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# The Authoritarian Resurgence

## IRAN'S PARADOXICAL REGIME

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Just as the 1979 Islamic revolution that begat the truncated republic of Iran was notable both for its ironies and incongruities and its novelties and cruelties, Iran today is ruled by a regime of glaring paradoxes. After 35 years of Islamic theocracy, Iran has become a land of myriad contradictions: It is a cruel authoritarian state, personified by the dour, aged faces of its autocratic rulers, where there are more public hangings per capita than anywhere else in the world and where misogynist laws deny women equal rights and status. Yet behind the mirthless face of the regime pulsates a young and globally connected citizenry and a women's movement as impressive in its reach as in its prudence and patience. So while the center is defined by authoritarian control, in the body politic, the "center cannot hold."

Only by deconstructing the nature and origin of these paradoxes can we understand the nature of the ruling authoritarian theocracy, as well as the challenges that it faces in maintaining the status quo. To assess why the Iranian regime has endured, to understand the methods that it uses to coerce and coopt its critics, and finally to gauge its long-term prospects of survival, we must place these issues in their dynamic historical context. The regime's authoritarianism is more flexible and durable than some of its quixotic detractors hope, yet more fragile and endangered than its invested defenders suggest.

The 1979 revolution was, according to a near-consensus among scholars, the most "popular" revolution in modern times—almost 11 percent of the population participated in it, compared to the approximately 7 and 9 percent of citizens who took part in the French and Russian revolutions, respectively.<sup>1</sup> As the political philosopher Hannah Arendt argued,

the concept of “revolution” is a creation of modernity. Before the rise of modernity and the birth of the concept of natural rights, the word “revolution” had no political connotation; it referred simply to the movement of celestial bodies. When the idea of a citizenry replaced the notion of subjects, however, the word took on its new political meaning—a sudden, often violent structural change in the nature and distribution of power and privilege. “Subjects” form a passive populace bereft of rights and needful of the guardianship of an aristocracy or rulers invariably anointed by the grace of God (or Allah). “Citizens,” by contrast, are imbued with natural rights, including the right to decide who rules over them.

In Iran, notions of popular sovereignty and limited government legitimized by the consent of the people had been part of political discourse since the late nineteenth century. Ironically, however, the 1979 revolution, which had the requisite popular support, was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who had denigrated the notion of popular sovereignty as a colonial construct meant to undermine the Islamic concept of *umma* (or spiritual community). In Khomeini’s treatise on Islamic government,<sup>2</sup> the will of the people is subservient to the dictates of the divine, as articulated by a supreme leader.

In this sense, his concept of an Islamic revolution is an oxymoron, and its concomitant idea of Islamic government—*velayat-e faqih*, or rule of the jurist—is irreconcilable with the modern democratic ideal of popular sovereignty. On the contrary, *velayat-e faqih* posits a population in need of a guardian, in the way that minors or madmen need guardians. In other words, the people are subjects rather than citizens. As conservative clerics such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati never tire of repeating, the very idea of an Islamic republic is a contradiction in terms. Iran, they say, is the government of God on earth, and certainly no mere republic. In an “Islamic state” (a term they used long before it was appropriated by terrorist groups), the people have no role or capacity to invest legitimacy in a ruler, or to divest it from him. All legitimacy is in the hands of Allah, and the supreme leader is His viceroy on earth. Defying the dictates of the leader, in this narrative, is nothing short of heresy—punishable both in this world and the next.

Yet in 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini called a populace that was expected to be servile and passive to stage a revolution—historically, the defiant act of a citizenry cognizant of its ability and right to demand a new social contract. And in the months before the revolution, Khomeini told the people that it was their right to demand a new social contract. Every generation, he said more than once, has the right to determine its own mode of governance. As a token of this right, the first government after the fall of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi was led by Mehdi Bazargan, who served as prime minister from February to November

1979. Bazargan was a man of moderate leanings, with a clear proclivity for democratic rights. At the same time, every government office, and soon every institution in the country, also had “special representatives” of Khomeini who increasingly asserted their authority to the detriment of government officials. A dual power structure began to emerge—one representing the will and desire of the people, and the other appointed by the supreme leader. It was not long before Khomeini, along with a coterie of clerics and activists, began talking of *velayat-e faqih* and the divine mandate of the clergy to rule. Thus the most popular of all “modern” revolutions led to the creation of a state whose constitution places absolute power in the hands of an unelected, unimpeachable man (and he shall always be a *man*) and whose basic political philosophy posits people as subjects and pliable tools of a supreme Islamic jurist, the *faqih*.

The democratic forces that had come together to make the revolution and overthrow the shah, however, did not dissipate or disappear, despite the biggest exodus from Iran in its three-thousand-year recorded history—of the country’s approximately 35 million inhabitants at the time of the revolution, between six and seven million have gone into exile. Advocates of democracy, women’s rights, freedom of expression, the rights of religious minorities (including Bahais) and ethnic minorities (such as Iranian Kurds and Azeri speakers) have, in spite of repeated waves of suppression, persisted. The uneasy reality of an authoritarian regime ruling a still vibrant and defiant society constitutes the most remarkable paradox of the Islamic revolution. Yet the country’s many historic anomalies and social disharmonies threaten the status quo.

The 1979 revolution was in a sense a replay of Iran’s first assay at democratic constitutional government, which resulted from the 1905–1907 constitutional revolution. At that time, a coalition of secular intellectuals, enlightened Shia clergy, bazaar merchants, the rudiments of a working class, and even some members of the landed gentry came together to topple the oriental despotism of the Qajar kings and replace it with a monarchy whose power was limited by a constitution (*mashruteh*). Indeed, the system established by the new 1906 Constitution emulated a European model of a liberal-democratic polity—one that allowed for elections and separation of powers, yet had a monarch as the head of state.

In those years, the most ideologically cohesive and powerful opposition to this new democratic paradigm was spearheaded by Sheikh Fazlollah Nouri—a Shia zealot who dismissed modern democratic constitutions as the faulty and feeble concoctions of fallible men. He believed instead that the divine and infinite wisdom of God, manifest in *shari’a*, should guide the country. The advocates of constitutional democracy were so powerful, however, that Nouri became the only

ayatollah in Iran's modern history to be executed on the order (*fatwa*) of his fellow clerics. For decades, Nouri's name was synonymous with the reactionary political creed of authoritarian rulers who sought their legitimacy in *shari'a*.

### The Rise of Authoritarianism

Almost seventy years later, the same coalition of forces that had created the constitutional movement coalesced once again, this time to topple the shah's authoritarian rule. By the 1970s, each of the social classes that had formed that earlier movement had become stronger and more politically experienced. Nevertheless, they chose as their leader Ayatollah Khomeini, a man who espoused an even more radical version of *shari'a*-based politics than what Nouri had proposed. While Nouri had urged that government should be based on *shari'a*, Khomeini advocated the absolute rule of the *faqih*, a man whose essential claim to power was his anointment by the Shia imams based on his mastery of *shari'a*. Moreover, even *shari'a* would become a pliant tool in the hands of the *faqih*, as the new concept of absolute rule of the *faqih* (*velayat-e motlagheh faqih*) meant that even principles of the faith, as well as the rules of *shari'a*, could be suspended by the supreme leader if he should deem it "expedient." So at a time when authoritarianism was gradually receding all over the world—starting in Portugal and Spain in the 1970s and peaking in the late 1980s as Soviet totalitarianism began to crumble—Ayatollah Khomeini was fighting against the tide of history, erecting an authoritarian state founded on the divine edicts of God and the absolute wisdom of the *faqih*.

Just as Nouri's ideas had split the Shia clergy after the constitutional revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas (as well as those of his successor, Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei) not only split the clergy, but also were incongruent with the wishes of the people. Today, this split has corroded the core of clerical ruling power itself. It has been reliably reported that Ayatollah Khomeini once said that, after his death (he died in 1989), the survival of the Islamic regime would depend on the continued cooperation of Khamenei and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was the second most powerful man in Iran for more than three decades. But in the last few years, the two men—friends and allies for almost sixty years—have been increasingly at odds.

A great deal of unchecked power is concentrated in Khamenei's hands. According to the constitution, the Assembly of Experts (a popularly elected body of theologians) is supposed to supervise the work of the supreme leader and elect a new one when he dies or is deemed to be derelict in his duties. Khamenei's supporters now openly dismiss the supervisory role of the Assembly and unabashedly claim that the body's "elected" members are as duty-bound to follow the wishes of the supreme leader as everyone else. Moreover, by law Khamenei is Iran's

commander-in-chief; he controls around US\$90 billion in revenue from foundations, endowments, and special accounts; and he can issue at will a *hokme-hokumati*—an order that everyone is expected to follow, and that trumps the letter and spirit of the constitution and all laws.

In addition, the supreme leader appoints not only the head of the judiciary but the head of the country's monopoly radio and television organization. Ever since Hassan Rouhani's election to the presidency in 2013, Khamenei and his conservative allies have taken a page out of the same playbook they used against the reformist president Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005), using the judiciary to intimidate critics, to shut down magazines, and even to forbid all media outlets from publishing the words or images of the still-popular Khatami. Yet in a perfect illustration of the paradox of Iran's clerical despotism, no sooner had the judiciary announced the draconian ban on Khatami than Rouhani and Rafsanjani both defied the blackout by publishing Khatami's photo on their respective websites.

Lately, the 80-year-old Rafsanjani (who served as president in 1989–97), along with many of the top Shia clerics and a surprising number of Khamenei's erstwhile supporters, has begun openly to challenge the supreme leader, the embodiment and symbol of clerical authoritarianism. Rafsanjani has even suggested that, after Khamenei, a committee of clerics should assume the responsibilities now held by the supreme leader. Many scholars and activists think that such a development would be a critical step in curtailing the authoritarian powers of the leader.

Yet the 75-year-old Khamenei has at his disposal a vast and varied set of tools for ideological molding and outright political oppression. He appoints all Friday Prayer leaders, and his office sets the agenda for their weekly sermons. The country's media generally give wide coverage to what is said in these sermons. His decisive role in appointing the head of the radio and television organization ensures his ability to control who has access to the airwaves. He appoints his own special envoy to *Keyhan*, which used to be the country's most popular daily paper but is now seen essentially as a Khamenei mouthpiece. Finally he appoints virtually all members of what is called the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution, a body of usually conservative figures keen on ensuring that higher education in Iran maintains an "Islamic" texture.

Khamenei has representatives in every institution, including all branches of the armed forces. The Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) is the chief tool of suppression and control at home. It is now also an economic juggernaut. The Basij—a paramilitary group of gangs-cum-militia—are literally and metaphorically the foot soldiers of the IRGC; they are used to control the streets, accost intransigent critics, and disrupt concerts or conferences considered "undesirable." Yet another paradox of Iran's authoritarianism is that the regime's conservative ideologues, despite claiming that legitimacy comes only from God,

nevertheless constantly use the power of mass rallies (invariably organized and funded by the Basij) in order both to underscore the regime's popularity and to intimidate its opposition.

Khamenei also appoints at least six members of the twelve-man Guardian Council, which now vets every candidate for every elective office in the country. In a gesture toward the democratic aspirations of 1979, this clerical dictatorship holds regular presidential and parliamentary elections, whose course clearly traces the ebb and flow of Iran's paradoxical despotism over the last twenty years. On the one hand, Khamenei and his cohort have regularly used their judicial fiat to exclude serious challengers or reformists from seeking elective office; on the other, democracy advocates and the people themselves have tried at every turn to use even controlled elections to inform the regime of their discontent and their desire for democratic reform.

The history of recent Iranian elections is filled with manifestations of the shifting dynamics of authoritarian control and the intermittently assertive democratic demands of the people: the surprising landslide victories of the reformist Khatami in the 1997 and 2001 presidential elections; the surge in popularity of former prime minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Rafsanjani in the 2009 presidential election; the unexpected swell of support for Rouhani after he aligned himself with reformists in 2013, enabling him to win that election; and the lack of popular support in 2013 for Saeed Jalili (the intransigent head of Iran's nuclear negotiating team), who, despite having the backing of the regime, won no more than five-million votes.

## The Paradox of Control and Weakness

The great paradox of Iran's clerical authoritarianism is that its weaknesses are evident. Even in the regime's ideological and oppressive apparatuses—from the intelligence organizations and government bureaucracy to the clerics who were once regime stalwarts—cracks are visible in the form of leaks, particularly about corruption during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–13), and in comments published in the media and online social networks. For example, at conferences and in interviews, some public intellectuals have recently criticized the regime's nuclear policies and suggested that leaders who can muster only a small percentage of the vote (like Jalili in 2013) are trying to use coercion to maintain power and continue past policies. Meanwhile, as the cracks in the regime have become more apparent, the populace has become more vocal. For instance, when Hossein Shariatmadari, the controversial editor-in-chief of the newspaper *Keyhan*, who is a Khamenei appointee and regime mouthpiece, attempted to give a talk at Tehran University, he was met with angry slogans and spent his entire time jostling with surprisingly assertive students. Every moment of this episode was captured and widely discussed on Iranian social media.

The paradoxes of the Islamic regime's authoritarianism are especially striking in the realm of information technology and social media. Iran has one of the most heavily censored Internet services in the world: The regime boasts of hiring thousands of cyber-jihadists, whose sole job it is to monitor, control, and even influence social media. Facebook and Instagram are officially banned in the country, and many in the regime wish to see a complete shutdown of online social networks—one cleric recently compared them to the biblical golden calf, chastising them as tools of the devil. Some officials advocate the establishment of a “national Internet” that would make it difficult for Iranians to access sites that the regime deems dangerous.

At the same time, close to forty-million Iranians have Internet access, five-million Iranians have Facebook accounts, and about a million use Instagram. Even more remarkably, Ayatollah Khamenei and President Rouhani each have active Facebook and Instagram accounts. There are now open disagreements between different elements of the regime—members of the Rouhani government on the one hand and conservative clerics on the other—about whether and how much control there must be over these kinds of tools and sites. While forces close to Rouhani, including members of his cabinet, insist that censoring or shutting down the sites is no way to fight their potential ill effects, the conservatives consistently advocate imposing more limits on usage. They also occasionally use the judiciary or the IRGC and its intelligence units to arrest social-network users and accuse them of either “collusion” with the enemy or spreading corruption.

A cultural trench war—a subtle battle for hegemony—is being waged in virtually every domain of life in Iran. Draconian laws and harsh sentences meant to intimidate critics are increasingly defied by a surprisingly large number of people. Jafar Panahi, the award-winning filmmaker who has been banned from making films for twenty years as punishment for his support of the democratic movement, has just sent his most recent movie to European film festivals. Every proposed movie must be approved by the government before cameras can roll, but Panahi clearly defied the rule and made his film without a permit. Nasrin Sotoudeh, a human-rights lawyer who has spent much time in prison and been banned from the Iranian bar, has not only continued to protest her banishment by standing vigil in front of the offices of the bar association, but also defied authorities by agreeing to play herself in the Panahi film. Everyday life in Iran now includes a number of permanently underground activities: theater groups, musical bands, film clubs, art exhibits, and an active and thriving publishing network that makes banned books available online and sometimes in print. There is even an underground university; because the regime bans Bahais from enrolling in colleges, members of that faith have created a remarkable alternative university, whose graduates have been accepted to many prominent Western schools.



While the regime maintains a policy of gender apartheid—one objection to Facebook and Twitter is that they allow “illicit” direct contact between members of the opposite sex—women are increasingly visible

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in every sphere of public life. There are now more women poets, writers, directors, singers, and entrepreneurs than ever before. The country is experiencing a sexual revolution that is unlike anything it has known before and is altogether incongruent with the professed pieties of the regime. There is, sadly, a tsunami of divorce—rooted partly in the many social malaises facing the country but also in the reality of newly assertive women who would rather get divorced (possibly becoming

single parents) than suffer the “slings and arrows” of a misogynist relationship.

At the same time, in an apparent effort to intimidate women to dress “modestly” and in line with regime guidelines, there has been a spate of acid attacks on women—the most infamous case happening in the city of Isfahan. Women’s groups and other democratic forces in Tehran and Isfahan have demonstrated against what they consider to be the regime’s lackadaisical approach to apprehending the culprits. It is striking that a regime which prided itself on arresting almost instantly those who had allegedly committed a small act of armed robbery—four young men, using machetes taking a small sum of cash from someone who had used a cash machine—has been somehow unable to arrest the culprits in the acid attacks.

The regime has tried to stem the tide of this cultural revolution by force and through propaganda. It occasionally arrests leaders of the Bahai underground university and raids some of the other cells of cultural resistance. But so far it has utterly failed to dissuade the population from participating in them. Thus, while the specter of Procrustean cultural control is never far from the horizon in Iran, defiant resistance through the sophisticated use of metaphors in every discursive form manages to persevere. When a regime tries to engineer and control every facet of life—from sartorial style to quotidian minutiae—then all facets of that life become potential loci of resistance. A scarf worn an inch higher on a woman’s head, revealing just a few more strands of hair, or a name for a newborn baby chosen from the lexicon of pre-Islamic Persian mythology rather than the roster of Islamic saints, becomes a tool of resistance and an indicator of defiance.

Students of Iranian politics have interpreted in varying ways the paradox of having so many loci of “underground” resistance in a severely

repressive authoritarian regime. Some observers argue that the regime, in an attempt to forestall the necessity of structural change, has opted for what social theorists have called “repressive tolerance.” According to this narrative, the regime has consciously decided to allow these private, underground, and ultimately apolitical forms of resistance not as a gesture of toleration, but rather as a way of placating and pacifying the dissatisfied masses in order maintain the status quo.

Others, however, argue that after the traumas of the last twenty years—the failed promises of the eight-year Khatami presidency, the suppressed Green Movement of 2009, and the ongoing and near-apocalyptic destruction in Syria and Iraq—the Iranian people, recognizing the regime’s willingness to brutally suppress any direct threat to its power, have chosen a new way to engage in politics. Instead of directly challenging the power of the state, they use elections to send messages of discontent and to help elect less undesirable leaders (such as Rouhani). More crucially, they have begun to chip away at the regime’s capacity to control and shape daily life. Politics is, after all, as much about the quality of life in the private sphere as it is about control of the centers of power.

According to this narrative, the gradual, corrosive, and inexorable power and persistence of such micropolitical defiance—these myriad sites of life lived in a manner incongruent with the regime’s “social-engineering” designs—will inevitably break the clerics’ authoritarian grip. Also helping to loosen their hold is the serious economic crisis that the regime currently faces, a result of longtime corruption, incompetence, the siphoning off of government rents and sky-high black-market profits by the elite, all augmented by international sanctions and the falling price of oil. The only way for Iran to resolve this crisis is by instituting the rule of law and putting an end to corruption, crony capitalism, and the rentier state that subsidizes authoritarian rule.

## NOTES

1. See Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

2. Ruhollah Khomeini, *Islamic Government*, trans. Joint Publications Research Service (New York: Manor Books, 1979).