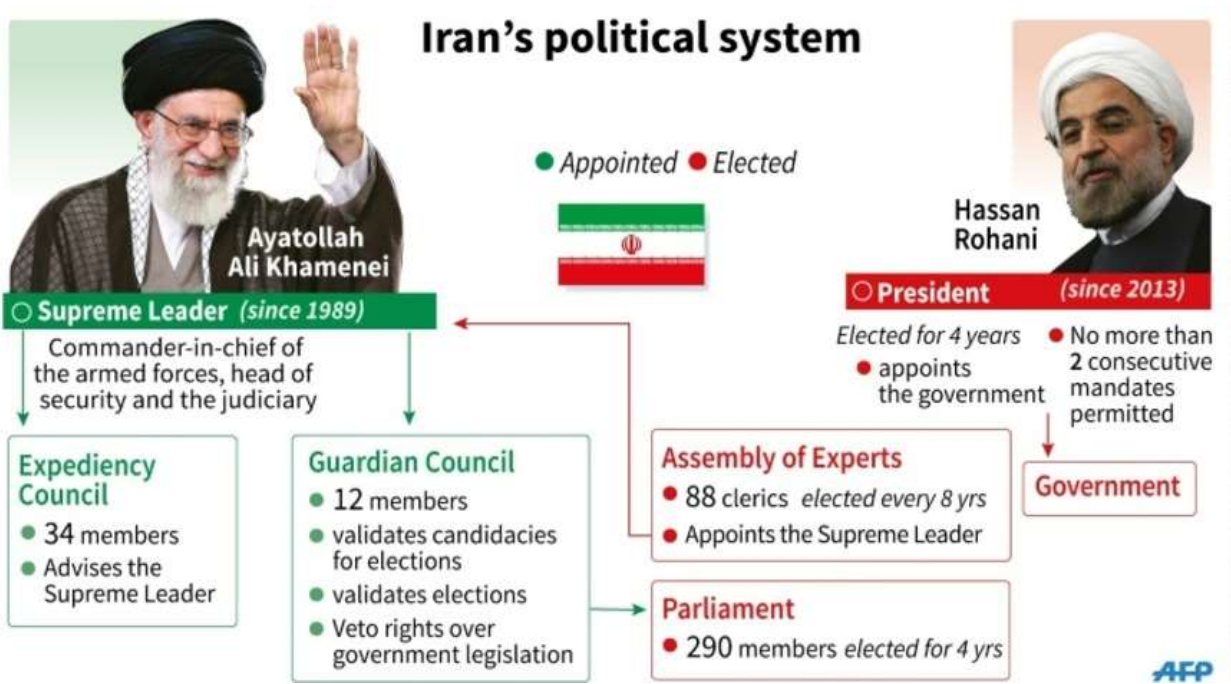


Iranian Political System



Iranian Political System

Islamic Republic of Iran,” which is the official name of Iran, is a puzzle for many scholars, yet many political scientists opine that Iranian political system is a theocracy. Other terms used to describe the Iranian political system are religious tyranny, mullocracy, clerisy, and theocratic oligarchy. According to its Constitution, Iran is an Islamic republic and a unitary state, where state power is divided into three main branches; namely the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary.

Nine Basic Political Institutions

Iran has basically nine political institutions which make its political system what it currently is, as of 2017. The first of these nine institutions is the Assembly of Experts (which consists of 88 mujtahids and ayatollahs. Although woman mujtahid is de jure possible, so far this case has never been seen.

They are elected directly by the public for a term of eight years. There are no conditions clarified in the Constitution for nomination for this post. Members of the Assembly have to be experts in Islamic jurisprudence according to a law decreed by the Iranian Parliament. Assembly meets at least two times a week, and these experts elect the Supreme Leader and take him out of office. Yet, they have never overtly resisted to any of the decisions of the Supreme Leader so far, let alone taking him out. Lastly, the minutes of the Assembly are deemed secret documents. The Iranian Parliament, the “Islamic Parliament of Consultation” in its original Farsi name, (is unicameral and composed of 290 deputies. According to the Iranian Constitution (Constitute Project, 2016), the Parliament is the legislative body and legislates in all matters within the context of the Constitution.

It approves all international treaties, agreements, and cabinet ministers nominated by the President. It has the power to impeach the cabinet ministers and the president. For the impeachment of the president, one third of the votes of the Parliament members (PM) are required. After this requirement met, one more voting is conducted, and if two thirds of the PMs vote for the impeachment of the president, the case is taken to the Supreme leader). Third institution is the Supreme Leadership who is the head of the state and the highest religious and political authority. The institution, the Governance of the Jurist, Vilaya-te Faqih, has the crux of the mentality of the Iranian political system. Khomeini articulated his political ideas in his book titled Islamic Government (1970), arguing that the Supreme Leader is to guide the Islamic community (umma) until the twelfth Imam emerge on earth and take his political and religious role.

Until then, governments would be regarded illegitimate. In this sense, he thinks that there is no division whatsoever between religion and politics. The Supreme Leader is elected by the Assembly of Experts for eight years and can be elected again without any limit. Compared to the president, he has more authority and is more respected, appointing many high-level bureaucrats in the military, the judiciary, and the government. He can put impeachment on the president with the two out of three members of the Assembly of Experts.

He appoints the head of the judiciary for eight years, the members of the Expediency Council for five years, six out of the twelve members of the Guardian Council for six years, the head of the state radio and television channel, the Friday prayer Imams of each province for a lifelong term, all the Commander-in-chief of the Armed Forces, the General Directorate of Security, and the head of the Intelligence Unit. According to the Iranian Constitution, the Supreme leader must be an Islamic scholar who is just, pious, brave, genius in social and political matters, having common sense, foresight, administrative and leadership features. That is, Khomeini seems to have imagined the Supreme Leader as Plato (2003) imagined the philosopher-king in his book The Republic. He

is chosen by the Assembly of the Experts from among those who have the required characteristics. If the members of the Assembly may reach no agreement as to who to elect as the Supreme Leader, the Assembly choose someone among its own members. Hitherto, there have been two Supreme leaders, Ruhollah Khomeini being the first between 1970-1989 and Sayyid Ali Khamenei being the second since 1989.

The fourth major institution is the Guardian Council, which is vested with the authority to make guardianship for the principles of Islam as well as being responsible for the interpretation of the Iranian Constitution. It also supervises elections in the Assembly of Experts, and presidential and parliamentary elections. It reviews all the laws passed by the Parliament and can veto laws if it finds them contradictory to the Constitution. According to the Article 91 of the Constitution, it has 12 members, half of which are appointed by the Supreme Leader, and other half of which are nominated by the judiciary and later approved by the Parliament (Constitute Project, 2016).

However, although its members are not elected, it has the power to supervise directly any law enacted in the Parliament by the elected PMs. It traditionally vetoes many laws regarding women rights, election reforms, ratification of international agreements on human rights, ban on the torture etc. It can also veto the nomination of any candidate in elections and increases the role of the military in the daily life. With this extended powers, the Council traditionally vetoes the candidacy of the reformist figures in both the parliamentary and the general elections.

For instance, the Council vetoed the candidacies of 1006 out of 1014 candidates, thereby narrowing the figure to eight politicians in the 2005 Presidential Election. Since the Council similarly vetoes the reformist candidates in parliamentary elections, the majority of the Iranian Parliament is traditionally held by the conservative Islamists, and these conservative Islamists in turn nominate half of the members of the Council usually from among the conservative members of the judiciary. Due to this vicious circle, the Parliament was kept at a certain distance from the popular will in favor of the official ideology, and thus the conservative Islamist character of the Parliament and of the laws are sustained. Only the change of the Supreme Leader may bring about considerable change in the Council as the Supreme Leader appoints half of the members of the Council.

Hence, the Council is widely and duly criticized to pose a hinder before the democratization process in Iran. The Presidency is the fifth major political institution in Iran. The president is the highest elected Iranian political authority. He is elected by single majority in general elections for a term of four years and could not serve more than two terms. Being responsible to the Supreme Leader, he makes agreements with other countries and international organizations, ratifies the budget, appoints the vice presidents, and the cabinet ministers but the appointments of cabinet ministers must be approved by the Parliament. The president is not the ultimate authority as to the Armed Forces, foreign policy, and the policy of nuclear energy; the Supreme Leader is the ultimate authority on these crucial matters. He is the head of the cabinet, the deputy commander-in-chief, and the head of the National Security Council and of the Cultural Revolution Council. Being vested with the power to suspend all the laws and declare martial law, he may declare war. According to the Iranian Constitution, the president must be of Iranian origin, Iranian citizen, having the feature of leadership, having a clear account of history, trustworthy and pious, believing in the basic principles of the Islamic Republic of Iran and in the official sect of the state which is Shi'a Islam. The sixth institution is the cabinet that has 22 ministries but no prime minister as the president is the head of it.

Therefore, ministers are directly responsible to the president, yet they could be deprived of their ministry with no-confidence vote of the Parliament and with the will of the president. The seventh major institution is the Expediency Council whose task is to determine Iran's interests where the Parliament and the Guardian Council cannot agree. It also works as a consultative body for the Supreme Leader about the general policies of the regime. The eighth institution is the head of the judiciary. This institution is different from a ministry of justice since the Iranian judiciary system is based on Shi'a Islamic law, and thus, there is a senior cleric on the top of the judiciary system, appointed directly by the Supreme Leader for a five-year term.

He nominates the minister of the justice to the president and the six non-clerical members of the Guardian Council to the parliament as well as appointing many high-level bureaucrats related to the judicial affairs. The last major political institution in Iran is the Armed Forces which is composed of two parts as the Revolutionary Guards and the Republican Army. The Revolutionary Guards are directly under the Supreme Leader to prevent any possible coup attempt from the ordinary army and hence wields remarkable influence on the security bureaucracy of the state. It is obvious that the Iranian political institutions do not have much semblance with a liberal democracy although, prima facie, there is a parliament, a cabinet, a president, and so on. Yet they do not make up a tyrannical rule either for there is a peculiar kind of equilibrium between them.

Although Khomeini's tenure was a one-man rule due to his charismatic figure and to the significant role, he played during the 1979 Revolution, after his demise in 1989; the regime became a bizarre combination of oligarchic, theocratic, and democratic elements.

But still, the Supreme Leader is above all the institutions and responsible to no-one since he is regarded as unmistakable and holy. A high-level Iranian bureaucrat even argued that the Assembly of Experts does not elect the Supreme Leader but they "discover" him. Therefore, the lack of cohesion between the state institutions is the fundamental problem for the current functioning of the Iranian regime. Therefore, it is argued that post-revolutionary Iran is institutionally Balkanized. The dual institutions whose functions overlap each other cause a "suspended equilibrium" in the regime. This situation is called as "dissonant institutionalization" of the state. Functional overlapping of the institutions results in their being "interdependent" on each other, and thus, power games start; institutions may work to undermine each other's influence in the political arena, which led to the development of miscellaneous political factions. The ruling elite is said to have four factions as traditional right, radical right, modern right, and the left. Kamrava & Hassan-Yari writes "The traditional right is made-up of ultra-conservative clerics who oppose all forms of secularism in policy. By contrast, most members of radical right tends to be non-clerics, although they are mostly also virulently anti-Western, oppose capitalism and staunchly resist all attempts to deviate from what they consider to be Khomeini's pure vision of Islamic revolution.

The modern right is generally less radical, includes educated professionals, and its members can be found in most of the institutions of the state. Nevertheless, it still resist what is seen as deviation from the original essence of the revolution. As importantly, it opposes the ideologically motivated interpretations of Islam popular with the Left. ... For its part, the Left is comparatively less fractious, although its lack of access to the state's most powerful institutions – especially the judiciary, the Leadership, the Guardian's Council, and the Expediency Council – has kept it at a relative disadvantage vis-à-vis the Right." However, following Khomeini's death in 1989, Iranian political regime transformed remarkably. When a revolution is no longer seen as a revolution, the regime starts to change. This phenomenon is called "Thermidor" in the political science literature.

Population growth was 3.5% in Iran throughout 1980s—one of the highest numbers in the world—but it turned out to be 0.86 in 2005, which is close to the world average. These figures demonstrate that 1979 Iranian Revolution lost its fever as all revolutions do over time. Iranian politicians are no longer following aggressive and purely ideological foreign policies, except the notorious Syrian policy of Iran since the start of the Arab Spring. Secular power politics is on rise, which is another indication of the exhaustion of the Revolution. In this sense, there has been a number of structural changes within the Iranian political regime. Firstly, the figure of “maximum leader” was replaced by the figure of the “first among equals (primus intersperse),” which was a transformation from paternalism to presidentialism. Secondly, the regime shifted its ideology of Islamic totalitarianism to pragmatic Islamism, the most important result of which has been the marginalization of the Islamist extremist groups in the country.

Thirdly, there has been a major transformation in the regime’s official ideology from universal Islamism to nationalist Islamism. Thus, the 1979 Revolution has evolved from the Umma Revolution to the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Lastly, technocratic ministers replace the ideological ministers more and more. In this sense, the de-clericalization of the Iranian cabinet is underway. All these changes and transformations show that the Iranian political regime is structurally no longer the same with the one that was created after the Revolution.

The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran

Iranian Constitution starts with a pompous, five-page long preamble in which the regime’s religious vision is frequently stressed. It asserts that the state has an official ideology, which is genuinely Islamic. It defines the Iranian society as a “Muslim nation” under the guidance of “militant ulama” and the Supreme Leader. Later, the preamble gives a bombastic narration of the the 1979 Revolution and calls it an enlightenment and a rebellion against the “American conspiracy and world imperialism,” probably with direct effect of Khomeini’s anti-imperialist ideas. The Constitution accepts that the 1979 Revolution is not only the fruit of pious men, but of all segments of society including the left and the women.

There are numerous turgid expressions such as “the wrath of the people” and “continuous and unrelenting struggle” scattered in the last pages of the preamble where the form of government in Islam, according to Khomeini, is elaborated. The text mentions about “the impurities of the past,” thereby having an anti-traditional religious stance reminding of Ali Shari’ati who has often been regarded as the ideologue of the 1979 Revolution (Constitute Project, 2016). The constitution has conspicuous totalitarian sentiments since it claims to establish an ideal and model society and, as aforementioned, declares an official ideology. It says that the Iranian state will strive to construct a worldwide umma and help “the deprived “(and “the downtrodden “(in their struggle for liberation. Some Qur’anic verses are also mentioned. The preamble includes a separate title for women and the ideological army, as well as various ideological terms such as the “Islamic justice,” “extending the sovereignty of God throughout the world,” “ideological mission of jihad in God’s way,” “consumerism and exploitation of women,” “human rights and creation of an Islamic society.

” Under the title “Mass-Communication Media,” it is written that “mass communication must serve the diffusion of Islamic culture.” The preamble finishes with the sentence that “this century will witness the establishment of a universal holy government and the downfall of others.” In effect, this preamble gives a short account of the worldview of the founders of the Islamic Republic of Iran, of Khomeini in particular (Constitute Project, 2016). After the preamble, Article 1 of the Iranian Constitution states that the form of government is Islamic Republic. Article 2 declares that sovereignty belongs exclusively to God and writes “La ilaha illallah (There is no God except

Allah).” It also says that the supreme leadership and guidance is for some of Ali Shari’ati’s significant works, see Ali Şeriati (2014). *Dine Karşı Din: Anne Baba Biz Suçluyuz*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları; Ali Şeriati (2016). *Dünya Görüşü ve İdeoloji*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları; Ali Şeriati (2016). *Kendini Devrimci Yetiştirmek*. Ankara: Fecr Yayınları. Perpetual. Article 3 lists goals of the regime. Looking at those goals, one can conclude that Iranian regime is, again, totalitarian, somewhat socialist, clearly anti-imperialist, irredentist, ummatist, and collectivist.

Article 11 says that all Muslims naturally form a single nation. The first reference to the Shi’a sect of Islam is made in Article 12 which runs “the official religion of Iran is Islam and the Twelver Ja’fari School” adding that “other schools are accorded full respect and can perform their religious rites.” Article 13 mentions the officially recognized minorities: Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian Iranians (without mentioning Baha’i sect of Islam, which is generally seen as heretic by the Shi’i Muslims) who are free to perform their religion. Article 15 declares that Farsi is the official language of Iran but any language could be used in press and mass media. Education of Arabic language in the primary and secondary schools are compulsory since Arabic is the language of the Qur’an, says Article 16. The official calendar is the Hijri Calendar, and weekly holiday is Friday. Article 57 says that three branches of state power, namely the executive, the legislative, and the judiciary, are independent of each other (Constitute Project, 2016).

Government and Electoral System

The Iranian Parliament which has 290 deputies is unicameral as aforementioned. The head of the executive is the president and the Supreme Leader. There is no prime minister but the president functions as the de facto prime minister. Therefore, the political system is a hybrid of parliamentary and presidential systems. It has presidential characteristics since the president is popularly elected and does not have to be the leader of any political bloc in the Parliament. At this point, it is noteworthy that there is such a balance among the institutions that no one or no institution can resist the authority of the Supreme Leader. Iran’s political system also resembles the parliamentary system since the president as well as the cabinet ministers are responsible to the Parliament, and the Parliament can ask the president to attend its sessions and can ask him questions.

Moreover, the parliament can take the ministers out of office with no-confidence vote. The president has no authority to veto the laws enacted by the Parliament, and he is not the head of the armed forces either (Constitute Project, 2016). In Iran, there are also local governments which functions as the administrative bodies of the provinces. A law enacted in 1997 with the name “decentralization law” enhanced the powers of the local governments and committees; nonetheless, they are still weak vis-a-vis their equivalents in liberal democracies. Iran’s population is about 75 million and the electorate is nearly 50 million, 60% of whom are living in the cities. One out of three of the Iranian population is under 30 years old, which means that around a third of the Iranian society was born after the 1979 Revolution. Elections in Iran are extremely unfree. The Guardian Council nullifies candidacy of many candidates if it thinks a candidate is not loyal to the regime. In the presidential elections, two-round majority election system is applied. In the general elections that are held once in four years, the system of the single-member district is implemented. Five seats are allocated for the religious minorities in the Parliament: one for the Zoroastrians, one for the Jews, one for the Assyrian and the Chaldean Christians, one for the northern Armenian Christians, and one for the southern Armenian Christians. Local elections are held once in every four year. There are five administrative entities as village, urban area, little province, province, and county, all of which have their own local parliaments .

Source:

<https://dergipark.org.tr>