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# The Jurist State and the Dilemma of the Institutionalization of Parties in Iran

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Iran had been familiar with the failings of political parties and organizations before the Iranian revolution of 1979. Under the Shah's regime, the religious, nationalist, and Marxist parties faced intense pressure from the country's authorities, forcing them to work underground.<sup>1</sup> The situation hardly changed after the revolution, following the defeat of the liberal and then the socialist movements in the wake of the uprising, with nonreligious parties ultimately failing to attain any parliamentary representation; this became effectively impossible after the new constitution imposed regulations against political parties' work.

Iran's current theocratic political system is founded on the theory of the Jurist Leadership [Wilayat-Faqih], which rests on three pillars. First is the religious pillar represented by the Supreme Leader and the senior clerics who rule the country. Second is the security pillar in the form of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and the security services, which are affiliated with the Supreme Leader.<sup>2</sup> The third is the political pillar embodied by the elected political institutions; this is the weakest of the three in terms of influence in political decision-making, which is negligible unlike the absolute power of the unelected organs of state. Although the creation of political parties is nominally allowed by the constitution, the prescriptions on any meaningful dissent or deviation from the regime's worldview mean there is no way to build a genuine pluralist democracy in Iran.<sup>3</sup> The splits and division within these parties, typical of political life and of the steady decline within Iranian society, appear to be inherent characteristics.

There are several reasons for these divisions, the foremost one being the totalitarian nature of the country's political system which hinders the formation of independent and varied political schools of thought capable of broad, non-doctrinal thinking that accepts other views. Another reason is the party leaders' and members' failure to agree on a political model which dovetails with the religious and cultural values promoted by the regime. For these and other reasons, the various political movements have been unable to establish a party with any staying power, with schisms and dissolution being the fate of opposition parties and political movements within Iran.<sup>4</sup>

In the context of the aforementioned observations, this study focuses on measuring the degree of institutionalization or conformity to the regime's worldview within the Iranian party system, measuring the degree of institutionalization within the party entities or semi-partisan movements competing for power in Iran. The study argues that the greater the degree of conformity to the regime's worldview and internal institutionalization of its perspectives, both in the parties' own organizational hierarchy and through their policies, the less able they are to promote or participate in meaningful democratic transformation.

### **First: Party Institutions and Promoting the Democratic Transformation Process**

Democratic transition refers to the processes and interactions associated with the shift from an undemocratic regime to a democratic system of government. This is divided into several phases and subphases ending with the consolidation of democracy; this refers to the evolution of the democratic system into a stable institutional system that can continue and embody the values of democracy, its components, and mechanisms<sup>5</sup> and to establish institutions and permanent arrangements for the functioning of the democratic process,<sup>6</sup> with a view to reach political decisions in which individuals have the power to decide from a range of competing choices through voting.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, Schmitter defined the minimum consolidation of the democratic system as the process of transforming the occasional arrangements that emerged during the transition period into recognized and reliable cooperative and competitive relationships, practiced regularly and accepted voluntarily by individual actors or political groups involved in democratic governance, that is, the consolidation of Huntington's democratic culture.<sup>8</sup>

Gunther, Diamandourus, and Puhle also viewed the democratic system as being strengthened when all politically important groups consider the main political institutions as being the only legitimate framework for the political rivalry. Similarly, Robert Dahl lists eight institutional requirements for a democracy.<sup>9</sup> These are

- » the freedom to form and join organizations
- » the freedom of expression
- » the right to vote
- » access to public positions
- » the right of political leaders to compete for voters' votes
- » the existence of alternative sources of information
- » free and fair elections
- » elected institutions for government policy-making based on votes and other expressions of preference.

A democratic system exists where governments are formed by individuals who win free and fair elections. Possible deviations which can undermine the authority of democratically elected governments and diminish their means include

- » the existence of the power of guardianship, that is if the power centers of policy-making belonging to the nonelected elites.
- » the existence of spheres of power and policy-making excluded from the control of the elected majority.
- » electoral discrimination and biased electoral systems against minorities who cannot win parliamentary seats.
- » military coups or rebellions by political actors.<sup>10</sup>

In this context, Diamond pointed out that promoting democracy means developing the quality, depth, and authenticity of the democratic process so that political competition is fairer, more participatory, and better represented and accommodated. Procedural democratic transformations, such as free and restricted elections that prevent participation and party competition, do not guarantee democratic consolidation.<sup>11</sup>

Wolfgang Merkel identified the following four dimensions in promoting political democracy:

**Institutional Consolidation:** This denotes the principles and standards of central constitutional and political institutions, such as the head of state, the parliament, the government, the judiciary, and the electoral system and their ability to include politics and society (minorities are not discriminated against), institutional efficiency (rapid decision-making and implementation), and political effectiveness (political decisions contribute to problem-solving).

**Representative Consolidation:** This refers to parties and interest groups, as well as factors such as low levels of disintegration, polarization, and voter turnout, which are elements conducive to the promotion of democracy. Parties and interest groups are important links between politics and society and must be effective and inclusive.

**Behavioral Consolidation:** This refers to the veto granted to political actors such as the military, paramilitary groups, powerful economic actors, or terrorist groups.

**Civic Culture or Political Culture:** This is the basis of democracy. Hence, espousing democracy is synonymous with institution-building. The centrality of the parties' role in promoting democracy becomes clear.<sup>12</sup> The parties fulfill a number of vital functions, including the consolidation of citizens' interests; the formation of governments; the development and strengthening of attitudes, policies, and programs; the empowerment, selection, and training of political leaders; and the organization of electoral campaigns and consolidation of community interests, establishing a necessary link between the state and civil society.<sup>13 14</sup>

However, what do we mean by partisan institutions? What are their levels?

We should distinguish between the institutionalization of political parties and the institutionalization of the party system.

The institutionalization of the party system has several criteria:

» A competitive party system, that is, power-sharing between parties, enhancing the prospects for electoral accountability.

» A behavioral dimension: this refers to the relationship between the parties, that is, mutual acceptance, and their interaction as legitimate competitors.

» A structural dimension that entails the interaction of the party system with the state and, to an appropriate degree, independence from it.

» The existence of a degree of public trust in the parties as political institutions.

» Regarding institutionalization of political parties, we can first state that organizations are not necessarily institutions. Over time, some organizations transform into institutions. While political parties are organizations, they are primitive even if they are established with some form of official rules and objectives.<sup>15</sup>

Huntington suggested several institutional dimensions which apply to political parties:

» Adaptability. The older the organization and the more peaceful the succession of leadership, the higher the level of institutionalization.

» Complexity/Simplicity. The less it depends on individuals and the greater the number of organizational units, the more institutionalized the entity is.

» Independence. Organizations that are considered as tools for a social class, such as a clan and a class, lack independence and institutionalization.

» Cohesion/Division. This is the extent of accumulation of splits between leaders and members.<sup>16</sup>

Panbianco stressed that by adopting an "institutional" form, an organization acquires elements of power, a process through which the organization slowly loses its character as a tool, to become a value in itself, with its existence becoming the target of many of its supporters.<sup>17</sup>

Randall and Svasand determined four institutional elements:

**The systemic dimension:** This refers to how the party is established. The more

it was built through the “spread” of ideology from the center to the fringes, the more institutionalized its thinking, with parties that rely on charismatic appeal disappearing after the transfer of power.

**Value infusion:** This alludes to the roots of the party within a society and its association with the social and economic classes therein.

**Independence:** Any party’s dependence on external supporters is an institutional weakness, transferring the center of its loyalties outside the party structures and making the external institutions the source of leadership and legitimacy.

**Symbolic embodiment (reification):** The degree to which the party has become an unforgettable institution because of the symbolic values it represents.

In their model of political party institutionalization, Basedau and Stroh identified four key dimensions for measuring the degree of institutionalization, namely, the level of organization, internal cohesion, independence, and socialization.

Kristina Weissenbach added other elements and institutionalized dimensions, including the following:

**Organization:** The ability of the party to act as a professional bureaucratic entity within all its organizational levels, its ability to access fixed resources, and its strong organizational presence outside the capital.

**Internal Party Democracy:** This refers to a model in which the political will within the party is formed from the bottom up, from the base to the party leadership, thus ensuring that the decision-making process is transparent and is carried out within legitimate official committees rather than through informal party gatherings.

**Program:** This refers to defining the party’s core set of values and objectives to form a clear ideological basis which is consistently reflected in the party’s political program.

**Autonomy:** The independence of a party organization from any influence by individuals within or outside the party, and the independence of the decision-making structures from external actors.

**Roots in Society:** This refers to the strength of the party’s roots in its society, meaning the party can, therefore, rely on a broad base of appreciation and support from voters.

**Coherence:** Cohesion and internal unity, while ensuring diversity of views and tolerance of political discussions within the party, ensure that relations between internal groups should not undermine the unity of the party.<sup>18</sup>

## **Second: Political Parties Operating in Iran “Factions, not Parties”**

In dealing with the nature of political parties operating in Iran, it is necessary to first describe the social and political environment within which they are interacting. This refers to a number of factors, the most important being the following:

1- The Iranian political system is a restricted “authoritarian” system rather than a democratic one, despite its claims to the contrary. This means that the pluralism within it is restricted to the entities working and competing within the system of the Jurist Leadership.<sup>19</sup>

2- The post-revolutionary political and political structures of Iran have been shaped by historical events and military involvement therein, such as the revolution, the attack on the Iranian Embassy, the formation of popular committees, and the Iran-Iraq war.

3- Acceptance of the Jurist Leadership system’s primacy is the main condition for granting any political party a license to operate inside Iran, which has led to a strong degree of uniformity among the country’s parties, with any differences being negligible since they are all working within the confines of the regime’s ideology, being denied any right to oppose it.

4- Iran’s political parties are very different from those of other countries. In the immediate wake of the 1979 revolution, Iran briefly had parties spanning the political left, right, and center with a leftist president, Seyyed Abolhassan Banisadr, taking office in February 1980; with his impeachment in June 1981 after only 16 months in office, the clerics’ theocratic establishment brutally eradicated any political movement which it felt contravened the principle of the rule of the jurist and the Iranian state, eradicating any real political pluralism.

5- The men of the religious circles [Hawzas] (seminaries for training Shia Muslim clerics) established the Iranian Republic Party in mid-1979 to counter the growing influence of leftist parties. This was the only recognized political party in Iran up to the end of 1987, with no new parties formed before 1994, when close associates of Hashemi Rafsanjani formed the ‘*Executives of Construction of Iran Party*,’ which is a reformist political party, although of course it operates within the boundaries of the regime’s ideology.

6- After Mohammad Khatami had been elected president of Iran in 1997, other parties emerged. In 1998, the formation of other political parties was formally permitted by the leadership, but these are more coalitions based on concern and special interests rather than political parties in any meaningful sense.

Based on this information, it is clear from the contemporary political scene in Iran that there is no real political opposition, with the regime remaining a theocratic authority that does not allow any meaningful margin of disagreement. The absolute power enjoyed by the Supreme Leader and the subservient institutions which implement his orders in accordance with the theocratic system adopted by the regime means that any opposition is effectively outlawed not only from political activity but also even from the public declaration of any opposing ideas, with the voices of groups of a civil or secular character so limited as to be ineffectual.<sup>20</sup> The active political forces in Iran are divided into two principal groups—reformists and conservatives—whose members enjoy political flexibility allowing them to move freely between the two streams because they are ultimately loyal to the rule of the Jurist [Faqih] and operate under the umbrella of the Iranian Constitution.

The map of Iran's political forces—the aforementioned reformists and conservatives—is characterized by extreme liquidity and frequently changes from one election to the next. Thus, the classification of Iran's political entities can be based on their position on the issue of the relationship between the state and the revolutionary bodies (related to the Iranian revolution). Broadly speaking, the state focuses on considerations of construction and development, while the revolutionary bodies are concerned with security and military power and the desire for external influence. Given these factors, it can be said, therefore, that the active political forces are distributed in Iran among several major factions:

**A. “Revolutionary” faction.** This bloc, which seeks to promote the “priorities of the revolution” over any other, comprises the radical and fundamentalist Shiite groups, the most important of which are the fundamentalist *United Front* and the *‘Line of Imam Front.’* These groups, which receive the support of the Supreme Leader (Khamenei), the Revolutionary Guards, and the country's religious institutions, thereby wielding great political and financial influence, are funded by the “khums,” that is, via the religious taxation levied by the state, which means that one-fifth of the value of certain items a person acquires as wealth must be paid to the “state of Islam,” that is, the Jurists, scholars, clerics, and other agents of the Guardian of the Jurist.

**B. Iran's current state.** This faction believes that priority should be given to the process of developing the regime and the state through expanding the scope of its development and reducing Iran's political isolation, increasing economic openness to the outside world. This bloc, described as reformist, is spearheaded by reformist figures such as Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and a group of the more open-minded politicians and clerics in the regime, such as the now-deceased Rafsanjani, his sons, Murtada Asraghi, Khomeini's grandson, and others.

**C. The minority reformist faction which has promoted issues such as pluralism and freedoms.** This bloc, which was the driving force behind the so-called “Green Revolution” of 2009, was formed and expanded during the rule of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. It includes groups of intellectuals, artists, students, and small liberal groups but has yet to attain any political power or influence within the political system.<sup>21</sup>

In general, political factions in Iran should not be understood as mass political parties. They are informal coalitions that lack explicit programs and hierarchical organizational structures but rely on personal charisma and elite networks.

These factions are the main means of political activity in Iran, with the logical consequence of the limitations imposed on them being a weak organization between the elite system and the social circles that seek to represent them in the absence of institutional mechanisms.<sup>22</sup>

### **Third: The Degree of Institutionalization in the Iranian Party System**

The institutionalization of the party system which sees the political blocs and factions as reflecting the regime's interests is the result of a series of developments. Some of these have come from direct influence through the institutionalization of the constituent parties

of the party system, while others are more indirect. A number of parties may attain distinct institutional advantages because of their close association with the regime or affiliated autocratic regimes, which allows them to limit the possibilities for growth and influence among rival blocs. Conflicts can be due to some factions having greater non-political sources of institutional power, such as ethnic or cultural affiliation with certain groups. Each bloc or faction represents or claims to represent a distinct social group, which effectively negates political competition, undermines popular trust in political parties, and affects the political system.<sup>23</sup>

To measure the degree of institutionalization within the Iranian party system, one can study the indicators shown in the following figure:

### **Indicators of an institutionalized party system**

#### **1- The degree of competition within the party system.**

In 1975, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi announced the dissolution of all political parties in the country and the establishment of one party, the Baath Party. Shah Pahlavi then tried to make changes to the systems of administration and governance in what he called the “White Revolution.” As a result of the subsequent brutal political repression and the disintegration of civil society, the popularity and domination of the religious trend increased, boosting public support for the then-exiled opposition leader, Khomeini. This ultimately led to the Iranian Revolution of 1979; despite the revolution, however, the same repression and denial of political pluralism remained under the new theocratic system. Although Khomeini had asserted during his time in exile that the Iranian republic would be dependent on democracy and political pluralism, on his return he immediately got rid of the symbols of the national movement when they clashed with his concept of a theocratic state. Since these developments, both before and after the Iranian Revolution of 1979, political life in Iran has been characterized by a clear ideological monopoly. There is no opportunity for the establishment of any political party which doesn’t follow the edicts of the rule of the jurist. Iran’s political life exists solely under the Supreme Leader’s ideological umbrella, with no space for those outside it. Therefore, we are talking about political trends within those ideological limitations rather than any real political pluralism or actual political parties. Even the so-called reformists are deeply conservative in origin; there is realistically no space for any healthy disagreement or plurality of views.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, if there is a consistent pattern of power between two major factions, it possesses no real diversity or competition.<sup>25</sup> Under these conditions, large segments of the population feel that they have been effectively disenfranchised and removed from the participatory process, leading to frustration and a turn toward nonpeaceful or undemocratic means of expression, with any democratic or peaceful protests brutally suppressed as seen during the Green Revolution of 2009.<sup>26</sup>

#### **2- Behavioral dimension: the degree of acceptance between political parties and the pattern of their interactions.**

The rivalry between political factions is limited, with the political elites enjoying a close relationship. This continuing peaceful rivalry depends on accepting the principle of

consensus between the rival political blocs to reach some measure of relative agreement through mutual concessions.<sup>27</sup>

One of the clearest demonstrations of the close relationship between the political blocs in Iran is the selection of presidential candidates by the Majlis Shura and the Council of Experts; as seen in the recent election, the Guardian Council, headed by Ahmed Jannati, rejected more than 99 percent of the reformist and moderate candidates who put their names forward, preventing them from standing for election. This demonstrates the absolute power wielded by the religious fundamentalists over state affairs, showing once again that there is no real possibility of any political advancement by anyone not approved by the conservative factions, which must work within the limitations set by the Shura Council and the Council of Experts on Leadership. The same applies to political and civil life in general.

Current events in the government of Hassan Rouhani is further proof of the growing conviction that Iran needs a third political movement capable of leading the country out of its current domestic political impasse. This is why both Rafsanjani and Rouhani hoped to see their candidate win the presidency of the Assembly of Experts to realize their hope that this council, formally elected on February 26, 2017, would play the central role in determining the future of Iran since it would be responsible for choosing the new leader of the country as an alternative to Khamenei. Their dismay was evident at the victory of Ahmed Jannati, who had limited the reformists by controlling the selection of presidential candidates (as what happened to Rafsanjani when the Guardian Council rejected him as a presidential candidate in 2009 in favor of Ahmadinejad). Jannati has also taken control over the selection of candidates for parliament and domestic councils as well as placing further restrictions on already heavily prescribed reformist media, closing down most reformist media outlets, a repeat of events during the tenure of former president Mohammad Khatami.<sup>28</sup>

### **3- Structural dimension: the party system's interaction with the state and the extent of its independence from it.**

Iran's nonelected governing authorities interfere significantly in all political areas, with elections conducted under the supervision of the Supreme Leader and the Revolutionary Guards. Any individuals aspiring for candidacy must first win Khomeini's approval for their nominations. When candidates register, the Guardian Council, led by Ahmad Jannati, must declare their eligibility based on several criteria, particularly their "practical" loyalty to the Supreme Leader and their recognition of the principle of the Jurist's mandate. When the elections are over, the council has exclusive responsibility for implementing the final result, despite its participation in the supervisory authority for vote-counting along with the Ministry of the Interior. This ensures that election results do not deviate significantly from those desired by the Supreme Leader, the Revolutionary Guards, the Guardian Council, and other institutions.<sup>29</sup> Candidates are not eliminated based on the flawed selection criteria, but regime officials will take arbitrary steps exceeding their legal powers to exclude any candidate even if they meet the discriminatory criteria set forth in electoral laws. In recent years, the council has expanded its oversight and introduced various blatantly unjust

measures, including collecting information on candidates from undisclosed sources, by which means they can exclude any candidate they wish to.

During the violent government crackdown that followed the disputed 2009 presidential election, hundreds of peaceful activists and demonstrators were arrested and convicted. On December 27, 2015, Najatullah Ibrahimian, spokesman for the Guardian Council, announced that the candidates for the 2017 election must adhere to clear boundaries separating them from the “sedition” of 2009 (a term used to describe post-election protests at that time).

In a similar case, a branch of the Revolutionary Court in 2010 ordered the dissolution of two prominent reform parties, the ‘*Islamic Iran Participation Front*’ and the ‘*Mujahideen Coup*,’ partly because of the participation of leaders of both parties and their members in the 2009 post-election protests.

Iranian authorities have also detained prominent opposition figures such as Mir Hossein Mousavi, Mehdi Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnavad (Mir Moussaoui’s wife) under house arrest without judicial orders.<sup>30</sup>

Moderates used a strategy of registering many candidates in the 2016 elections to ensure that enough of them passed the scrutiny process for the elections. Although the elections saw a record number of applications for candidature, initially only 38.9 percent of the candidates were found to be qualified to stand for Parliament, with around 20 percent deemed sufficiently qualified for the Council of Experts. After appeals to President Rouhani, some candidates were requalified, bringing the total number of eligible candidates to the parliament to around half of the total number registered. In some constituencies, no moderates qualified to become candidates at all although this exclusion was not limited solely to moderates, with radical fundamentalists such as Hamid Rezaei, a member of parliament who had opposed the nuclear deal, also failing to qualify for candidacy.<sup>31</sup> The leader of the Iranian Republic also agreed to the exclusion of the majority of reformist candidates, defending the decisions of the Guardian Council by declaring that opponents of the values of the Shiite religious authority in Iran should not be allowed to run for parliament. He called upon opponents of the regime to vote, stressing, “This does not mean that opponents of the Iranian Republic enter the parliament, but only those who believe in the Iranian republic and its values.” He added, “Even in America, which claims to be the ‘land of the free’ as naïve people view this, during the Cold War, those with the slightest inclination towards socialism were marginalized.”

#### **4- A degree of public trust exists in the parties as political institutions.**

The Constitution of Iran recognizes the formation and activities of political parties and provides for the formation of parties, political and professional associations, and religious associations, whether Islamic or related to one of the recognized religions, provided they do not violate the principles of national unity or the standards of Islam or the foundations of the Iranian republic. In fact, the weak performance of the Iranian parties in their long history has been a major reason for public discontent. In the absence of confidence in their ability to bring about the desired change, the public has not forgotten the negative roles of political

parties prior to the Iranian revolution that supported the suppression of democracy, such as the Baath party during Shah Pahlavi's rule. These parties were viewed as being active solely during election periods and absent from the political arena the rest of the time, with their geographic concentration in the capital and major cities losing them grassroots support and undermining their claim to legitimacy for much of the population

It is clear from these factors that the Iranian party system is erratic, affecting the behavior of the political elites and weakening the chances of institutionalizing Iranian political parties/factions from inside.<sup>32</sup>

#### **Fourth: The Degree of Institutionalization in Iranian Political Parties/Factions**

The association of political parties or factions with religious social movements is of crucial importance in any analysis of Iran's political life.<sup>33</sup> Through this intertwined relationship, political activities are integrated with social and spiritual life. Membership in religious parties seems to be more closely linked to membership in other civil and social groups than that in other parties; however, a certain degree of functional differentiation will still exist, especially since forming a religious bloc to serve as a political party implies recognizing the need for divergent principles of regulation in the private and public spheres. Religious political parties are legitimate like other political parties.<sup>34</sup> When they receive popular support, religiosity dovetails with the political needs and interests of part of the population.<sup>35</sup>

What concerns us here is not to challenge the legitimacy of religious parties but to measure the degree of Iran's domestic institutions and these parties' impact on the performance of their functions. Several indicators express the level of institutionalization in this sphere as shown in the following figure:

##### **Institutionalization of parties**

- A. Party organization
- B. Internal party democracy
- C. Program dimension
- D. Independence
- E. Socialization
- F. Internal coherence
- G. Financing
- H. H: Media capacity

**A. Party Organization, interconnected networks:** Iranian parties suffer from an absence of organizational power. With few actual party members, the political blocs' and factions' primary focus is on organizing their supporters during election campaigns rather than creating a strong party structure. The low level of membership prevents parties from building up financial reserves from means such as membership fees, which in turn prevent the establishment of active party branches in different cities; instead, the parties resort to seeking endorsement from influential figures. Although reformists outnumbered

conservatives between 1997 and 2001 in terms of ability to attract voters, this support has not turned into a significant organizational force. None of the reformist parties or blocs have an effective grassroots organization that can connect with the broader sectors of Iranian society,<sup>36</sup> with most remaining loose networks of reformist academics and clerics instead. This situation, in turn, reinforces the reformists' own rejection of strictly organized formations.<sup>37</sup>

This was seen during the two presidential terms of President Mohammad Khatami between 1997 and 2005, during which Khatami received no support from any of the country's political blocs despite having 70 percent of the public vote. Even with such a strong public support, the lack of backing from the political blocs weakened his position; the absence of any strong political party in parliament left him politically vulnerable to his adversaries. Nonetheless, Khatami has continued to confront the conservatives and resist organizational representation,<sup>38</sup> viewing himself as separate from partisan politics.<sup>39</sup>

**B. Internal party democracy: individual tyranny:** Democracy cannot be said to exist in any meaningful sense within Iranian parties. Despite several elections, the political culture of the parties' leadership is still weak and characterized by features such as dependency, an emotional and tribal political culture, nepotism, ethnic identification, collective weakness, low levels of trust, and little sense of accountability, along with intolerance and ego worship.<sup>40</sup>

Iranian parties are characterized by members following a single charismatic factional leader rather than uniting individual party members under a single political umbrella according to party objectives and programs, with these entities being essentially based on loyalty to the party founder, with the party's position rising or falling according to this individual's position of authority or activities which win him some degree of power. Because they are founded and centered on following the party leader, the party collapses with him when he fails.<sup>41</sup> The longevity of a party, therefore, depends on the longevity of its founder. These are not entities whose functions vary and whose social influence grows through working with the public but essentially miniature personality cults with a political platform. This leaves a crisis of representation for the public, who are effectively left unrepresented once the elections are over, and leads to a narrow,<sup>42</sup> volatile, and unstable political culture almost wholly reliant on charismatic individuals rather than on political programs and policies.<sup>43</sup>

**C. The programmatic dimension: theoretical weakness and crisis of discourse:** Iranian parties have not succeeded in codifying any political theory incompatible with the frame of reference of the Iranian republic. Many subjects such as civil society, freedoms, justice, and pluralism remain controversial, making it difficult for parties, even those from the same reformist trend, to analyze or formulate policies in these areas.<sup>44</sup>

In addition, most of the parties fail to formulate any specific party-political positions regarding most political issues, with leaders and members rarely issuing statements expressing their own parties' positions and instead of expressing their individual opinions. This lack of policy statements is due to the absence of party manifestos, which would

be redundant since the parties lack any specific and recognizable political ideologies or objectives<sup>45</sup> reflecting the crisis in wider political discourse within Iran. Even Iran's reformists and intellectuals lack the capacity to enrich the country's political language and landscape, with their rhetoric presenting only the most ambiguous vocabulary and vague policy suggestions. Although the reformists can be clearly distinguished from the conservatives in some areas, they are still more alike than they are different because of the overlap between the theocratic and political leadership, which gives religious characteristics to political issues and language, which is then caused by the dominance of religious discourse within all areas of life in Iran. This can be confusing both to the elites themselves and to the Iranian public.<sup>46</sup>

The development-oriented reform discourse of the Khatami period failed largely because of the lack of any supporting rigorous and coherent program, a demonstration of the government's weakness in the face of overwhelming structural and societal challenges in the system. This led to a gap emerging between the people and the reformers, including the student movement.<sup>47</sup>

In these conditions dominated by stagnation and waning competitiveness in the political scene, the distinctions and boundaries between political currents are fluid and appear to be unclear.<sup>48</sup>

**D. Independence: crises of establishment and nepotism:** Many parties were created by direct government edict or through influential figures in government, making them vulnerable to political fluctuations and changes and shifting government priorities. Two examples of such parties are the '*Executives of Construction Party*' founded by Rafsanjani and the '*Islamic Iran Participation Front*' founded by Khatami.

The establishment of these parties was linked to the authority of the time, meaning they are effectively extensions of their founders or the government of the moment, being used directly or indirectly as tools to assert these individuals' or entities' own power; other examples include the '*Republican Islamic Party*' in the wake of the 1979 Iranian revolution and the '*Rastakhiz* party' from the time of the Shah.

Generally, the existence of political bodies is closely related to the establishment of a stable and influential opposition that enjoys harmony with democratic practices, but the absence of democratic institutions in Iran prevents the emergence of an effective opposition, with parties operating informally or even resort to working in secret. This means there is a lack of opportunities to accumulate the practical experience necessary for the internal construction of institutional parties, with the country's political life remaining hostage to the worldview of the theocratic elite, impeding the advent of democratic institutions.<sup>49</sup>

Support for these parties is not permanent, however. During the first period of Rafsanjani's presidency in which the reformists dominated the presidency and the majority of the seats in parliament, Rafsanjani and his pragmatic group supported it, but pragmatists might change their alliance with the reformists if their position is damaged.

During the political crisis that took place after the 2009 presidential elections, which was between the hardliners who supported Ahmadinejad and the moderates supporting

the Green Movement, Rafsanjani adopted a neutral stance because he did not want a direct confrontation with Ahmadinejad, the Revolutionary Guards, and the Supreme Leader.

In the 2016 legislative elections, Rafsanjani's position changed once again as his pragmatist movement moved back in line with the reformists, forming a coalition with them to prevent the hardline candidates from dominating parliament and the Council of Experts.<sup>50</sup>

Because of this almost absolute dependence on power or influential individuals within it, the parties' activities are shaped by these individuals' positions or their absence. The death of Hashemi Rafsanjani—both a middleman and a leader in the performance of all the institutions of government and political forces, as well as a crucial link between the conservatives and reformists—caused a spike in tensions between the two currents, especially the reformist movement, which, despite its inflexible middle positions, regarded Rafsanjani as the man who would play a pivotal role in the battle for the next “political caliphate” after Khamenei's demise.<sup>51</sup>

One of the regime's favorite tools in controlling parties and civil society is its dominant networks of patronage. Although favoritism in Iranian political life is not the creation of the Iranian revolution, having existed since the days of the Shah, it has become even more firmly entrenched under the theocratic regime. The most prominent example of this is the transformation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) from a military apparatus created to protect the revolution and to implement its objectives into a complex and multifaceted organization that penetrates deep into the Iranian economy and is involved in diverse areas of Iranian society. This transformation has, to some degree, weakened the institution's ideological commitment and has turned it into a commercial entity—first, a coalition affiliated with the fundamentalist political faction of the ‘Khomeinist Islamic Republican Party’ and second, an alliance with Khamenei. While Khatami made a largely fruitless effort to reduce the influence of the IRGC during his time in office, Ahmadinejad bolstered long-standing alliances with the IRGC by giving the Revolutionary Guards a series of lucrative government contracts and appointing members of the IRGC, the Basij, and veteran members of his government to benefit from IRGC and Basij activities which had some positive effects on certain groups, especially poor rural people. On the other hand, the current Supreme Leader, Khamenei—who lacks the charisma of his predecessor—needs the political support of the Revolutionary Guards to strengthen his power, given his reduced military, economic, and political clout.<sup>52</sup>

The IRGC has expanded far beyond its original security and military mandate. In the 2005 presidential election, it was the IRGC which largely voted for and ensured the success of Ahmadinejad. In 2009, the Revolutionary Guards also demonstrated their ability to quell any insurgency by brutally crushing the moderate pro-democracy demonstrations that were part of the Green Movement.<sup>53</sup> By the same logic, the Revolutionary Guards tried in 2017 to mobilize the electorate, rallying its members, the Basij, and the supporters of the Supreme Leader for fear of domination by reformist streams.<sup>54</sup>

**E. Grassroots support: fully absent:** When political parties, in general, succeed in gaining the trust of the citizens and establishing a viable relationship with them, it can be said that the political parties have grassroots support within society, which helps them to become institutionalized, while the absence of such support means that they remain distant entities from the people. This lack of support and public identification with specific parties means that citizens find it difficult to distinguish between the parties and to determine who best represents their interests—particularly given the lack of real policy statements and manifestos. As a result, voting behavior varies widely from one election to the next; many individuals nominate themselves as independents (though they too have no recognizable policies or political identity) and political instability increases, further weakening the existing political parties. In Iran, although the factions may appear to be rooted in society, where there is some differentiation between the voting patterns of the more traditional and religious groups and the more highly educated people, a significant number of voters do not have any sense of belonging to a specific political party and may vote for candidates from different factions in successive elections or even vote for members of two factions in the same parliamentary election, with the individual's appeal superseding that of the parties. Candidates also prefer to use their abilities to win elections and conduct independent campaigns. For example, Ahmadinejad has presented himself as a nonpartisan and has not tried to gain the support of political parties although he enjoys the support of the conservative faction and the Revolutionary Guards.<sup>55</sup>

**F. Internal cohesion: splits and political liquidity:** While factions are seen as a feature of the so-called modernization process in Iran, in which individuals and groups overcome traditional patterns of political behavior, the degree of political participation and institutionalization remains low.<sup>56</sup> Political factions are not cohesive groups. Each has no clear leader, and are composed of a loose coalition of groups and individuals. Political factions often change their views and policies for short-term political gain. Often, different opinions within one faction have caused imbalances and alliances with other factions or have led to the emergence of new ones.<sup>57</sup> These factions are quickly split and in turn form parallel entities. Thus, disagreements within the '*Combatant Clergy Association*,' the best-known conservative faction, led to the creation of the *Association of Combatant Clerics*, which endorsed economic policies that were more in keeping with a pro-labor-oriented government economy, leading to the offshoot group subsequently becoming one of the most important reformist factions.

In this confused situation, there is no mechanism of commitment to party principles, with many Iranian politicians being members of several political parties at the same time and not adhering to any one party's views on most issues; this fluidity means there are no fixed electoral blocs in parliament, with the blocs instead forming and reforming different alliances without any particular party identity or affiliation within any one government term. This means that Iranian parliamentary life is characterized by a state of constant liquidity and changing attitudes according to personal and factional interests.<sup>58</sup> Political

allegiances are also combined with family, religious, and regional loyalties while the factions' practices are based on networks of patronage acting as a central mobilization mechanism. This multiplicity of influences is reflected in parliamentary groups whose party loyalty is not governed by any shared support for policies or a political manifesto but by informal and flexible personal agreements between politicians. A clear sign of the lack of loyalty, discipline, or party commitment is the parliamentary approval of ministers, with cabinet members often not receiving the same number of votes during the vote of confidence, which means that there is no clear party orientation. The MPs decide on their endorsement for ministers according to ideological affiliations or personal loyalties rather than on the candidates' suitability for the ministerial positions. This is not unusual; given the dozens of political bodies which lack any clear ideological identity and in which no official membership is recognized, one politician can declare his affiliation to several factions at the same time.

Even during the electoral processes, these political bodies can support their own candidates or support joint lists or other independent candidates. This encourages flexible and temporary electoral alliances. The candidate can be included on several lists regardless of his or her wishes or knowledge.<sup>59</sup> The electoral list may include two ideologically contradictory candidates. For example, in the Shura Council elections of 2016, the reformist "Hope List" consisted of a diverse range of moderates, reformers, and even traditionalists such as Ali Motaheri, the social conservative who sided with Rouhani on the nuclear deal.

In the elections for the Assembly of Experts in the same year, candidates from the conservative '*Association of Combatant Clerics*' got the highest number of votes, followed by those from the radical fundamentalist *Assembly of Qom Seminary Scholars and Researchers* (also known as the *Association of Researchers and Teachers of Qom*), then by the moderate *List of Hope [Omid]*, and finally the independents. However, the party lines remained vaguer in the council than in the parliament, with 42 percent of the elected members of the council appearing on all three main blocs' lists.<sup>60</sup>

### **One of the signs liquidity is high in the Iranian political party scene:**

1- Seven of the sixteen electoral winners in Tehran were listed not only on the reform list but also on a list of their direct rivals established by the conservative "fundamentalist" movement. These candidates were Muhammad Ali Muhadi Kermani, Mohammad Imami Kashani, Mohsen Qomi, Ibrahim Al Amini, Qirban Ali Dari Najaf Abadi, Mohammad Mohammadi Rishaheri, and Abu al-Fadl Mir Mohammadi.

2- Two out of the seven winners (Rishaheri and Derry) are former intelligence ministers and prominent violators of human rights.

3- The most prominent winners from the list of reformers were Rouhani and Rafsanjani. Of the incumbents who stood in the context of a conservative in the last parliamentary elections, two candidates have been nominated against reformists who have been a member of the '*Combatant Clergy Association*' since the late 1990s, as they also ran against the leftists before the reform movement.

4- None of the other winners in Tehran claimed to be reformist; some openly declared their historical and ideological opposition to reformists.

5- With Larijani and other conservatives losing their traditional ties to the fundamentalist camp, Larijani was unable to stand as either a reformist or conservative, instead presenting himself as an “independent” candidate.

6- Ali Motaheri and other prominent figures were allowed inclusion on the reformist list even while they formed a new conservative movement the ‘*Peoples Voice Coalition*’ (also known as the *Nation’s Voice Coalition*) and publicly insisted that they were not reformists.

7- Kazem Jalali, the head of the conservative fundamentalist faction of the ‘*Jurist Leadership bloc*,’ has been included on the reform list simply because of his support for the nuclear deal.<sup>61</sup>

**G. Poor funding sources:** Finance is one of the decisive factors affecting the performance of any political party. However, political parties in Iran lack any means of financial support. Large private companies do not exist. Most companies and banks are under government control and are unwilling to support political parties, most citizens are not interested in becoming members of parties that may be required to pay membership fees, and political parties do not have government support.<sup>62</sup>

**H. Media capacity:** Iran’s recent presidential elections saw the already heavy restrictions on the country’s media freedoms further intensified, with the closure of Arab news channels’ offices and blocking of access to Western media, along with the shutting down of several news websites and Iranian opposition newspapers, especially those connected with the reformist movement.<sup>63</sup> This is another problem for Iranian political parties, namely, the lack of any access to independent media, with all media tightly controlled by the state, which owns most media outlets and forbids the establishment of private satellite TV channels.<sup>64</sup>

Despite this, voters find ways to circumvent the regime’s draconian restrictions and access encoded alternative media—particularly the Telegram channel—which worries the regime, given the implications for undermining the state’s monopoly on information and its dominant role in mobilizing voters.<sup>65</sup>

All these factors demonstrate the weakness of political institutions within the Iranian blocs and other political entities, showing their inability to lead any process of democratic transformation or political change within Iran and underlining the need for a comprehensive internal reform process within these bodies so that they can play a role in any such course.

### **Fifth: The Challenges of the Transition to Nonpartisan Institutions in Iran**

There are many organizational models available to political parties, with no single ideal, one-size-fits-all organizational form to fit any entity since the advantages of a particular model of organizational structure or philosophy may be disadvantageous at other times and in different circumstances.<sup>66</sup>

In this context, we can refer to several criteria considered to offer the bare minimum of efficacy required for the establishment of any effective political party. These are essentially the criteria that present challenges to the emergence of a real political party in Iran:

**1- Creating and developing a party-political identity:** In the present circumstances, it is very difficult to establish parties that have party-political programs, electoral programs, and detailed manifestos. A party's program represents its identity, its general direction, its values, and the justification for its existence, possessing a long-term character that does not focus on partisan issues. It is also necessary to issue electoral manifestos containing specific policy proposals, which are redesigned from a short-term perspective during each election campaign. Policy papers should be prepared concerning detailed positions on certain economic, security, and agricultural issues, and others.<sup>67</sup> This is the root of the party's identity which enables it to build a base of support and is independent of individual party leaders, being based on ideas rather than any individual's character. This identity largely depends on the extent to which members and domestic structures are involved in the identification and formulation of priority programs and policies for endorsement by the party's decision-making bodies.<sup>68</sup>

**2- Strong organization and presence outside the capital:** For any party to succeed in political competition, it needs constant organization, that is, direct membership, decentralized organizations according to residential or neighborhood areas, and communication with nonpartisan domestic organizations such as religious institutions, civil and professional bodies, and others. The Iranian regime, by its authoritarian nature, opposes any political activity outside the framework set by the revolution for its regime, constitution, and theory of governance, precluding the existence of any alternative organization as well as the existence of real opportunities for its dissemination.<sup>69</sup>

**3- Avoidance of personality cults and promotion of participatory and internal democracy:** Political parties which encourage their supporters' participation the most offer better choices to voters because they are more likely to be more receptive to new ideas and less focused on the protection of power by a handful of party leaders. Participatory politics reflects the breadth of the decision-making circle in the party,<sup>70</sup> with internal democracy being necessary to increase the influence of party members so as not to deepen the alienation between the leadership and membership. Domestic committees need to play an influential role in the decision-making process, with the absence of complete consensus on issues not being a sign of weakness but instead an indication of vital and healthy party-political life promoting political debate and party experience. This remains nonexistent, however, meaning the preference for authoritarian policy-making has not been shaken off, and society lacks any degree of participatory politics which would allow such internal party mobility.<sup>71</sup>

**4- The need for sustainable communication and diversification of communication channels with the community:** This refers to forming connections between several

channels, including those of direct contact controlled by party organizations such as domestic branch meetings, party conferences, campaign activities, leaders' speeches, electoral campaign tours, publications and party statements, websites, activist blogs, and networks' e-mails.<sup>72</sup> Intermediate or indirect channels are also required to reach a wider audience, depending on interviews with leaders, writing campaigns for the press, radio communication, and website messaging as well as personal contact. This, along with carefully prepared home visits, is the best way to convince voters to join a political party. Parties should also create a database of interested non-member citizens.<sup>73</sup> Parties must determine the conditions for membership, such as ensuring that members have attained the legal voting age, and determine members' rights and responsibilities, such as the payment of membership subscriptions and the obligation to attend meetings. In Iran, we've seen how the regime managed to quell any internal movement or effort to create channels of communication between the opposition forces or reform, with leaders of the Green Movement placed under house arrest to prevent them from having any contact with the masses, while draconian restrictions are placed on all means of communication including the Internet, suppressing any party activity and opening prisons to incarcerate dissidents and opposition figures.<sup>74</sup>

**5- Avoid splits and enhance internal party conflict management:** Regular internal conflicts over differing political views or even over personal rivalries about positions and influence are inevitable in party politics but must be properly managed internally. One way of doing this is to establish permanent party committees to mediate and resolve internal conflicts. There are also "soft" forms of mediation through power-sharing, by trying to integrate representatives of different groups into the party's organizational structures and allocating leadership positions to improve the representation of some groups, apart from rigid quota arrangements.

**6- The need for minority representation:** Representing religious and ethnic minorities within the party membership structure, ensuring their involvement in domestic and national party committees, and preparing them and guaranteeing their candidacy in the general elections are essential in creating strong links between the parties and these minorities.<sup>75</sup>

**7- Party discipline:** Clear rules must be established to regulate the relations between the parties and their elected representatives, beginning with the identification of communication lines, power, and accountability between the parliamentary group and the party; periodic selection procedures for parliamentary group leaders; decision-making procedures; and the adoption of mechanisms for coordination and information exchange among parties regarding the need for coordinated action in the legislative body on the one hand and recognition of the legitimate right to violate these terms under certain conditions on the other.<sup>76</sup>

**8- Multilateral or plural sources of funding:** Parties require financial resources to carry out their tasks effectively and can find multiple sources of funding through membership

fees, financial contributions by members of parliament and party executives, capital income for income-generating activities, public donations, and government support.<sup>77</sup>

Membership fees must represent a large part of the income, with donations to be made public and government support to respect the principle of equal opportunity. Adherence to these preconditions allows the emergence of permanent and coherent party organizational entities that may play a very important role in Iran's future.

Regardless of the pressures from nonelected entities, strong, disciplined, and cohesive party institutions can impose their political agenda, or at least part of it, notwithstanding the external environment, because of their sustained political activity and internal cohesion. This in turn would positively affect the external environment as well as the degree of institutionalization in the party system in Iran since the availability of these factors would increase public confidence in the political parties and regulate the competition between them on a civil basis that allows for dialogue, alliance, and bargaining instead of mutual negation based on a censorious authoritarian constitution.

In general, given the nature of Iran's regime, its ideology, power structure, and decision-making bodies and the nature of the competing forces operating according to the Jurist Leadership doctrine, its political environment presents serious challenges to the establishment of any institutional party entities.

### **Sixth: Institutional Political Parties and the Future of Democratic Transformation in Iran**

The victory of the Iranian Revolution meant that the clerics monopolized power and were determined to exclude the populace from exerting any influence which might impede their decision-making and theocratic rule.<sup>78</sup> Having assigned themselves the role of mediator between God and the people, they accorded themselves the sole right to interpret the Quran and monopolized religion as a major source of their legitimacy.<sup>79</sup> Any transition to a genuinely democratic system in Iran through elections held under the mandate of the jurist is almost impossible no matter how great the public support.<sup>80</sup>

In 1992, Rafsanjani won the presidency as a reformer, followed by Mohammad Khatami in 2000; neither could carry out any meaningful reforms, reflecting their lack of any real influence on the nature of the system and its working mechanisms.<sup>81</sup>

The political control of Iran by clerics and bureaucratic institutions associated with the interests of the theocratic elite has placed restrictions on the development of genuine democratic practice, with politics largely becoming a matter of bureaucratic ritual constrained by strict procedures to ensure the election of the symbols of governing institutions without reflecting any genuine support for the electorate's choices that would mirror real political pluralism in society.<sup>82</sup>

It is also impossible to imagine a genuine exercise of democracy without a free party system that reflects popular participation in the decision-making process. This cannot be found in a contractual system whose legitimacy is linked to ideological values whose origins then derive from the belief in the Supreme Leader's metaphysical potential. The Iranian Revolution is morally and ideologically backward and reflects the model of a

totalitarian theocratic state, in which religion determines the legitimacy of government and the clergy controls the institutions of its political system. Interestingly, a one-party rule—one of the factors of authoritarianism—does not nominally exist in Iran. However, the absence of a dominant party has not translated into multiple institutional parties. Iran's policy has been characterized by multiple centers of power and division among different factions.<sup>83</sup>

It is clear that the Iranian state still opposes the existence of serious political parties or of a pluralist and institutionalized party system. The weakly institutionalized parties which do exist are allowed to maintain their presence because they do not challenge Khamenei's authoritarian rule.<sup>84</sup> There is also a clear tendency among the nonelected institutions to support the conservative faction within all the institutions of the regime.<sup>85</sup>

There is no doubt that the cohesion of the theocratic system, its power, and its ability to manage internal interactions to protect it from any dramatic change of influence casts a heavy shadow over the extremely slender chances of change at the current stage, which may affect the structure of the regime, including the party system, and in its heart institutionalize its parties.

On the other hand, the hope for change remains present within Iranian society itself, especially considering the emergence of the reformist tendencies after the war with Iraq. Liberal intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush have already begun to present theories about civil society and the relationship of religion to the state. Outside the control of the conservative current, this is causing significant changes in the values of the system and the movement of its institutions.<sup>86</sup>

Over time, the calls for reform have become part of a political culture supported not only by the reformers but also by all groups and all political and intellectual actors,<sup>87</sup> from some fundamentalists to dissidents abroad, from clerics to writers, artists, and film stars, all of whom desire a society that believes in reform and change and want a more transparent, capable, and less totalitarian state. When we review the ideas of most of the sons of the leaders of the Iranian republic and their daughters, including the descendants of Khomeini, we discover that they have moved from the Iranian Revolution's ideologies to ideas of reform.<sup>88</sup>

It is not surprising to any student of Iran's history that Iranian society has sought democracy for decades. This was shown in the constitutional revolution of 1905 and in the 1951 election of a prime minister who fought for the right to vote and the participation of women in elections in 1963. This same democratic spirit also led to the overthrow of the Shah's regime and approved and supported Khatami and Rafsanjani and then Mousavi in the current regime.<sup>89</sup>

The beginning of Khatami's reform experiment was an important indicator of future opportunities for change, winning broad-based support which saw him get over two-thirds of the 1997 election vote.<sup>90</sup>

In the wake of this experience, a class of young people born and raised after the revolution grew up with ideas and concerns different from those of their predecessors,

reflecting the modern age. This was accompanied by a change in the cultural structure of Iranian society. The most important indicators were the greatly increased levels of knowledge and university education in rural areas and cities. With new interests and demands, many eventually supported Khatami as their potential “savior” from the conditions in which they lived.<sup>91</sup> Continuing this gradual political and social movement toward modernity, Hassan Rouhani was elected as the “moderate” candidate in 2013. He won a second term in 2017 with a wide popular participation rate of 73 percent. The trends and participation of urban voters did not differ from those of their rural counterparts, with a large percentage also voting for Rouhani. The revolution of communication<sup>92</sup> and its renewal came as an objection to the actual system of power. Most of the votes that went to Rouhani were with him as much as he was against his rival forces, the “Supreme Leader,” the “Revolutionary Guards,” and the rival candidate of the fundamentalist movement.<sup>93</sup>

It can be said that despite the authoritarian pressures from nonelected institutions and the absence of institutionalization in the party system and the compliance of Iran’s political parties with the regime, the chances for change in Iran are not impossible given this remarkable social development, which ensures that the country will continue to have a solid foundation for steady political development in general and for the institutionalization of political parties in particular.

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