over judicial authority, religious endowments, and economic resources increased, positioning the ulama as a powerful check on the monarchy.[13] The clerics also began to play a more active political role in

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[8] Robert Gleave, *Islam and Literalism: Literal Meaning and Interpretation in Islamic Legal Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 141–143. Said Amir Arjomand, "Shi'ism and the Social and Political Order in Twelver Shi'ite Communities," in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism,* ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), pp. 46–48.

[9] Rula Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in Safavid Iran,* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 65–68. Rudolph P. Matthee, *The Politics of Trade in Safavid Iran: Silk for Silver, 1600–1730,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 112–115.

[10] Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 15–19. Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 232–236.

[11] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 28–31.

[12] The role of a high-ranking cleric whose legal rulings (fatwas) guide followers in the practice of Islamic jurisprudence. These clerics make interpretations of Islamic law and offer legal opinions. Following the Occultation of the Twelfth Imam, this authority emerged, with Mujtahids assuming the responsibility for Islamic jurisprudence. Prominent figures such as Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani and other influential *Maraja* continue to shape Shia religious and political life, especially in the cities of Najaf and Qom, to this day. See, Momen.

[13] Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy–State Relations in the Pahlavi Period*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 19–21. Robert Gleave, *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran,* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 105–106;

opposing foreign interference. Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi led the Tobacco Protest of 1891, which showed that the ulama could bring the masses to oppose state policies[14] and, therefore, play a political role.

At the turn of the 20th century, Iran battled a multifaceted crisis of economic difficulty, political suppression, high taxation, widespread corruption and increasing foreign interference. This growing resentment led to the Constitutional Revolution in December of 1905 when the bazaar merchants in Tehran protested unjust taxation and governmental corruption. The movement was initiated by religious leaders, merchants and intellectuals demanding a written constitution and a national assembly *(Majlis)* to limit the king's power. [15]

The political transformations in Turkey and Russia, the two neighbouring countries of Iran, also inspired the revolutionaries. Religious leaders were divided. Mohammad Kazem Khorasani, the reformist cleric, argued that constitutionalism was lawful according to Islamic law. However, Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri and other conservatives among the clergy were against changes, fearing that this would endanger their influence in politics and society.

By 1906, after months of protest, strikes, and sit-ins *(bast),* Mozaffar al-Din Shah had been forced to sign a constitutional decree; Iran's first parliament *(Majlis)* was installed, and a constitution was drawn up. However, royalist factions and foreign powers met the systematic transition with great resistance. In 1908, Mohammad Ali Shah, with Russia's support, staged a coup by shutting down the Majlis and bombing it in Tehran. Some leading constitutionalists were either jailed or executed. The clerical conservatives justified the crackdown by depicting constitutionalism as a Western-inspired threat to Islamic traditions.

Shah temporarily returned to power in 1909 after driving constitutionalist forces out of control. The Russian military's external intervention suppressed the Iranian constitutionalist strongholds in the north, and later, they occupied Tehran; the Majlis was shut down for the third time, and prominent constitutionalists like Sattar Khan were executed.

The Constitutional Revolution failed to produce a stable democracy, but it sowed the initial beliefs of political alteration in Iran. The demand for constitutional governance kept on plaguing the Iranian nationalist movements of the twentieth century and finally determined the shape of Iran's political evolution – from the 1953 coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh to the 1979 Islamic revolution.

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[14] Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 70–73;

[15] Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), pp. 14–16.

Clergy's Response to Modernisation and Nationalism

The Qajar dynasty's rule ended with economic and political instability, foreign intervention, and military weakness. Reza Khan, an army officer and leader of the 1921 coup, who later established the Pahlavi dynasty (1925–1979), consolidated power and was declared King in 1925. With the support of the Majlis *(Parliament)* and British backing.[16]

He initiated a process of modernisation and secularisation in the country that significantly reduced the influence of clerics. His reign coincided with increasing modernisation in the region, particularly in Turkey, where Mustafa Kemal Atatürk was attempting to implement a similar model. Reza Shah's policies aimed to diminish the role of religious institutions in governance by replacing Islamic courts with secular legal systems and promoting Western-style education.[17]

His policies, however, were disrupted with the First and Second World Wars as Iran became a battleground between Russia and Britain, especially with the discovery of oil in 1908. This culminated with the global nationalist and anti-imperialist movement in which Iran played a central role.

A key aspect of Iranian nationalism was its oil industry, which Britain primarily controlled. While the clergy held significant political influence, they and they and the bazaar class, the social base of the clergy, often did not support the secular nationalist Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh.[18]

The lack of hegemony among various political forces and the influence of the Soviet Union on Iran's Communist Party ultimately convinced the United States, with support from Britain, to orchestrate a coup in 1953 to restore the Shah to power after his exile.[19]

In the aftermath of World War II, the United States emerged as the dominant global power, taking over Britain's previous role. This shift significantly altered the geopolitical environment, particularly in the Middle East. With its strategically vital location and vast oil reserves, Iran became a key player in this new order. It was seen as a bulwark against the spread of Soviet communism, which posed a significant threat to regional stability and Western interests. As a result, the US cultivated a close alliance with Iran, recognising its importance in countering Soviet influence in the region during the Cold War.

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[16] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 69–75;

[17] Shahrough Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy–State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), 25–30;

[18] Farhad Kazemi, "The Origins and Development of the Clergy in Iran: A Study in Class and Political Conflict," in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions in the Middle East since 1500*, ed. Nikki R. Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 222–225.

[19] Mark J. Gasiorowski & Malcolm Byrne, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran,* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004), 15. Farhang Morady, *Contemporary Iran: Politics, Economy, and Religion* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), pp. 78–80.

After World War II, the Iranian clergy was divided into two distinct factions: quietists and activists. Ayatollah Hossein Borujerdi, a quietist cleric, advocated against involvement in political activities but focused on religious learning and moral instruction. By comparison, Khomeini argued that the clergy had to engage actively in political participation to save Islam in society.

After the war, economic development in Iran, supported predominantly by the West—particularly the United States—intensified under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah. The aim was to counter the threat posed by the Soviet Union and to reduce the traditional ideological influence of religion in Iranian society. However, the Shah continued to collaborate with religious leaders to maintain his grip on power. For instance, the number of religious centres and publications flourished during this period. Between 1970 and 1978, more than 5,000 new mosques were built in Iran, and the number of pilgrimages to the holy city of Mashhad rose dramatically, from fewer than 500,000 in 1970 to over 10 million in 1978. Additionally, the number of Iranians who undertook the pilgrimage to Mecca, which every Muslim must make at least once in their lifetime, increased from around 8,000 in 1968 to 55,000 in 1978, just before the Revolution.[20]

In response to the growing transformation in Iran, Khomeini and his followers adopted a radical and active interpretation of Shia Islam, particularly regarding politics, power, and the state. He developed the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih,* arguing that in the absence of the twelfth imam, governance should be entrusted to a qualified Islamic jurist who could implement divine law. This marked a departure from previous Shia political thought, which had traditionally accepted the idea that government was a temporary and imperfect structure awaiting the return of the Mahdi.[21] He did not see a separation of religion and politics, asserting that Islam provided a comprehensive framework for governance that could not be subordinated to secular institutions.

While this represented a shift from Western-style democracy, it did not completely reject it. It was a hybrid system where elements of popular participation coexisted with clerical oversight.[22] The concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* emerged as a significant ideological framework during Iran's revolutionary upheaval in the late 1970s. However, Khomeini and his followers refrained from advocating its practical implications for Iran at that time, as they needed to collaborate with various social forces to establish hegemony. They garnered support from the working poor through anti-imperialist rhetoric while also reassuring the merchant class, who represented

[20] Farhang Morady, *Contemporary Iran: Politics, Economy, and Religion,* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), p. 69.

[21] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini,* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 27.

[22] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 108.

Iran's economic and financial backbone, along with other segments of the traditional classes.

The Paradox of Theocratic Democracy in Iran

The establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran following the 1979 Revolution represents one of the most significant transformations in modern political history, combining elements of theocratic governance with republican structures. This hybrid political system has been subject to ongoing debates regarding its democratic legitimacy, political stability, and the balance between religious authority and popular sovereignty.

This tension was evident during the Revolution when intense ideological conflicts emerged among various political factions. Initially, the Revolution united Islamists, secular nationalists, Marxists, and liberal democrats under a common goal: overthrowing the Pahlavi monarchy. However, deep divisions emerged regarding the new government's structure once the Shah was removed. Secular and nationalist groups envisioned a republic with democratic institutions, whereas Khomeini and his Islamist allies sought to implement an Islamic state grounded in clerical rule.[23]

The term "theocratic democracy" appears paradoxical, as it is often based on divine sovereignty, whereas democratic governance is premised on popular sovereignty. The Iranian model attempts to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory paradigms by maintaining a structure where the Supreme Leader, a religious figure, holds ultimate authority. At the same time, electoral processes determine the president and members of parliament. The institutionalisation of this dual system raises critical questions about the extent to which democratic elements function within a system fundamentally shaped by religious doctrine.

During the drafting of the new constitution, Khomeini and his followers successfully embedded *Velayat-e Faqih* into the governance structure, ensuring that ultimate authority rested with the Supreme Leader. This decision was met with resistance from secular and moderate Islamist factions, who feared the establishment of a religious dictatorship. However, Khomeini's charismatic leadership and control over revolutionary institutions allowed him to consolidate power. The constitutional framework that emerged established a multi-tiered government in which both democratic and theocratic elements coexisted, albeit unequally.

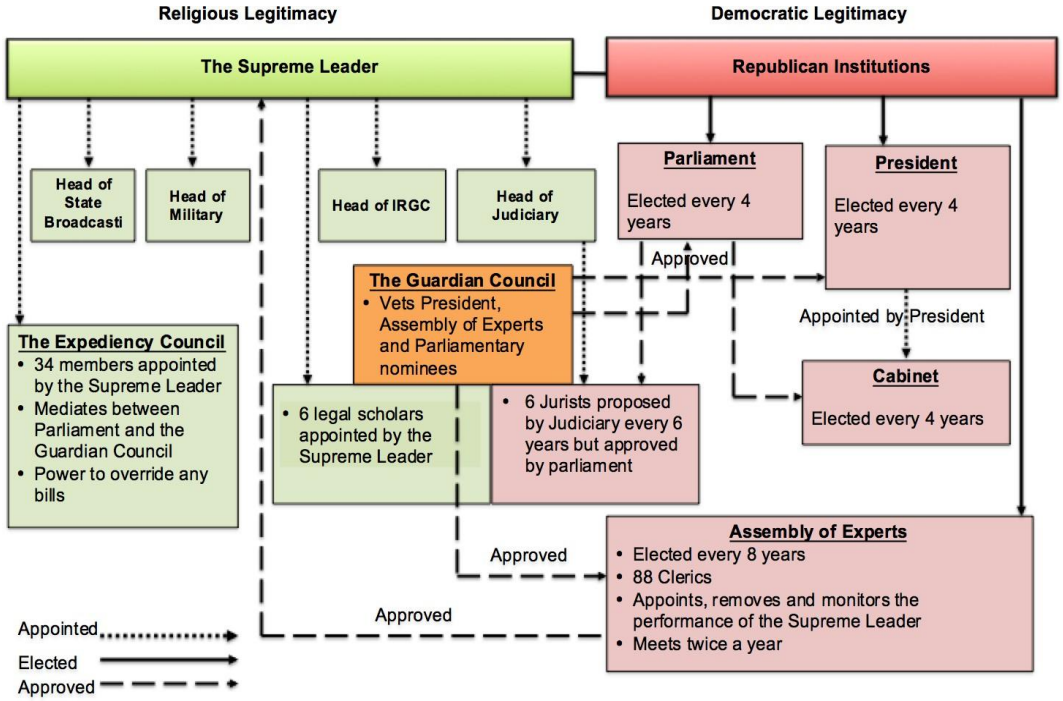
Governance and Political Structure

The structure of the Islamic Republic thus reflects a tension between democratic aspirations and religious authority. While the presence of elections and legislative bodies suggests a degree of popular participation, the overarching power of religious institutions ensures that ultimate decision-

[23] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 110.

making remains within the hands of the ulama. This has led scholars to describe Iran's political system as a form of "guided democracy," where electoral processes exist but are constrained by ideological and religious oversight.[24]

Structure of Power in Iran



Source[25]

The new system incorporated elections for the presidency, the Majles (parliament), and local councils, giving the appearance of democratic participation. However, these institutions were under the oversight of the Supreme Leader and Shoura-ye Negahban (the Guardian Council), a body of jurists and scholars responsible for ensuring that all laws and political decisions align with Islamic principles. This arrangement effectively limited democratic governance, as elected officials were subject to clerical approval.[26]

The defining characteristic of Iran's theocratic democracy is the Supreme Leader's role, who is not elected by citizens but wields significant political, military, and judicial power.

The *Majles-e Khobregan-e Rahbari* (Assembly of Experts) constitutes a clerical body tasked with the evaluation of the Supreme Leader's performance.

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[24] Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 174.

[25] Farhang Morady, *Contemporary Iran: Politics, Economy, and Religion,* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), 97.

[26] Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, trans. Hamid Algar, (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), 57.

Despite this mandate, there are limited mechanisms available to ensure accountability for the actions and decisions of the Supreme Leader. The Supreme Leader controls key institutions such as the military, the judiciary, and state media, making him the most influential figure in the Iranian political system.

The Guardian Council further reinforces the theocratic nature of the system by acting as a gatekeeper to the electoral process. Composed of six clerics appointed by the Supreme Leader and six legal experts nominated by the judiciary, the Guardian Council has the authority to vet all candidates for political office. Only individuals deemed ideologically suitable by the clerical establishment can run in elections. Additionally, the council can veto parliamentary legislation incompatible with Islamic law, further restricting the legislature's independence.[27]

These structural mechanisms ensure that Iran's democratic institutions operate within a framework that prioritises religious authority over popular will. Critics argue that this model undermines the fundamental principles of democratic governance by limiting political competition and restricting the electorate's ability to influence policy. Reformist politicians and some religious individuals have repeatedly challenged this system, advocating for greater political openness and institutional reforms. However, conservative forces have systematically curtailed their efforts within the clerical establishment.[28]

Theocratic Governance, Elections and Political Movements

Although Iran has theocratic foundations, it has regular elections, which makes it different from traditional theocracies. The presidential and parliamentary elections occur every four years. However, the extent of their freedom is open to debate due to the significant role of unelected bodies in the system. For example, the Guardian Council has the authority to vet all candidates, and under the Islamic Republic, it has denied specific individuals the right to stand for election. Consequently, elections depend on the votes cast within the ruling clerical elite's ideology framework.[29]

The Iranian model of theocratic democracy presents a paradox. On one hand, it maintains institutions of popular participation, allowing citizens to vote and engage in political discourse. On the other hand, it imposes strict limitations on political expression, ensuring that ultimate authority remains with the religious leadership. This dual structure has led to persistent tensions between reformist and conservative factions, with reformists seeking greater

[27] Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 112.

[28] Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran,* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 85.

[29] Farhang Morady, *Contemporary Iran: Politics, Economy, and Religion,* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2020), hlm. 142.

political openness and conservatives aiming to preserve the ideological purity of the system.

These tensions manifest in different interpretations of governance within various factions. Abdul Karim Soroush, a notable reformist Islamist scholar who played a significant role in the Council of the Cultural Revolution - responsible for shaping the ideological framework of the Islamic Republic - developed a critical perspective on the *Velayat-e Faqih* principle. His early views aligned with the Revolution's objectives, but he became a vocal advocate for reconciling Islam with modern concepts of freedom and rationality over time.

Soroush articulated this perspective by asserting that *"religious morality would be the guarantor of a democracy, where the rights of the faithful to adopt religion would not vitiate the democratic, earthly, and rational nature of the religious government"*.[30] His ideas influenced the reformist scholars and political figures who sought to establish a government grounded in Islamic principles and democratic values.

His perspective had practical political implications among his reformist supporters, as an ongoing political contest and protest that took place during the 2009 presidential election, which marked a turning point in the struggle between reformists and conservatives. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the incumbent president, represented a radical and conservative stance, whereas Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, reformist contenders, had previously served as Iran's Prime Minister from 1981 to 1989, advocating for political and social freedoms, greater transparency, civil liberties, and participatory democracy.[31]

The controversy triggered a nationwide political crisis, culminating in the emergence of the Green Movement *(Jonbesh-e Sabz).* The movement became a platform for expressing deep-seated frustrations with the political system, particularly the lack of democratic accountability within the framework of *Velayat-e Faqih*.[32]

The movement elucidated the systemic issues and challenges inherent within the political framework while simultaneously pointing out significant societal divisions that underline the growing demands for political reform. More critically, it prompted a re-evaluation of the Iranian system's capacity to reconcile religious authority with democratic principles.

Iran's theocratic democracy remains a battleground for competing visions of governance. Reformists seek a system where the people have greater agency in political affairs, while conservatives insist on maintaining clerical

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[30] Abdulkarim Soroush, *Reason, Freedom, and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdulkarim Soroush,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 154.

[31] Farhang Morady, "Who Rules Iran? The June 2009 Election and Political Turmoil," *Capital & Class* 35, no. 1 (2011): 90.

[32] Farhang Morady, "The Crisis of Legitimacy in Iran and the Ongoing Struggle for Freedom," dalam *Trajectories of Declining and Destructive Capitalism*, ed. R. Herrera, *Research in Political Economy*, vol. 40, (Bingley, UK: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2025), 212.

oversight to uphold Islamic values. This tension, embodied in figures like Soroush and events such as the Green Movement, represents the ongoing struggle over the future of democracy in Iran. Whether the system evolves toward greater openness or continues reinforcing its religious foundations remains a pivotal question for the country's political trajectory.

Conclusion

This paper explored the transformation of Iran's political system following the 1979 Revolution, framing it within its historical context. It examined the structural and political forces that have influenced the development of the Islamic Republic. The establishment of a theocratic state was not solely a cultural or religious change; it was also a response to longstanding socio-economic contradictions that had been developing over several decades.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution represented the culmination of these historical developments. The collapse of the Pahlavi monarchy allowed the ulama to translate centuries of religious authority into formal political power. The drafting of the new constitution institutionalised *Velayat-e Faqih,* making the Supreme Leader the ultimate authority in the state. While democratic institutions such as elections and a parliament were incorporated into the system, they were placed under the supervision of clerical bodies such as the Guardian Council. This hybrid structure reflected the long-standing tension within Shia political thought between divine authority and practical governance.[33]

The crafting of a theocratic democracy in Iran, therefore, cannot be understood in isolation from the historical transformations of Shia Islam. The evolution of religious authority, from the *Imamate* to the role of the *ulama,* created the intellectual and institutional foundations for clerical rule. The experience of political engagement, particularly during the Safavid, Qajar, and Pahlavi periods, shaped the clergy's strategies to consolidate power after the revolution. The Islamic Republic's governance model - combining elements of democracy with religious oversight - reflects this historical trajectory, demonstrating continuity and adaptation in the relationship between Shia Islam and political authority.

This historical perspective also highlights the inherent tensions in Iran's theocratic democracy. While the system draws legitimacy from Islamic principles, it operates within a modern nation-state that demands responsiveness to social, economic, and political changes. The balance

[33] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 110.

between clerical authority and popular participation remains a central challenge, reflecting how religious governance can coexist with democratic aspirations. The evolution of Shia Islam into a governing ideology thus remains an ongoing process, shaped by historical legacies and contemporary political realities.The future of Iran's theocratic democracy will be determined not by religious ideology alone but by the ongoing political imbalances between the social groups that control the economic distribution of wealth and the demands of a population increasingly aware of its political and economic rights. Whether the Islamic Republic evolves toward greater inclusivity or tightens its authoritarian grip will depend on how these conflicts are resolved.

Author(s)

Farhang Morady is a senior lecturer at the University of Westminster, known for his expertise in development politics, civil society, and social change, particularly in the Middle East and Iran.

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