

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'état 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, which was so apparent in the reactions within the country to the 2009 presidential elections. 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 Iran'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 Russia, China, 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 for 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 were 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 those 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 SHIISM

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 changes in political leadership over the years, the religion of Islam has continued to be a vital source of identity for the Iranians.

The brand of Islam that distinguishes Iran from its neighbors today – **Shiism** – 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 Shiites 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 Shiite 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 Shiite 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 Shiite 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 Shiism. 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 the Hidden Imam. Khomeini’s doctrine of **jurist’s guardianship** (which we’ll define later) is included along with the other “divine principles.”

In recent years two conflicting ideas – sovereignty of the people and divinely inspired clerical rule – have created a crisis of legitimacy in Iran. During the presidency of Muhammad Khatami (1997-2005), reformers who supported a democratic government came to the forefront, but with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005, the conservatives who endorsed a theocracy took control. As a result, the rift between these two forces – conservatives and reformers – has illustrated the issue of just how a theocracy can also function as a democracy. The conflict is reflected in differences among clerics in the seminaries of **Qom** (a city south of Tehran) through their interpretations of the true meaning of jurist’s guardianship.

POLITICAL CULTURE

Although the Safavid Empire was followed by centuries of weak political organization in Iran, Shiism 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 Shiite 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 in 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. However, starting with the rule of the Qajars (1794-1925), the two types of authority were separated, only to be brought back together by the Revolution of 1979.
- **Shiism and *sharia* as central components** – Today almost 90% of all Iranians identify themselves as Shiite, a fact that links citizens to the government, which is officially a theocracy. Islamic law, the *sharia*, 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 imperialist era of the 18th and 19th centuries. Although the area was heavily impacted by European power moves, 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 Shiite 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.
- **Strong sense of Iranian nationalism** – Public opinion surveys show that Iranians in general have a stronger sense of national identity than do citizens of most Arab countries. As a result, they are more likely to identify themselves as Iranians first and Muslims second. Their Persian roots encourage the perception that Iran is a distinct culture, and pride in being Iranian is quite pronounced.

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 in the modern theocracy.

Economically, Iran has both suffered and benefited from natural resources. A lack of arable land has 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 Shiite 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 Shiism. 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 its 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 conquered by another Turkish group, the **Qajars**. The Qajars moved the capital to Tehran, and they retained Shiism 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 Shia 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 Qajars' move to hand over their customs collections to Europeans. Although the Qajars were attempting to settle their debts, middle-class people were 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:

- Direct 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 Shiism completely. Shiism was declared the official state religion, and only Shiites 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 co-sponsoring with the U.S. 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, was motivated to reinstall the shah as a pro-Western force in the Middle East. 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 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 him 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."

COMPARATIVE RULING FAMILIES: IRAN

	SAFAVIDS (1501-1722)	QAJARS (1794-1925)	PAHLAVIS (1925-1979)
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Converted Iranians to Shiism Tolerated "People of the Book" Ruled from Isfahan Relied on local rulers Rulers claimed to be descendants of the 12 Imams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Turkish invaders Ruled from Tehran Retained Shiism, but lost hereditary claims to 12 Imams Dominated by other countries; Loved luxury; fell into debt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Overthrew a representative government; Centralized power in shah Increasing oil income: creation of the rentier state Contact with the West Secularization of Iran Corruption; shah's personal enrichment
Influences on modern political system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Almost 90% of Iranians today are Shiite Tradition of isolation Authoritarianism, not totalitarianism Foundations for a theocracy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loosened Shiite influence Tradition of trade/contact with others Authoritarianism, not totalitarianism Foundations for secularism, separation between religious and political leaders Failures of regime led to the creation of a representative government 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinforced authoritarian rule; led to resistance to totalitarianism Modern corruption issues in government, economy Increased secularization led to reestablishment of a theocracy

The Creation of a Conflictual Political Culture. Between 1501 and 1979 Iran was ruled by three families that shaped the modern day clash between the conflicting political goals of authoritarianism, democracy, and theocracy.

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 Shiism, 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.

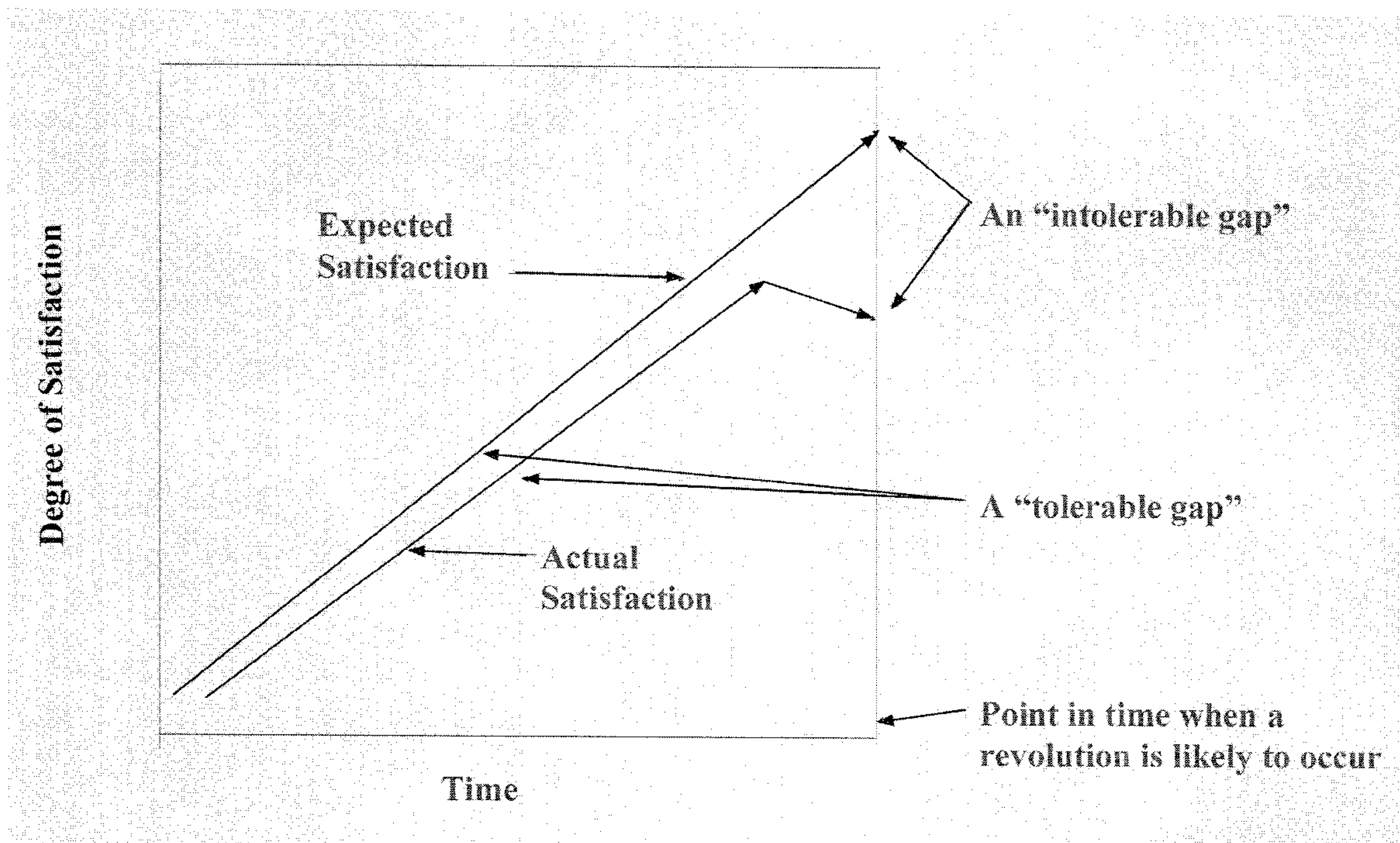
In many ways, the shah created a divide in the political culture, with one side supporting modernization in the sense of establishing closer ties to the West, and the other side staunchly defending traditional ways, in particular Shiism. An elite of clerics rose to oppose the shah, lead a revolution, 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 toward 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 Shia 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 Shia 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.



Revolution of Rising Expectations. In this chart the line that dips represents a drop in a standard of living that had been going up for some time. However, expectations rise along with living standards, and when the drop occurs, people are more likely to support a revolution.

(Source: James Davies, "Toward a Theory of Revolution," *The American Sociological Review*, February 1962)

- 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 Founding of 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 based in Islam, but 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.

Once the constitution was endorsed, the Shia leaders launched the **Cultural Revolution** with goals that were very similar to Mao Zedong's goals as he led China's Cultural Revolution in 1966. The Cultural Revolution in Iran aimed to purify the country from not only the shah's regime, but also from secular values and behaviors, particularly those with western origins. The universities were cleared of liberals and staffed with faculty who supported the new regime. The new government suppressed all opposition, including almost all groups from civil society, and many were executed in the name of "revolutionary justice."

Post-Khomeini – 1989-Present

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, facts that have encouraged some scholars in Qom to question the legitimacy of the theocracy. 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.

In many ways the conflict between theocratic and democratic values has played itself out during the presidencies of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-Present). Although both are clerics, Khatami was a reformist who aimed to end the freeze in relations between Iran and the West, particularly the United States. Khatami believed in a "dialogue among civilizations" that fostered positive relationships with other countries, not just a cessation of hostilities. Although he never advocated changing theocratic political structures, reformers became a strong presence in both the *Majles* and the executive branch. In contrast, Ahmadinejad is a conservative who has antagonized western countries, although he has not isolated himself from them. He has asserted theocratic values, and has appealed to Iranian nationalism to solidify his **white** (bloodless) **coup** of the reformists.

CITIZENS, SOCIETY, AND THE STATE

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, *sharia*, 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 Iranian society are based on:

- **Religion** – Almost 90% of all Iranians are Shia Muslims, but almost 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 Shiites 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'i 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 Shiite, and the supreme leader that 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 *sharia* 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.
- **Pragmatic conservatives v. radical clerics** – The complicated set of cleavages in Iran is made more complex by distinct divisions among the clergy that have led to many important disagreements at the top levels of policymaking. Pragmatic conservatives are clergy that favor liberal economic policies that encourage foreign trade, free markets, and direct foreign investment. They base their points of view on strong personal ties to middle-class merchants (*bazaaris*) and rural landowners who have long supported mosques and religious activities. Conservatives argue that private property and economic inequality are protected under Islamic law. They are generally willing to turn over economic management to liberally-inclined technocrats. Radicals are more numerous among younger and more militant clerics, and they call for measures to enhance social justice, especially in terms of providing welfare benefits to Iran's poor. Radicals generally endorse state-sponsored wealth redistribution and price controls.

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 Shiite revolutionary elites launched a campaign that may be compared to Mao's Cultural Revolution in that they sought to impose 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.

Under the presidency of **Muhammad Khatami** (1997-2005), Iranians experienced the so-called "Tehran spring" – a period of cautious political liberalization, with a loosening of freedom of speech and press, a more open economy, and a friendlier stance towards the outside world. However, the Iranian president has only limited powers, and the reforms were limited by more conservative elements in the government. Since **Mahmoud Ahmadinejad** became president in 2005, the government has closed down newspapers, banned and censored books and websites, and no longer tolerates the peaceful demonstrations and protests of the Khatami era. Prominent scholars have been arrested, including Haleh Esfandiari, the director of the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington, D.C. Dr. Esfandiari had dual citizenship (the U.S. and Iran), but was arrested in 2007 while visiting her mother in Tehran. She was imprisoned for more than three months before being released to return to the United States.

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 under Khatami showed some signs of tolerating this behavior, but under Ahmadinejad there has been a crackdown against western dress, with arrests of women who show too much hair under their headscarves or wear makeup.

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 protesters called for the overthrow and even death of Iran's religious and political leaders. Thousands were arrested during 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. Since Ahmadinejad became president in 2005, the government has renewed its crackdown on

protests and demonstrations. For example, in January 2007 security forces attacked striking bus drivers in Tehran and arrested hundreds of them. Two months later police beat hundreds of men and women who had assembled to commemorate International Women's Day.

Most remarkably, the days of protests that followed the presidential election of 2009 demonstrate the Iranian capacity to react strongly to repressive government. When the election results were announced, supporters of opposition candidates to President Ahmadinejad cried foul, and the biggest popular upheaval since the 1979 revolution began. The announcement that Ahmadinejad had won with 63% of the vote, against 34% for **Mir-Hossein Mousavi**, caused the opposition candidates to call for the election to be annulled, and people on both sides of the issue poured out into the streets. Demonstrations and rallies continued for several days, and the government arrested many protesters, including some top leaders of the opposition. The government sent tens of thousands of Revolutionary Guards and voluntary militiamen, known as the Basij, to disperse the crowds, and violence followed. The death toll is disputed, with state-controlled media reporting 20 people killed, but others put the figure much higher. The protesters rallied around the image of a young woman, Neda Agha Soltan, who was photographed in a demonstration in Tehran as she lay dying after being shot by an unknown assailant.

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, with 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 *sharia* narrowly, so that women are 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 stoning of women for adultery has 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 33% of the total labor force.

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

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 the supreme leader, and two governmental bodies: 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.

WOMEN IN NATIONAL PARLIAMENTS

Country	Lower House % Women	Upper House % Women
China	21.3%	*
Iran	2.8%	*
Mexico	22.6%**	18 %
Nigeria	7 %	8.3%
Russia	14 %	4.7%
United Kingdom	19.5%	18.9%

* No directly comparable upper house

** 2006 election; 2009 statistics not available

Source: *Women in National Parliaments*, www.ipu.org

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 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 2007 and the presidential elections of 2009, 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, the parties usually operate in loose alignments within two main coalitions: the conservative and the reformist. The alliances/parties that sponsored presidential candidates in 2009 are:

- **The Alliance of Builders of Islamic Iran** – This alliance of conservative parties is usually shortened to **Abadgaran**, and it sponsored the incumbent, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who officially won the presidential election of 2009. The alliance was founded in 2003, and most of its leaders live in Tehran. Alliance candidates did well in the *Majles* elections since 2003, including the latest election in 2008.
- **The Iranian Reform Movement**, or the Reforms Front – A number of reformist parties – including the Iranian Militant Clerics Society, and the Islamic Iran Participation Front – formed an alli-

ance 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. Their candidate in 2009 was **Mir-Hossein Mousavi**, a former prime minister under Khatami.

- **Etemad-e Melli Party** – This party was formed just after the 2005 presidential election by Mehdi Karroubi, who finished third in the presidential election of 2005 and fourth in 2009. Karroubi ran as head of his party, but he was endorsed by many non-party figures. He considers himself to be a “pragmatic reformist,” and has been described by others as a moderate with a rural base of support.

A fourth candidate for president in 2009 was Mohsen Rezaee, who ran as a conservative. 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 1950s 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.

The party system reflects **factionalism**, or the splintering of the political elites based not just on points of view, but also on personalities. Since parties are fluid and weak, they are not vehicles for discussing policymaking alternatives. Instead, factions tend to coalesce before elections and then break apart if their candidates are chosen. Defeated factions tend to stay together between elections in hopes of reversing their fortunes in the next election.

ELECTIONS

On the national level, citizens over the age of eighteen (minimum age changed in early 2007 from fifteen to eighteen) 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 the presidency are conducted 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* Elections of 2004 and 2008

The first round 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. In 2008, conservatives held on to about 70% of the seats, but reformists managed to win 46, an increase over their numbers in 2004.

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.

The Presidential Election of 2009

Charges of election fraud were made after the presidential election of 2005, but they were dismissed, even though many were surprised that Ahmadinejad won. One reason for his victory was that many reformists did not vote, since they rejected both major candidates. As the election of 2009 approached, the Iranian reform movement attempted to rally behind one candidate. Many reformists hoped that former President Mohammad Khatami would win the election, but Khatami dropped out of the race and endorsed his former prime minister, Mir-Hossein Mousavi. One other reformist ran, Mehdi Karroubi, and one conservative – Mohsen Rezee – challenged Ahmadinejad for conservative support. The debates leading up to the election focused mainly on the economy, a main concern of Iranian citizens after the global economic crisis of late 2008.

Opinion polls – not always very reliable in Iran – showed a close race between Ahmadinejad and Mousavi as the election approached on June 12, so the official results – nearly 63% for Ahmadinejad and less than 34% for Mousavi – surprised many people. Record numbers (85% of the electorate) turned out for the election, and many reformists that had not voted in 2005 went to the polls in 2009. Mousavi urged his supporters to fight the decision, without resorting to violence, and protests in favor of Mousavi broke out in Tehran. Mousavi appealed the result to the Guardian Council two days after the election, and Supreme Leader Khamenei agreed to an investigation into the fraud. The votes were recounted, but Iran's electoral board concluded that Ahmadinejad won the election. When Khamenei publicly endorsed the decision, many criticized him for shutting down the popular outcry prematurely. The inauguration of Ahmadinejad was held in early August, with protests held outside the Parliament.

In the election's aftermath, many were arrested, and some high-ranked clerics accused foreigners – including some British embassy employees – of stirring up the protests. Mousavi was portrayed as a tool of secular foreigners who plotted for the downfall of the country. The government also claimed to have confessions from top reformers who were arrested, who allegedly pleaded guilty to accusations of organizing a “velvet revolution” to overthrow the country's leaders. Mousavi and Karroubi were not arrested, but accusations soon surfaced that some of those that had been detained were tortured and/or killed by government officials. Mr. Mousavi responded by announcing on his website the formation of a “grass roots and social network” to promote democracy and adherence to the law. The formation of a new party would have required a government permit, which would have been denied.

The election brought many disparate elements of Iran's political culture together for the biggest confrontation since 1979. Although the protests finally cooled, charges of voter fraud continued to circulate, and the legitimacy of the government was shaken to its very core, most profoundly by those who questioned the authority of the supreme leader.

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 its 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 the 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. A bus drivers' protest was crushed by the government in 2007.

Few interest groups have formed for business because private businesses have been crowded out since the Revolution of 1979, when many were taken over by the government. Agriculture, internal trade, and distribution are mostly in private hands, but the government controls between 65% and 80% of the economy.

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 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 unitary state, but it is divided administratively into provinces, districts, sub-districts, and local areas. The Islamic Constitution of 1979 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. Local elections in December 2006 supported candidates critical of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, reflecting a weakness in the president's popularity.

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 *sharia* and their commitment to champion the rights of the people. The Constitution of 1979 specifies the duties of government institutions, including prerogatives and responsibilities of the dual executive: the supreme leader and the president.

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 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 changed the Constitution and 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 *sharia*, 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

Although the dual executive positions of the Iranian government may be categorized as **head of state** (the supreme leader) and **head of government** (the president), the supreme leader holds ultimate power, and is far from a figurehead.

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 *sharia*, 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 an 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 Guardian Council.

In 2007 former President Hashemi Rafsanjani was picked as chairman of the Assembly, a move that could pose a challenge to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and possibly even Supreme Leader Khamenei. Rafsanjani, a moderate, was Ahmadinejad's main opponent in the presidential election of 2005, and he also tends to side with pro-democracy reformers who believe the government's authority is derived from popular elections.

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. Former President Hashemi Rafsanjani is currently head of the Expediency Council, a position he holds in addition to chairing the Assembly of Religious Experts.

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, and he functions as the head of government, while the supreme leader serves as head of state.

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 Shiite who 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 it controls 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)
- Interpreting legislation, as long as they do not contradict the judicial authorities
- Appointing six of the twelve members of the Guardian Council, chosen from a list drawn up by the chief judge
- Investigating the cabinet ministers and public complaints against the executive and judiciary
- Removing cabinet ministers, but not the president
- Approving 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 eighteen. 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

The judiciary is headed by a chief justice, who must have an understanding of *sharia*, so by necessity he must be a cleric. The chief justice is appointed by the supreme leader for a five-year term, and he is charged with managing the judiciary and overseeing the appointment and removal of judges. Beneath the chief justice is the Supreme Court, which is the highest court of appeal in the land. Judges on the Supreme Court, like the chief justices, are all high-ranking clerics who are familiar with *sharia*.

Two very important things to remember about Iran's judiciary are: 1) the distinction between two types of law: *sharia* 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:

- **Sharia**, or Islamic law, was built up over several centuries after the death of the religion's founder, Muhammad, in the 7th century. *Sharia* 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, *sharia* 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 *sharia* 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 *sharia*, and much of the legitimacy of the supreme leader is based on his ultimate authority as the interpreter of this sacred law.
- **Qanun** – Unlike *sharia*, *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. *Sharia*, then, is divine law derived from God, and *qanun* is law made by the people's elected representatives. Of course, *qanun* must in no way contradict *sharia*, 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 *sharia* 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 *sharia* law itself. Because *sharia* 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 *sharia* came to be the standard that influenced all leaders that followed him – Supreme Leader Khamenei, the six presidents, and all other high officials. In other words, a core principle of the present-day regime is to accommodate Islam to a constitutional framework, as provided by the Constitution of 1979.

The Islamic Republic Islamized the judiciary code by interpreting the *sharia* very strictly. The new regime 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 *sharia* 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 *sharia* 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 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.

The **Basij** is a loosely-organized military that is formally part of the Revolutionary Guards, and it gained international attention in the aftermath of the disputed presidential election of 2009, when the opposition candidate, Mir-Hussein Moussavi, accused the Basij of brutality as it contained the demonstrations and addressed dissidents. The word Basij means “mass mobilization” in Persian, and it dates back to the Iran-Iraq War, when the Ayatollah Khomeini asked for civilian volunteers to go to the war front. The militia was reinvented in the late 1990s, when the government quelled the street celebrations when Iran advanced to the playoffs in the World Cup soccer championship in 1998. The Basij also helped the government contain students protests in 1999.

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. The Revolutionary Guard remains an important political force, with its own ministry, army, navy, and air-force units, and appears to have a great deal of say in Iran’s nuclear program. The Guard is becoming increasingly independent, and takes an active role in policymaking. A large number of former Guards sit in the *Majles*, and men with close links to the Guards control principal media outlets, such as the state broadcaster and the powerful Ministry for Islamic Guidance and Culture. In 2004 the Guards showed their strength by deciding on their own authority to close down the airport in Tehran on the grounds that a national security threat was present. The Guards’ engineering arm, known as Ghorb, has been granted big state projects, such as a new section of the Tehran metro.

THEOCRATIC AND DEMOCRATIC ELEMENTS IN IRAN'S GOVERNMENT STRUCTURE

Structure/Position	Theocratic Characteristics	Democratic Characteristics
Supreme Leader	Jurist guardianship; ultimate interpreter of <i>sharia</i> ; appointed for life	
Guardian Council	Jurist guardianship; interpreter of <i>sharia</i> ; six members selected by the supreme leader	Six members selected by the <i>Majles</i> , which is popularly elected; indirect democratic tie
Assembly of Religious Experts	Jurist guardianship; interpreter of <i>sharia</i>	Directly elected by the people
Expediency Council	Appointed by the supreme leader; most members are clerics	Not all members are clerics
<i>Majles</i>	Responsibility to uphold <i>sharia</i>	Directly elected by the people; pass <i>qanun</i> (statutes)
Judiciary	Courts held to <i>sharia</i> 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

The policymaking 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. The two most powerful policymaking institutions in Iran are the *Majles* and the Guardian Council, with the Expediency Council refereeing disputes between the two.

POLICYMAKING 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 *sharia* law with a minimum of modern modifications. They are wary of influence from western countries and warn that modernization may threaten the tenets of Shiism 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 Shiism 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 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.

THE IMPORTANCE OF QOM

The legitimacy of the modern Iranian theocracy has its roots in Qom, a desert city about 60 miles south of Tehran. It was from Qom that Ayatollah Khomeini began to denounce the shah, and it was there that he set up his government after returning from exile in France. It is a city of seminaries, and the scholars that inhabit them help to define the very foundation of Iranian society. Ironically, despite the fact that Khomeini’s doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih* was devised in Qom, many scholars there are not entirely comfortable with the theocratic state. Their debate frames the factionalism of Iranian politics.

From some perspectives, the only rightful union of religion and politics will occur when the Hidden Imam (see p. 230) returns from hiding. Until then, these scholars say, men of religion should be careful not to get involved in politics, and no one has special authority to guide society during this period called “occultation” between the disappearance and the return of the twelfth imam. Therefore, *velayat-e-faqih* is invalid, because it endows the supreme leader – and other government structures – with divine authority. President Khatami’s reform movement drew heavily on the views of clerics that see politics as an experimental, man-made activity that Islam should respect. These pragmatists, of course, clashed with conservative religious scholars, who agree with the doctrine of *velayat-e-faqih* and the divine authority that it implies, and their points of view are very influential in the reversal of the Khatami reforms under President Ahmadinejad.

The presidential candidates who challenged the 2009 election results appealed directly to the scholars of Qom without challenging *velayat-e-faqih* as a doctrine. The response from Qom was mixed, with one group of mid-ranking scholars and a few senior clergy denouncing the election as a fraud, but most kept quiet. However, the election and its aftermath no doubt fueled the disagreements among clerics, further factionalizing the country.

ECONOMIC ISSUES

The factional disagreements within the political elite are apparent in Iran's struggles with economic policymaking. 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 Shiism.

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 policymakers 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 management of the economy has been criticized, especially under President Ahmadinejad. He was elected based on his promises to provide government subsidies for consumers, and government expenditures on subsidies increased to about 25% of Iran's GDP in 2005-2006. The programs include food, housing, and bank credit, and perhaps most controversially, gasoline. Gasoline is priced so low that domestic refiners refuse to raise production to meet demand, so Iran has to import about 40% of its oil. This situation encourages oil smuggling to neighboring countries, and corruption among the quasi-state companies that deal in oil products. The global economic recession that began in late 2007 impacted Iran deeply, especially the dramatic decline in the price of oil in 2008.

POPULATION POLICY

One major initiative of the government in recent years has been to bring down the overall birth rate in Iran. The population surged after the Revolution of 1979, when Iranians were encouraged to have large families. As a result, the percentage of young people in the country grew tremendously, placing pressure on schools and eventually the workforce. Unemployment rates increased as too many young people sought the same jobs, so the clergy approved policies to lower the birth rate and reduce long-term burdens from overpopulation. Beginning in the late 1980s, the government reversed its policy and began discouraging large families. This new emphasis occurred at the same time that greater educational and professional opportunities opened to women, so the fertility rate declined, especially in urban areas. Although the population will continue to grow for some time because there are still so many young people of childbearing age, the government appears to have reversed the population crisis.

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Iran's international profile has been raised considerably by President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whose statements and actions have been quite controversial. He became the most polarizing head of government in the Muslim world when he declared the Holocaust a "myth," and argued that Israel should be "wiped away." Since then he has threatened to retaliate against American interests "in every part of the world" if the U.S. were to attack Iran. His 2006 letter to George W. Bush inviting him to a televised discussion about their differences was openly published in newspapers, and although Bush declined, Ahmadinejad received a great deal of international publicity for his gesture. He holds regular press conferences with western journalists, and he travels widely. Yet the stance that he generally takes is to defend Iran against the rest of the world, particularly the West, reinforcing the historical perception of an isolated country.

The attitudes toward supranational organizations such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization are 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 ENERGY

"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. In 2006 Britain, France, and Germany offered Iran trade, civil-nuclear assistance, and a promise of talks with America if it stopped enriching the uranium that could produce the fuel for a bomb. When Iran refused, diplomacy led in December 2006 to the imposition of formal economic sanctions by the United Nations' Security Council.

Iran has continued to meet with a six-country negotiating group (China, Russia, the United States, Britain, France, and Germany), and has increasingly frustrated the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N.'s

nuclear watchdog. When Barack Obama became president of the U.S. in early 2009, he declared a willingness to turn a new page in U.S.-Iranian relations, and his overtures were backed by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who justified them as a way to let the world know that “we are willing to engage.” There was no immediate reply from the Iranian government.

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, especially since the price of oil plummeted in 2008. 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.

IMPORTANT TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Ahmadinejad, Mahmoud
 Assembly of Religious Experts
 “axis of evil”
 Basij
 Baha’i
 Constitution of 1979
 Constitutional Revolution of 1905-09
 Cultural Revolution
 “economics is for donkeys”
 equality-with-difference
 The Executives of Construction Party
faqih
 fundamentalism
 Guardian Council
 head of state, head of government
 Hidden Imam
 imams
 import substitution industrialization
 Iranian Militant Clerics Society
 Islamic Iran Participation Front
 Islamic Society of Engineers
 jurist’s guardianship (*velayat-e-faqih*)
 Khamenei, Ali
 Khatami, Muhammad
 Khomeini, Ayatollah Ruhollah
 Khordad Front
Majles
Majles Election of 2004, 2008
 Mosaddeq, Muhammad
 Mousavi, Mir-Hossein

Muhammad Reza Shah

National Front

qanun

Qajar Empire

Qom

Pahlavi Foundation

Pahlavis

People of the Book

Persian Empire

presidential election of 2005, 2009

Rafsanjani, Akbar Hasemi

reformers v. conservatives

rentier state

Resurgence Party

Revolution of 1979

revolution of rising expectations

Revolutionary Guards

Reza Shah

Safavid Empire

secularization

sharia

Shiism

statists v. free-marketers

Sunni Muslims

supreme leader

theocracy

Tudeh Party

white coup

White Revolution

Workers' House

Zoroastrianism